

**The Political Ontology of Islamic Democracy:
An Ontological Narrative of Contemporary Muslim Political Thought**

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of my dissertation is the trajectory of the democratic discourse in the post-Afghani era of Muslim political thought, in particular among the reformist (*islahi*) current. Toward this end, I situate my comparative political theory within the emerging genre of “political ontology,” which I deploy as an analytical device. More specifically, I seek to demonstrate that the shifting attitudes toward democracy over time among contemporary Muslim thinkers can be better grasped by approaching each of the selected thinkers’ political theories as a constellation of ontological, ethical, and political dimensions.

Accordingly, the first part presents several new themes that have received substantial interest in recent political theory. I dedicate each chapter to a specific genre of political ontology, political theology, and radical democracy. Having laid the ground for my ontological narrative, the second part analyzes the political theories of Jamaladdin Afghani (d. 1897), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1985), and such current liberal Muslim thinkers as Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Nader Hashemi, and Abdullahi An-Na‘im. While I analyze their political theories as ontopolitical constellations, I seek to show that each one’s approach to democracy or self-government is prefigured by his conception of God as well as how they conceive of the relationship between the Muslim self and the “other,” the rest of creation, and the revealed text (viz., the Qur’an).

But political ontology is more than just an analytical device for my project, for it also furnishes the contents of normative reflection. Hence, I also take steps to offer an

alternative to the liberal Muslims' comprehension of democracy. In conversation with some recent ontologically oriented formulations of "radical democracy" and "critical political theology," as well as their critiques of liberal democracy, I point to a different direction for Muslim political thinking on self-rule, one that attends more to vicegerency and the duty to justice as well as dialogical engagements with the "other," and one that is more characterized by a commitment to social justice based on an expanded understanding of egalitarianism.

Keywords: Comparative political theory, political ontology, political theology, radical democracy, Muslim political thought, *islah*, Afghani, Qutb

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INTRODUCTION

In 1991, a Turkish student at the International Islamic University Malaysia was excited to find a book on his university library's New Books section about the much-debated "Islamic state" by a Sudanese author named Abdelwahab el-Affendi. The author, coming from Islamist roots himself, favored relinquishing the non-viable idea of an Islamic state and affirming democracy. After enthusiastically reading this eloquently written short treatise, *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, the young student decided that the Turkish audience must also learn of the book and the ideas contained therein. He contacted an acquaintance in the publishing business, convinced him to publish a Turkish translation, and even volunteered to translate it. It came out in 1994, along with numerous other books in the flourishing Islamic publications sector. However, it enjoyed an unexpected popularity when, shortly thereafter, the Islamist newspaper *Yeni Şafak* asked Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the recently elected Islamist mayor of Istanbul, what he was reading these days. He replied he was reading *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, adding that it was a unique work that offered an alternative model of the state.¹

About two years later, the ultra-secularist Turkish military forced the Welfare Party's (WP) Islamist prime minister Necmettin Erbakan to sign a memorandum containing a set of measures in order to curtail the "reactionary" and "separatist" forces in the country. This "February 28 Memorandum," which was later dubbed a "post-modern coup" or "soft-coup," instigated a series of developments that ended up with the elected prime minister's ousting. This significant moment did not mean yet another realignment

¹ *Yeni Şafak*, "Ne Okuyorlar? [What Are They Reading These Days?]," January 27, 1995.

of Turkey's political configuration by the army once again, but also a new politics of confrontation between the well-entrenched secularists and the increasingly more indigenous popular Islamist forces. During the following political turmoil, which conveyed a sense of defeatism among the Islamists vis-à-vis the secularist establishment, there were clear signals of an emerging mood that the old-style Islamism had reached an impasse. Around the same time, a set of novel Islamic political ideas from foreign writers were being popularized by the Islamist intellectuals who were also acting as Erdoğan's brain-trust. Included were such young intellectuals as Yalçın Akdoğan and Ömer Çelik,² who would later be part of Erdoğan's inner circle throughout his term, the longest continuous term for a prime minister in Republican history.

During this time, Islamist intellectuals were intensely debating such questions as religious and political pluralism, the status of the sacred in politics, the viability of the idea of an Islamic state or *shariah*, and, most importantly, the status of democracy from an Islamic perspective. As the dissatisfaction with the WP's old guard and its policies contesting the secularist establishment grew stronger, the generational and ideological split surfaced within the ranks of Turkey's hitherto monolithic Islamist party tradition. In May 2000, the post-coup successor to the WP, the Virtue Party (VP), held a contentious party conference in which Abdullah Gül (b. 1950) ran against the old-guard candidate to represent the reformist faction. A few months before that event, the reformists were making provocative statements in the media. Erdoğan, who was banned from politics at

² During that time, Ömer Çelik authored several articles in the Islamist journal *Bilgi ve Hikmet* and Akdoğan was popularizing the ideas of Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945). His *Politics and the Sacred* is a review of Soroush's ideas. Yalçın Akdoğan, *Siyaset ve Kutsallık* (Istanbul: İnsan, 1996).

the time, said that “Byzantism and theocracy are a nuisance for both religion and state” and that he would not take seriously anyone who spoke of a “*shariah* state.”³

These were strong indications that an ideological shift had developed within intra-Islamist discussions, one that resembled something like Asef Bayat’s newly coined term “post-Islamism,” which he used to characterize certain developments in Iran.⁴ In one of his encounters with his Islamist dissidents, Erdoğan made no secret of his intentions to found a non-Islamist conservative party as his new strategy and even went so far as to spell out his disillusionment rather bluntly: “What good did Islamism do for us?”⁵ The rest of the story is fairly well-known, as this new political language and gestation period formed the background for a period of Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule in Turkey, which has now lasted for more than a decade.

This dissertation is not particularly about Turkey. In fact, Turkey is generally on the receiving end of new political ideas, although in some ways the dynamism of her political practice may serve as a source of inspiration for the rest of the Muslim-majority countries. For the next few hundred pages, I will speak of ideas. When it comes to theorizing the role of ideational factors in political transformations, we stumble upon a complicated relationship and endless political science debates on the relative worth of cultural and material variables. But at the critical juncture of their encounter with the military, when a mood of defeatism and disillusionment with old-style Islamist ideology

³ *Hürriyet*, “Siyasi İslam Yol Ayrımında [Political Islam Is at the Crossroads],” February 8, 2000, <http://webarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/2000/02/08/179069.asp> (accessed May 13, 2013). Bülent Arınç, the prospective speaker of the Turkish assembly, said in the same interview that they did not seek an “Islamic state” and that “political Islam was on the retreat all around the world, where social change was far ahead of such a thing, and that Political Islam would not find adherents any longer as in the past.

⁴ Asef Bayat, “The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society,” *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 5, no. 9 (1996).

⁵ Akif Emre, “İslamcılık Yaptık da Ne Oldu?,” *Yeni Şafak*, April 17, 2001, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2001/nisan/17/aemre.html> (accessed May 13, 2013).

reigned, Turkish Islamists were exposed to a set of new ideas from Iran and the Arab world that may have played the important role as catalyst for political change. Perhaps thanks to this ideological turn to “conservative democracy,” as they put it, they have found an operational formula that has led to large winning electoral coalitions without alarming the internal or external secularists. Although the JDP’s amorphous ideological package did not seem appealing to outside Islamists, its pragmatic approach to politics as a way to solve the citizens’ everyday problems, rather than as a way to ideologically refashion the state, gained a fair share of their approval.

The Arab Spring inaugurated new large-scale political transformations that sparked heated ideological turmoil as well. Notwithstanding the specter of Islamism that has haunted Europe and the United States ever since 9/11, many commentators remained optimistic about a “moderate Islamist” version of democracy. Having observed Turkey’s ex-Islamists in power for almost a decade, they maintained that in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and similar countries, moderate Islamists may act as agents of sociopolitical development.⁶

Although this optimism may have moderated after some initial glimpses of Egypt’s Islamist Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Tunisia’s Nahda in power, it is too soon to make any conclusive arguments. Nonetheless, a March 14, 2013, statement issued by Egypt’s eighty-five year old MB right in the midst of the country’s severe political turmoil, perhaps reveals the limitations of the moderate Islamists’ vision of human freedom. Commenting on the 57th Session of the UN Commission on the Status Women, which sought to lay out global standards of action to eliminate violence against women, it

⁶ David Rohde, “Trust Tunisia,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2011, <http://blogs.reuters.com/david-rohde/2011/10/24/trust-tunisia/> (accessed May 8, 2013).

said: “This declaration, if ratified, would lead to complete disintegration of society, and would certainly be the final step in the intellectual and cultural invasion of Muslim countries, eliminating the moral specificity that helps preserve the cohesion of Islamic societies.”⁷

I. The Question: The Shifting Discourses on Democracy

These snapshots from two of the Muslim world’s important countries refer to a transnational, dynamic phenomenon that is characterized by a state of constant flux, even while its actors try to anchor themselves in certain fixed commitments. Commonly referred to as “Islamism,” this phenomenon refers to Islamic movements that actively pursue a political agenda usually to refashion their societies according to their particular vision of the “good.” For the good part of its history, this Islamic movement was conceived of as merely a security problem for the international system’s hegemonic powers and their local secularist allies ruling the Muslim-majority countries. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks only exacerbated this situation by subordinating most efforts to understand and explain this cross-cultural phenomenon, along with the related societies and cultures, through a security paradigm. Nonetheless, we seem to have come a long

⁷ Among the “destructive tools meant to undermine family,” the MB declaration cites “replacing guardianship with partnership, and full sharing of roles within the family between men and women such as: spending, child care and home chores; full equality in marriage legislation such as: allowing Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men, and abolition of polygamy, dowry, men taking charge of family spending, etc; removing the authority of divorce from husbands and placing it in the hands of judges, and sharing all property after divorce; cancelling the need for a husband’s consent in matters like: travel, work, or use of contraception.” These would, in their view, drag the society to “pre-Islamic ignorance.” *Ikhwanweb*, “Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles,” *Ikhwanweb: The Muslim Brotherhood’s Official English website*, March 14, 2013, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30731> (accessed March 17, 2013). For the final agreed-upon conclusions, see UN Commission on the Status of Women, Fifty-seventh Session, *The Elimination and Prevention of All Forms of Violence against Women and Girls: Agreed Conclusions*, (New York: UN, 2013), http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_18_March_2013.pdf (accessed May 13, 2013).

way from the well-worn Orientalist presuppositions that essentialized a whole range of different societies and their specificities around their common adherence to Islam.

Many observers no longer consider Islam as the overarching defining variable of each and every condition that needs to be explained in Muslim-majority countries. Neither do they see Islam as a predetermined structure that settles Muslims' relationships with others and the world in a definitive and uncontested way. Instead, many books, articles and news reports now operate with certain binary oppositions or categorizations: moderate and radical Muslims, Sufis and Salafis, secularists and Islamists, or, more recently, moderate Islamists and radical Islamists – in short, “good” and “bad” Muslims.⁸ I have to state at the outset that I have no interest in such sharp binary oppositions, although I will draw certain distinctions between different and opposing sensibilities.

The appearance of such fluctuating attitudes and sensibilities in contemporary Muslim political thought is my starting point. El-Affendi's defense of democracy and challenge of the very idea of an Islamic state was quite striking for his readers, because they subscribed to the idea of Islamic state governed by *shariah* (divine law). In their minds, this was the opposite of democracy. They were thinking from within a certain Islamic political paradigm developed by such Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-79), who developed theories of a unique “Islamic state” that is specific to Islam.

The dominant mood among these thinkers was the rejection of Western concepts in favor of more authentically Islamic ones. In Qutb's view, democracy was the stark

⁸ I refer to Mamdani's work that problematized this distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims. Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002).

opposite of Islam, because democracies “established legislatures to usurp the supreme sovereignty [*hakimiyyah*] that belongs to no one but God.”⁹ Qutb is considered one of Islamism’s most prominent figures, an MB official and its chief ideologue; some even hold him to be an inspiration for the likes of Osama bin Laden. Indeed, one might get the impression that the above statement is the definitive textual evidence for Islamism’s essential anti-democratic nature as a political ideology. Then it would seem that the ex-Islamists who eventually came to power had to drop this ideological baggage to affirm democracy.

Things get complicated, though, when we go back to the MB’s founding moment and its founder, Hasan al-Banna (1906-assassinated in 1949), who clearly said that “the foundations of the parliamentary system have no conflict with the foundations of government laid down by Islam.”¹⁰ When we go even further back to Jamaladdin Afghani (1838-97), who is the predecessor of Banna and Islamism’s real founder for many, we discover that not only would he defend constitutional rule, but he would also vigorously promote an anti-despotic struggle against the monarchs in almost every country that he had lived. This is why his immediate disciples are known for their active role in the constitutionalist struggles, as Turkish Islamists against the rule of Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1908) in the Ottoman Empire, and as Iranian and Egyptian constitutionalist activists. They were also known for their receptiveness toward Western ideas and concepts, in contrast to the later rejectionist attitudes of Qutb and Mawdudi.

⁹ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq* [Milestones], (Istanbul: Risale, 1986), 91.

¹⁰ Al-Banna, *Rasa’il al-Imam al-Shahid*, 321-22, cited in Sayed Khatab and Gary D. Bouma, *Democracy in Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 66.

This mixed and fluctuating record calls for a more nuanced analysis, one that defies the simplistic dichotomies of pro-democratic vs. anti-democratic, secular vs. Islamist, and progressive vs. reactionary forces to describe the Muslim world. What happened, then, during the years separating Afghani and Qutb, or from Qutb to the present day? The analytical tools of political science might provide several explanations ranging from those that emphasize ideational variables to those that prioritize political or material ones. One might hypothesize that liberal democracy represented British colonialism and therefore foreign rule for Egyptians, which accounts for its bad reputation for a good part of the twentieth century. Analysts can develop a whole host of other explanatory models that relate ideological change to urbanization, economic development, the impact of the Cold War, and so on. My project does not seek to account for the ideological transformation with reference to these extrinsic factors. Rather, it is about how the very same religion with the same foundational sources (e.g., God and the Qur'an, the revealed text whose authenticity is not contested among Muslims) could give rise to these conflicting political attitudes. One of my underlying concerns is to understand how the leading Muslim thinkers have derived such starkly conflicting political conclusions from the fundamental sources to which they are equally committed.

The situation becomes even more interesting, given that I am speaking of a transformation that took place within a more or less single line of thought. As in any other geography or culture, the vast territories inhabited by Muslims contained many scholars and thinkers who were royalists or pro-colonialist non-Islamists, or simply secularists or non-religious people who did not derive their ethicopolitical values from the same foundational sources. My focus will be on thinkers in what I call the *islah*

(reform) tradition, the reformist brand of Islam that took issue with the traditionalist solutions to the problems of contemporary life and actively used human reason to devise new solutions in their desire to reform their societies. Their self-conception was defined by a narrative of Muslim decline (*inhitat*), and thus they saw it as their mission to change the course of events and once again place Muslims on the track of progress via theological, intellectual, social, and political reform. As a result, the question then became how did the contemporary reformist Muslims thinkers' engagement with their own foundational sources differ from each other to such a degree that they produced dissimilar political diagnoses and prognoses, including a different attitude on democracy?

II. An Ontological Turn in Political Theory

In an attempt to give an account of this intellectual transformation, my goal is to develop a political theoretical narrative. I approach Muslim political thought via the analytical tools of political theory. I want to present a better sense of the discursive shifts, and toward that end I will engage with certain strands of thought in contemporary political theory that offer a better framework by which these diachronic shifts can be grasped and that provide more robust analytical tools. Since my major approach will probe how a thinker's relationship with his foundational sources affects his political positions, the recent ontological turn in political theory that addresses the pertinence of ontology for the political sphere is a useful place to begin.

Ontology is normally understood as the philosophical study of being or the inquiry on what exists in the most general sense of the term. Here, my intention is not to participate in arcane debates on the meaning of being or existence, or several related

categories or philosophical problems. Rather, I ask what it means, either ethically or politically, for one to make an ontological commitment to certain entities. In other words, if I affirm that God exists and is the Supreme Being, does this make any difference to how I relate with other people, living things, the environment, and participate in our common way of life on Earth? What difference does it make if I decide to reject a Supreme Being? Does doing so necessarily predispose me to being a less ethical person, or can I find other ways to be an ethical person? Does it require me to commit to other foundational sources to derive my ethical values, or can I create my own ethics without referring to any of them at all? By asking these questions, we enter into an arena where the different spheres of one's thought get entangled with each other.

Political Ontology and Ontopolitical Constellation

My interest here is to articulate this entanglement as it has been taken up by the emerging genre of "political ontology." The way I take it is, in simple terms, how the ontological, ethical, and political spheres in one's thought are related to each other. If I turn this into an analytical tool, I can approach a thinker's political theory, for instance, by looking at how her ontological commitments prefigure her ethical sensibilities and political positions. But this calls for another inquiry, which is whether one's political positions and engagements in the world require necessarily some ontological sources and ethical sensibilities. We may need to imagine ourselves as being engaged in constant "hermeneutic circles" among these spheres rather than a simple and linear determination of one level by another one.

For instance, disastrous calamities that kill thousands of innocent people or brutal dictators who massacre thousands of innocent children might impel a believer to deeply

contemplate the problem of evil (theodicy) on Earth and why God causes or lets such things happen if he is just. This might, in turn, lead her to revise her beliefs about an ethical God. She might even fall into a cynical attitude at the end of this contemplative process about morals and start to care less about other people's grievances, which could, in turn, lead to political choices that are indifferent to ethical concerns. Such thought processes suggest that maybe we should conceive of these processes not through the metaphor of foundation, in which the most foundational entity grounds the rest of one's thought structure, but through the metaphor of constellation. In a constellational mode, each level affects another and thus the resulting relationship would not necessarily be a determining one. As such, I take political ontological analysis to a mode of analysis that considers together ontological, ethical, and political dimensions to be in a relation that I call an "ontopolitical constellation."

When I compare two Muslim thinkers, this analytical tool will enable me not just to look at how their view on democracy differed, but also how their respective ontopolitical constellations take the fundamental sources of God, the revealed text, and their conception of the human being in such a way that this composite will highlight certain ethical sensibilities and prefigure certain political options over others. For example, a Wahhabi thinker might approach this relationship in a strongly determinative way by taking God as issuing an absolute imperative to a human being through a Qur'anic verse in a very clear and unmediated manner. This anti-hermeneutical sense of clarity and absolutism might, in turn, create resentment against those who take them as debatable and negotiable. He might respond by issuing a fatwa of heresy and a political suppression. It is hard to imagine such a person being committed to free speech or

democracy, especially since there is no clear reference to these in the verses or the Prophet's sayings (Hadith).

But Khaled Abou El Fadl, whom I will discuss later, grounds his affirmation of democracy at the deepest level of a commitment to the human being's inevitable role in interpreting the text as well as his fallibility in this endeavor. This leads him to more generous relations with fellow Muslims who understand a verse in a different sense and, thereby, the construction of a more democratic environment that provides the necessary framework for such contestable interpretive activities. In a very cursory manner, this is how I engage in political ontological analysis in this dissertation; and it should give one a sense of why I chose the title: "The Political Ontology of Islamic Democracy."

III. The Theological Turn and Political Theology

Let me expand as well on the other terms in my title: "Islamic" and "democracy." Indeed, if we tackle the ontological prefigurations of political positions in a religious context, where one is committed to God, a revealed text, and the model of a Prophet, this endeavor will involve one in theology. Interesting enough, and in parallel with the ontological turn in political theory, there has been a recent theological turn. This occurred mainly through the recent attention to Carl Schmitt's insight that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts."¹¹ I want to elaborate on this insight and approach the theological element in the political to expand my political ontological analysis. For instance, within Marx's atheistic political philosophy,

¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

the communist stage is quite reminiscent of the messianic moment in a Judeo-Christian imaginary.

Thinking in this fashion, I would like to focus on the moment of hope, the utopian moment, or the moment of perfect realization of justice in different political theories and formulate it as a “messianic impulse.” Then we can reflect on how taking note of this impulse can enrich our political ontological analysis. In other words, if we cannot eradicate the theological residues in our political thinking no matter how secularized we think we are, then we had better give an account of them within our ontopolitical constellation. In an Islamic context theological concepts are already of central focus; however, a more theologically conscious political theory will help us analyze religious and secular political theories in a more comparable manner. That is to say, they are not so far apart as qualitatively distinct bodies of thought and one can identify differing degrees of both rational elements and elements of faith in them.

The theological element in our political thinking has been taken into account by another line of thought. As I further reflect on the relationship between “the theological” and “the political,” I observe that within theology, the analytical tradition of “political theology” has also focused on how one’s affirmation of certain theological entities shapes one’s political attitudes; in short: “What are the social and political consequences of speaking of God?”¹² As the recent convergence of political theory and political theology also attests, looking at how these two fields have addressed certain relationships involved in political ontology, and having them talk to each other in a comparative endeavor, will hopefully generate fruitful analyses. This is one of my objectives in the dissertation.

¹² Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), xi-xv.

Subsuming an ontopolitical constellation under political theology also opens up a space for Muslim political thought to be evaluated alongside Christian and Jewish political theology. One can identify how certain political theologies are more submissive, acquiescent, or accommodative vis-à-vis the political authority as opposed to others that are more defiant, resistant, and critical. My interest in political theology is mainly due to my observation that certain moments of Islamism are comparable to Christian liberation theology, especially in the way that both of them link faith in God with social justice and anti-imperialist resistance.

IV. Varieties of Democracy

As for the component of “democracy,” one of my strongest emphases in this work is on the need to unpack democracy. It is clear that a good number of Muslims want to embrace democracy. Also, various Muslim thinkers, jurists, and theologians – some of whom are called “liberal Muslims” – seek to offer theories on Islamic democracy. I deem this as inadequate by itself, for democratic theory signifies a contested space and does not give any ready-made prescription of democracy. My political ontological outlook has obvious implications in this regard. First, a political ontological perspective will have implications for democratic theory. If I accentuate the pertinence of the ontological element, then the dominant understanding of democracy, which has the implicit adjective, “liberal,” has to be problematized with respect to its ontological premises. Even further, if I argue that there are ineradicable theological elements in our political thinking, this might impel us to reconsider the liberal secular model of a neutral public sphere free of religious argumentations.

I will attend to the various formulations of democracy with these questions in mind. I will look into the recent articulations of radical democracy to see if they can respond more felicitously to these concerns regarding ontological questions rather than simply identifying democracy with as a set of institutions or a form of government.

V. The Mode of Analysis: An Ontological Narrative

Together, these distinct but interacting genres of political ontology, political theology, and radical democracy help me develop an analytical toolkit to investigate the fluctuating political discourse among Muslim reformist thinkers on democracy. Accordingly, I will develop an “ontological narrative” that recounts this discursive transformation in the form of shifting ontopolitical constellations within contemporary Muslim political thought. The important issue here is the selection of my specific object of analysis, namely, periods, thinkers, or themes. In its most concrete form, I will analyze the political theories of several thinkers and scholars from different time periods: Afghani from the latter half of the nineteenth century, Qutb who was active around the middle of the twentieth century, Fazlur Rahman (1919-88), and finally a number of current scholars, namely, El-Affendi, Abou El Fadl, Abdullahi An-Na’im (b. 1946), and Nader Hashemi. I will seek to reconstruct each one’s political thought in the form of an ontopolitical constellation and inquire how their bedrock commitments as regards their conception of God, the human being, and the Qur’an are related with each other. This particular relationship, in turn, will cultivate a certain ethical standpoint and ultimately prefigure a given thinker’s attitude toward democracy.

VI. A Word on the Normative Goals of the Dissertation

As a careful reader would immediately note, a lot of normative commitments are also implicated in this analytical process. Indeed, my particular analytical framework will develop in constant interaction with my affirmation of certain normative goals. In the first place, the ontological interest in political theory has been aroused partly by the curiosity about clarifying the relationship between a strongly held ontological foundation and the intolerant or violent political attitudes that could result from it. The question, then, is how to ensure that our most deeply held commitments do not result in dogmatic and intolerant attitudes.

In this respect, when I present the recent ontological turn, I also ground myself on the normative terrain of “post-foundational political ontology” or a “weak ontology.” The former one, suggested by Oliver Marchart, can be defined in a very cursory manner as a certain approach to one’s ontological commitments in which “the quest for grounds is not abandoned, but is accepted as a both impossible and indispensable enterprise.”¹³ The latter term is coined by Stephen White, who contrasts weak ontology with strong ontology, with the latter defined as an ontology that carries an underlying assumption of certainty that guides the move from the ontological level to the moral-political level.¹⁴

In this project, I subscribe to the general idea that current political formulations within Islam will be more felicitous if they are developed somewhat along the lines of post-foundational, weak ontologies. I also embrace several traits of critical political theologies and radical versions of democracy. When I discuss radical democracy, I probe

¹³ Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, and Laclau* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 9.

¹⁴ Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 7.

whether it is more amenable to post-foundational political ontology and theologically informed political theories. Moreover, I inquire whether non-Western engagements with democratic theory will benefit more from theoretical conversations with radical democracy as opposed to liberal democracy. Radical democratic theories seem to place more emphasis on social justice, egalitarianism, and a clearer stance against hegemonic relations, all of which could appeal more to those Muslims who have discontents about the status quo. Radical democrats also push for deeper pluralism and seem to be more receptive to the “different,” without trying to assimilate it into “identity.” This might, then, open up more space for the non-Western dialogue partners in discussions about democratic options.

My ontological narrative of contemporary Muslim political thought will be animated by such normative commitments, while I critically analyze particular ontopolitical constellations. When I take up an individual thinker, I will develop both an immanent critique by evaluating whether the different dimensions of his political thought form a coherent whole and how well he can achieve his own normative goals. But I will also discuss the merits of those arguments from the perspective of my normative arguments in terms of such concerns as weak ontology, contestability, liberation, difference, pluralism, social justice, and resistance. As I narrate the discursive transformation, important concepts and themes that are unique to Muslim political thought will unfold. I will eventually lay out my own normative views on this groundwork.

VII. Comparative Political Theory

Theoria and Cross-Cultural Journeys

I characterize my theoretical endeavor in this project as a *theoria*, the Greek term for contemplation, which was also related to acting as a state delegate to a festival in another city. The connections between theory, travel, and knowledge have been more emphasized recently in the emerging field of comparative political theory (CPT), most significantly by Roxanne Euben.¹⁵ Theorizing in this sense, as she suggests, is “an inherently comparative enterprise.”¹⁶ My intention here is to make the connection between theory and travel clearer and to offer another contribution to this field as I present thinkers from a vast variety of lands and cultures.

Toward Post-Orientalism

Moving across different lands and cultures is fraught with difficulties. In the context of CPT, overcoming Orientalism’s legacy has been particularly challenging. Orientalism is mostly used in a pejorative sense nowadays, although in its original sense it simply denoted the study of the Orient, namely, Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures. Especially after Edward Said’s provocative challenge in *Orientalism*,¹⁷ which was also the seminal work for post-colonial studies, this term eventually came to signify a discourse that produces its subjects, the people of the Orient, as the object of power and, through a number of rhetorical strategies, as distinct and inferior.

I have no interest in presenting just another recapitulation of the numerous critiques of the Orientalist discourse and the violence it inflicted upon the specificities of

¹⁵ Roxanne Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

the Muslim-majority societies. An example of my attempts to overcome it will be presented in my analysis of Afghani, where I show how mainstreaming Afghani into comparative political theory has to dispel Orientalist assumptions that advise different standards when analyzing Eastern thinkers. My work will also draw on certain accomplishments of the post-colonial critique and its deconstruction of several of this discourse's dimensions and assumptions. This will be reflected in the way I approach certain concepts and themes; this sometimes differs from the earlier scholars within CPT.

First of all, my shared challenge to Orientalist discourse does not stop with deconstructing it, only to retain the categories of "West," "East," or "Islam." There is no "real" Islamic civilization once the veil of Orientalism is removed. As will become clearer through my ontological narrative, "Islamic civilization" itself is a defensive discourse constructed by Muslim apologists to counteract the project of the "West," which had constructed "the Orient" in the first place as its distinct and inferior "other." My stance can better be characterized as "post-Western," a post-Orientalist overcoming of the categories of Western, Eastern or Islamic civilizations.

I also advocate the end of civilizational thinking, which has had, in my opinion, far less intellectual value than a motivational or political value.¹⁸ Therefore, as with Euben and others in the field of CPT, my use of the "West" does not denote any affirmation of such an essential and objective category. It simply signifies the subjective

¹⁸ I agree with Dabashi on this point. See Hamid Dabashi, "For the Last Time: Civilizations," *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001). Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008).

perception of a tradition of thinkers who have conceived of themselves and their socio-philosophical project as “the West.”¹⁹

Some Terms: Islamic, Muslim, Islamist

This goes along with further conscious word choices on my part. In most cases, I refrained from using “Islamic,” which ascribes the cultural product in question to Islam, and instead opted for “Muslim,” which ascribed it to Muslims, the creators of the product in question. I also did this because the specifically Muslim discourse is the debate on “what Islamic is.” My use of “Islamic democracy” must also be seen in this light. In other words, it must be read as a Muslim debate on whether and how democracy can be “Islamized” and not as my affirmation of that phrase.

Nonetheless, my substitution of Muslim for Islamic must not be taken as another Orientalist residue, i.e., equating all “Muslim” discourses on politics with a religious discourse, as if Islam is the predetermining factor of Muslims’ political thinking. Muslims might opt out of religious thinking altogether, although there will still be, in my view, theological residues in their secular thinking.

The concept of “Islamist” must be clarified a bit further. Aside from the definition provided above, based on the common perceptions of Islamists, I prefer to define Islamism at its essence as a discourse – a discourse produced by a long line of Muslim thinkers, some of whom I analyze in this project, and whose thoughts elaborate what I call the basic Islamist axiom: Islam is not just about beliefs, rituals, and morality,

¹⁹ Such a conception of “the West as a project” clearly draws on Asad’s understanding of modernity and/or the West. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12-16. Accordingly, throughout the dissertation, whenever I use the term “Western,” it must be taken as either the self-perception of those who see themselves as part of it or the perception of those who use it to denote their antagonistic “other”: “Western” countries or societies.

but is a complete way of life that enjoins its own principles about ethics, economics, and, most significantly, politics.²⁰

Political Ontology for Comparative Political Theory

Mainstreaming comparative political theory (CPT) is still a work in progress. The interest of Western political theorists in the non-Western has never been completely absent.²¹

Nonetheless, following the earlier attempts by Anthony Parel²² and Fred Dallmayr,²³ more recent works have been more successful at integrating non-Western concepts and topics into mainstream scholarship during the last several years. For example, Euben²⁴ and Andrew March's²⁵ works have not just introduced new figures and themes to study, but have also worked out theoretical toolkits and methodological suggestions to examine non-Western political thought. In my turn, I will probe whether the recent genre of political ontology can help mainstream the non-Western even further. In this sense, my

²⁰ For instance, Abduh puts the Islamist axiom into these words: "Islam is a religion of sovereignty, authority, and unity between this world and the hereafter. Islam is a spiritual, social, economic, political, civilian, and military system." Muhammad Abduh, *Tafsir al-Manar* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah li al-Kitab, 1972), 1:11, cited by Khatib and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 11. Said Halim Pasha (d. 1921), a grandson of Muhammad Ali and once Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire (1913-17) and an Islamist thinker, would formulate his version as follows: "Islam is a religion for humanity that possesses the ultimate perfection, i.e., it is the most perfect by virtue of its unique creed, its ethics based on that creed, a sociology that springs from that ethics, and, finally, a politics that is engendered by that sociology." Said Halim Pasha, "Islamization," cited by Ismail Kara, *Türkiye'de İslâmcılık Düşüncesi: Metinler, Kişiler* [Islamist Thought in Turkey: Texts and Figures], 1st ed. (Istanbul: Risale, 1986), xxxvi. Based on this definition, we can differentiate between Islamists and Socialist Muslims, Liberal Muslims, and so on.

²¹ Leo Strauss already wrote in the 1950s on al-Farabi and Maimonides, a Muslim and a Jewish philosopher, respectively. See, for instance, Leo Strauss, "How Farabi Read Plato's Laws" and "Maimonides' Statement on Political Science," in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²² Anthony Parel and Ronald C. Keith, eds., *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies under the Upas Tree* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003); Anthony Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²³ Fred R. Dallmayr, *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999).

²⁴ Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*.

²⁵ Andrew March, "Liberal Citizenship and the Search for an Overlapping Consensus: The Case of Muslim Minorities," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34, no. 4 (2006); Andrew March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009); Andrew March, "Taking People as They Are: Islam as a 'Realistic Utopia' in the Political Theory of Sayyid Qutb," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010); Andrew March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The debate sparked by March's 2009 essay is especially interesting to note for the emergence of this area as a well-established discourse. See also Farah Godrej, "Response to 'What Is Comparative Political Theory?'" *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009); Megan Thomas, "Orientalism and Comparative Political Theory," *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 4 (2010).

engagement with political ontology must be deemed as my own attempt to develop an alternative toolkit to analyze the non-Western political thinkers along with any other mainstream political thinkers.

VIII. The Main Question Restated and an Overview of the Chapters

My dissertation develops its arguments by analyzing several theoretical genres and philosophical traditions. In terms of the theoretical genres, my arguments come out of the constellation of political ontology, political theology, radical democracy, and comparative political theory. As a theoretical journey across different geographies, my dissertation engages with the philosophical traditions of the Western and Muslim worlds. While I start off by searching for the analytical means to trace the trajectory of a certain idea, democracy, my overall concern is to offer my own normative suggestions on this issue. But as different themes and concepts continue to emerge from the ontological narrative, I will bring this cross-cultural journey to a close with a somewhat different question: “How can a committed, practicing Muslim who wants to ground his ethico-political action on a Qur’anic, theistic foundation carry out his vicegerency for a just world on an equal footing with his fellow dialogue partner who draws on different ontological commitments but is a willing participant in the quest for a just political arrangement?”

In response, I will suggest a theoretical conversation between Muslims who are trying to theorize a free, just, and self-governing polity and conceptions of radical democracy informed by a post-foundational ontology that pays attention to the ineradicable theological elements in the political. The resulting normative goal, I argue,

will be a progressive quest that develops an authentic Muslim discourse with an orientation toward social justice, anti-imperialism, and anti-authoritarianism. This framework will also foster more generous dialogical relations and solidarity with the non-Muslim “other” in the work for justice. This will, in my view, mark the future direction of *islah* in our broader desire for free, just, and self-governing societies.

With respect to the outline of my comparative political theory inquiry, my *theoria*, I divide my project into two parts: (1) the development of my analytical framework and elaboration on the normative terrain from which I will evaluate the selected thinkers, and (2) my particular ontological narrative of contemporary Muslim political thought as recounted through the trajectory of the discourse on democracy. These several different strands will eventually come together in my prolegomenon to the future of *islah*.

I start off with the foundations in Chapter 1, which concentrates on political ontology and different dimensions of the recent ontological turn in political theory. Taking up the debate on foundations between foundationalists and anti-foundationalists, I eventually affirm the unavoidability of ontology in political theorizing. However, rather than siding with the foundationalist position, I make a case for post-foundationalism, in which a notion of a ground for political positions is affirmed, but as an “absent ground.” Here, I draw on two different formulations, namely those of White, who suggests a dichotomy of weak and strong ontology, and Marchart, who observes a distinction between politics (*la politique*) and “the political” (*le politique*). Although both scholars’ accounts of political ontology are similar, White focuses on the ontological prefigurations of political positions while Marchart is more interested in the distinct ontology of “the

political.” As I derive the concept of “ontopolitical constellation” from these surveys, I also seek to elaborate the normative import of political ontology. On that note, I eventually conclude that political ontology is about giving an account of, as well as owning up to, our ontologies so that we can develop more conscious ontological moves on our way to affirming certain ethicopolitical goals.

As my overall project is situated in a Muslim context, “political theology,” the subject of Chapter 2, looks at how the ontological, ethical, and political spheres come together when ontology is informed by religious concerns. Here I observe a theological turn that is parallel to an ontological turn. This signifies the growing tendency of theological concerns to make inroads into political theory. As with the unavoidability of ontology in political thinking, here I argue for the ineradicability of theological elements from “the political.” I exemplify this by three important theological residues in the political that have had quite an afterlife within secular political theories: *mythos*, *messianicity*, and *theodicy*. I further intend to appropriate these three examples along the way for my normative theorization. Moreover, in this theory I give an account of different versions of traditional and critical political theologies with a particular focus on Gustavo Gutiérrez’s liberation theology. My interest here is to probe at a later point if Islamism can be compared to this Christian political theology in terms of its certain moments and sensibilities.

Next, in Chapter 3, I analyze various conceptions of democracy and discuss radical democracy. My major concern here is to bring it up as an alternative formulation to liberal democracy, which is mostly taken as the only theoretical conversation partner for Muslims’ discussion of democracy. I investigate whether radical democracy is more

congruent with a post-foundational, weak ontology and also question whether it is a better interlocutor for non-Western quests for theories of self-government. I conclude that although radical democracy is not the only version of democracy that fits weak ontology, these two form a more coherent ontopolitical constellation. I also suggest it as a better interlocutor for non-Western quests. With the foregoing perspective in place, I will have an analytical framework and normative terrain in relation to which I will pursue my discussions of Muslim political thought.

In Part II, I seek to develop an ontological narrative that will allow me to analyze the transformations of the shifting political attitudes toward democracy through each thinker's ontopolitical constellations. My particular focus is the reformist strand of thought (*islah*). I start off with Afghani's reform project in Chapter Four. Here, I first take issue with the Orientalist accounts of Afghani and make a case that, unlike their suggestions, he must be approached just like any other mainstream political philosopher. In his political theory, the concept of *shura* (consultation or deliberation) will be a crucial basis of self-government and will preoccupy Muslim political thought from that point onward. In his case, it practically meant the struggle for constitutionalism to end the Muslims' decline and put them back on the civilizational track. But he also stands out for his theory of human progress and civilization based on faith. I will present him as comparable to certain Enlightenment *philosophes*. The intellectual, theological, moral, and, most importantly, political dimensions of his reform project are motivated by his fundamental commitment to human perfection on the path of civilizational progress.

Afghani's protégés carried on his reform project in several countries, where they pushed a vibrant reform agenda with demands for more democratic governments. This

legacy, however, had become far more variegated by the time of Qutb, the focus of Chapter Five. Amidst multiple ideologies and through his ultimately bitter experience with Nasser's regime, Qutb undertook a major ontological clearance operation to erect a strong ontology par excellence. His concepts of *jahiliyyah* (barbarity) and *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty) were central to this endeavor, as I will explicate.

While I will not fail to note the perilous potential of his strong ontological edifice, I still find it significant that Qutb looked for a formula to make each human being free in his servitude to God. This will be the ground for my comparison between his Islamic political theology of liberation and some versions of Christian liberation theology. As I will show in this same chapter, his rejection of democracy is more of an ontological than a political rejection of people's self-rule. Otherwise he is also committed to the principle of *shura*. In this regard, I will suggest that his thought's emancipatory and anti-hermeneutic elements be disentangled.

Thereafter, my focus will turn toward the new locus of Islamic reform: the diasporic Muslim discourse. In Chapter Six, I analyze Fazlur Rahman as pioneer of the crucial shift to a liberal mood in contemporary Muslim political thought. In fact, I take him as keeping on the Qutbian path with certain Islamist elements of his thought; however, I also note that he shifts the focus from ontology to ethics. Most importantly, he develops a hermeneutic understanding of the Qur'an and a historical approach. Although some would deem him a minor figure in the overall development of the Muslim world's reform movement, I contend that he provides some key features of the following liberal mood. Among his novel suggestions are his emphasis on the human mediation of *shariah* and the active use of reason, a reorientation toward Islam's objectives, an emphasis on a

just God and our rational ability to know the good, and an Islamic democracy in which all can participate in communal deliberation (*shura*).

The final stage of my ontological narrative, as I discuss in Chapter Seven, looks at attempts within Islam to justify such modern concepts as democracy, pluralism, liberalism, and secularism. Here, I seek to identify different and sometimes opposing sensibilities. I cover the more liberal democratic thought through the works of El-Affendi, Abou El Fadl, An-Na'im, and Hashemi. In contrast, I also identify another discourse that shows greater sensibility as regards hegemonic relations, market fundamentalism, and social injustice. The latter further stands out due to its critique of liberal thinkers' inadequate engagement with these concerns. As an illustration, I turn to Dabashi's work that engages with Afghani and Qutb's thought and takes further steps to formulate an Islamic liberation theology.

In essence, I affirm most of the *islah* tradition's recent moves. As it will characterize my account of almost all thinkers in the second part, the understanding of each human being as God's vicegerent has an immense emancipatory potential in my view. This human being is also the one who has taken charge of religion through active reasoning and deliberative processes. Further, this conception can help cultivate a far more generous ethical relationship with one's fellow human beings and with the rest of creation, as we observe in several weak ontologies. Drawing on these ideas, I touch on those themes and concepts that will emerge from my ontological narrative such as *shariah*, an Islamic state, God's sovereignty, authenticity, civilization, and emancipation. In all of these instances, my goal is to offer various ways of rethinking these concepts and ideas for further deliberation, instead of issuing ready-made formulas.

All in all, my major contention is that the ongoing political reform in Muslim societies will be more viable if new ontopolitical constellations in Muslim political thought can be freely debated and made appealing to Muslim scholars and non-scholars alike. I will make the case that instead of pushing for a total break with the Qutbian paradigm and evading the Islamists' major concerns, acknowledging and engaging with some of them through an immanent criticism might result in more viable political options than transplanting liberalism within Muslim thought. Of course, we can hardly predict what events will occur in Muslim-majority countries. Economic or sociological transformations might always cause unexpected political or ideological outcomes. A certain level of economic development, for instance, might well entrench a Muslim bourgeoisie and a new religious consumer public who would opt for liberal democracy.

As I noted at the outset, politics and ideas have a very complicated relationship that is hard to theorize. Rather than searching for the best explanatory models for those correlations, I will focus on how ideas form various constellations among themselves. My ultimate concern, however, is to take a few steps toward making Muslims part of a global conversation on how to achieve free, just, and self-governing political communities without renouncing their foundational commitments.

PART I

A POST-FOUNDATIONAL POLITICAL ONTOLOGY FOR COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

PRELUDE

This thesis is primarily a work in comparative political theory. As this field is “still in the making,” any comparative work that emerges within the axis of the “Western” question will most probably count as another intervention in analytical tool-making for this emerging area. I am committed to the idea that crisscrossing the borders of distinct yet always interacting traditions of contemporary Western and Muslim modes of political thinking will lead to a better self-understanding for each tradition that will, in turn, make a more dialogical political theory possible. Therefore, in order to analyze how the problem of democracy or, more broadly, collective self-government has been conceived by certain contemporary Muslim political thinkers, I will situate myself within the intellectual terrain of post-foundational political theory. The goal here is to develop appropriate analytical tools to make sense of the intellectual trajectory of a certain political idea (i.e., the family of democracy). I will seek this through a deployment of the philosophical gains enabled by the ontological turn in political theory and its increasing convergence with recent interest in political theology. These theoretical engagements will provide me with both an analytical toolkit and a particular vocabulary to dissect the fluctuating intellectual discourse on self-government among Muslim thinkers. They will also help me cultivate certain normative sensibilities while allowing me to present my own ideas on how to approach the question of self-government within the context of a post-foundational, post-secular, and post-Western mood.

To this end, in each of the following chapters I will look into the specifics of “political ontology,” “political theology,” and “radical democracy,” respectively, as particular discourses elaborating different dimensions of the post-foundational mood.

Chapter 1, which deals with political ontology, will lay out the development of the ontological focus in political theory and its specific conception of the “political.” I will examine the case for the unavoidability of ontology in political theorizing. In chapter 2, I will call attention to the persistence of the theological element in the political and point toward certain gestures and sensibilities in recent political theology to warrant a comparison between political ontology and political theology. I will illustrate this point by focusing on the particular themes of *mythos*, *messianicity*, and *theodicy* as illuminative concepts to understand “the political.” This first part of my dissertation will conclude with chapter 3, in which I will probe whether the foregoing ontological and theological reflections will support radical democracy as the most appropriate formulation of democracy for a post-foundational political theory. More to the point for this essay in comparative political theory is whether radical democracy is the best conversation partner for Muslim political discourse on democracy, given its affinity with weak ontology. While the openness of radical democracy and contestability of weak ontology will shun such definitive positings, a certain affinity between these concepts will be defended as appropriate for the post-foundational mood of political thought.

CHAPTER I

POLITICAL ONTOLOGY FOR COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THEORY

From time to time, the question of how political positions are related with ontological commitments and ethical attitudes catches our attention. It is there when we hear a religious fundamentalist make a blatant statement about God or a supreme truth, which is then immediately followed by some sort of absolute moral injunction and a call to repressive political action. We become alarmed by observing how this sense of self-certitude and self-righteousness leads some people to imagine that there are many evils around them that they have to fight or censure by all means. We might just call them fanatics or dogmatists and then mind our own business. But things become more complicated when we encounter others who hold the same kind of certainty about the falsity of those fanatics' religion. When the latter group sets out to use the same language of evil and take action to repress their "fanatic" opponents in quite similar ways, it becomes hard to tell them apart. A third group might arise in protest of both, seeing that this language of truth and evil is causing too much discord and animosity. This time, their solution would be to leave such talk out of our shared space so we could focus on solving our common problems.

In all of these instances, we see the coming together of ontological, ethical, and political dimensions of one's thought in diverse ways. You can recognize these groups under different names in dissimilar cultural contexts, such as in the constitutional debates of the Arab Spring, perhaps in Egypt, in the form of Salafis, leftist secularists, and liberal

secularists. Or they might come into your view in the form of American Christian fundamentalists, staunch atheists, and liberal secularists. The interesting comparative cases they pose for a student of comparative politics aside, the interworkings of these dimensions of one's thought might be important in their own right for a student of political theory. Ontology might sound like a marginal interest at first, at least when compared to such more down-to-earth debates as democratic pluralism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and secularism. Yet it is, as the emerging genre of "political ontology" bears out, always already entangled with these topics.

My aim in this chapter is to make ontology's pertinence to political theory more explicit and render ontological reflections in a more systematic fashion. This way, "political ontology" will develop into a handy analytical device for comparative political theory in particular. The other equally important goal I pursue here is to sketch out the normative terrain where the contours of a novel ontological imaginary have emerged, which I prefer to call *post-foundational political ontology*. Sensibilities of this new terrain will figure in my standpoint when I engage with the critical analysis of the development of Muslim political thought on democracy. Further, these sensibilities will be at work when I strive to develop my own normative position regarding Muslim self-government.

Toward these ends, the first section (1.1) introduces the ontological turn in political theory amidst the debate on foundations. Discussions on whether ontology is unavoidable will be part of this explication. Later, in section 1.2, I will present "political ontology" with both its analytical and normative dimensions. The former will deal with the recent formulations of political ontology in the literature, specifically those presented

by Stephen White and Oliver Marchart. Based on these earlier attempts, I will seek to deduce means to turn political ontology into an analytical device with a set of terms and concepts such as *weak and strong ontology*, *ontopolitical constellation*, *hermeneutic circulation*, *disenchantment and re-enchantment*. These analytical efforts also point to a normative horizon with a family of concepts denoted by a new ontological terrain, namely, *post-foundational political ontology*. I will take up this dimension in the final section (1.3), where I will also link these debates with the upcoming chapters on political theology and radical democracy. Needless to say, my stance regarding this new normative horizon will be mostly affirmative.

1.1 An Ontological Turn in Political Theory: Political Theory on Shattered Grounds

The Recent Ontological Turn

Political theorists have recently taken a visible interest in ontology. During earlier decades, linguistic and ethical concerns had gained centrality in political theorizing to give good reason for talking about linguistic¹ and ethical² turns. Ontology first made its way into philosophy proper as Heidegger³ singularly sought to shift philosophy away from the age-old concern with the quest for absolute grounds to secure knowledge. His

¹ For a good overview of the linguistic turn and its reverberations in political theory, see Fred R. Dallmayr, *Language and Politics: Why Does Language Matter to Political Philosophy?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

² Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 97. See also, Marjorie B. Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³ Heidegger, arguably the prime mover behind the twentieth-century preoccupation with ontology in the larger western philosophical tradition, notes that the term *ontology* was first coined in the seventeenth century to develop the traditional doctrine of essents into a discipline of philosophy. Since he held that the proper way to handle the question was to shift the focus from essents to being, which had been so far expressly rejected by the tradition, he is even willing to dispense with the term. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 41. Marchart traces ontological inquiry back to Aristotelian metaphysics, while it is only with Christian Wolff and the German *Schulphilosophie* that ontology appeared as a name for a philosophical discipline. Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 163.

attempt moved the focal point to the question of being itself.⁴ This signified the realignment of the search for grounds from an epistemological to an ontological plane.

Just as he brought new life to ontology, Heidegger took great care to differentiate his project from the metaphysical tradition that sought for the absolute or a permanent substance.⁵ His ontological advances were interpreted to foster certain political positions in Nazi Germany.⁶ Nonetheless, they were also important for their reverberations in political theory itself many decades later, although the current political theoretical interest in ontology can in no way be confined to Heideggerianism. Due to the growing number of works that draw on ontology's relevance for ethics or politics, we can now confidently refer to an ontological turn in political theory with its novel sense of ontology.⁷

⁴ For him, "all ontology... remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task" Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Edward Robinson and John Macquarrie (New York: Harper, 1962), 31. Heidegger based this idea on the distinction he makes between "ontisch" (ontical) and "ontologisch" (ontological), where ontological inquiry is concerned with Being and ontical inquiry is more interested in entities and the facts about them. Ibid., 31fn. It will become clearer later in the text how Heidegger's shift is influential in the new understanding of ontology and its concept of "the political," even when it does not directly draw on him. The traditional understanding that takes ontology as "the study of fundamental logic of reality apart from appearances" also bothers Connolly; however, his problem has more to do with its presumption of logic and design in being. See: William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1.

⁵ In the more explicit words of Heidegger, "the question of Being does not achieve its true concreteness until we have carried through the process of destroying the ontological tradition" Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 49. The return of ontology, which was prepared by Hegel, Schelling, and Nietzsche but only fully articulated by Heidegger, was accompanied by the devaluation of the epistemological dominance of the post-Cartesian era. Hence, unlike Cartesian onto-theology (as Derrida called it) with its search for a stable ground, a new conception of ontology would be in order. I will expound upon this below. Oliver Marchart, "The Absence at the Heart of Presence," in *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack*, ed. Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 18.

⁶ Bernstein's "Heidegger's Silence? Ethos and Technology" is a good summary of the debate on the linkage between Heidegger's ontology and politics. His analysis could be considered a precursor of political ontological analysis. Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). If or how Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927) is related with his subsequent Nazism is also covered by Bourdieu's *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (orig. 1988), probably the earliest work to use the term "political ontology" in a book title. This work takes up the task of demolishing the "sacred barrier between ontology and anthropology" Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), viii. To Bourdieu, the real political implications of Heidegger's thought could be harbored and sustained by the illusion of the omnipotence of thought (Ibid., 100-105).

⁷ To follow the rise of this emerging trend of ontological analysis of political theories, see, Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*; Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*; Ruth Groff, *Ontology Revisited: Metaphysics in Social and Political Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2013). For some examples of affirmative political theorizing with more conscious and explicit ontological moves see, Jane Bennett, *The*

A New Sense of Ontology

As the foregoing remarks suggest, this recent interest in ontology is not about arcane metaphysical debates on essence, absolute, stable ground, substance, or attribute,⁸ but about unpacking the content of our commonsensical insight that whenever we affirm certain political ideas, we presuppose certain entities implicitly if not explicitly. This new sense of ontology, then, refers to these “bedrock commitments,” conceptualizations of being(s) at the deepest level of reflection, hard core, or the axiomatic thrust⁹ presupposed by our typical way of seeing and doing in this world. It is not about finding out what is/is not out there or what it means to be out there, but what one presupposes and affirms at the most primordial terrain of thought.¹⁰ Therefore, the political theorists’ interest in ontology is not so much about the proofs of existence for primordial beings (e.g., God), human nature, a cosmological order, or a Pegasus. Its real focus is how the existence of

Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*; William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*; Carsten Strathausen, ed. *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁸ Some seek to settle the new meaning by contrasting ontology with metaphysics, i.e., banking on Aristotle’s distinction between “first philosophy that studies ‘the nature and first principles of ens qua ens’ [being qua being] ... and metaphysics, the particular types of beings.” Ibid., 159-60. But this binary, as useful as it sounds, does not seem to deliver what such philosophers as Rorty, Rawls, Lyotard, and Derrida promise when they are aiming at “post-metaphysical” ethics or politics. See also, Connolly, “The Left and Politics” in Ibid., ix; and Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 161, especially when she says “an onto-picture provides a more convivial setting for normative affirmations than does a discourse that strives to be post-metaphysical.” Sometimes, even the term ‘post-metaphysical’ seems to be utilized to obscure the ontological thrust present in these theories. Vattimo’s project remains an exception, as he tries to make some sort of consciously weak ontological point by his postmetaphysical ethics Gianni Vattimo, Santiago Zabala, and William McCuaig, *Nihilism & Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 64-67. Perhaps out of such concerns, Flathman goes even further in his defense of holding onto the language of metaphysics instead of shifting to ontological language, since he deems this shift to be a “cop-out” and considers ontology as no more than a restricted form of metaphysics. Keith Topper, “An Interview with Richard Flathman,” *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 105-06. For the purposes of my essay, then, there does not seem to be any satisfactory reason to proceed by any distinction between metaphysics and ontology.

⁹ There are other ways to conceptualize this axiomatic thrust, such as “philosophical anthropology,” as suggested by Kateb and Taylor. I do not think that narrowing this term down to an anthropocentric perspective carries any advantage over *ontology* because, as Bennett has exemplified, political ontology can be formulated in ways that do not place the human being at the center.

¹⁰ Bennett expresses the term ontology as follows: “[T]he picture of the basic character of nature/life/existence –that informs a theory’s more specifically political set of claims, criticisms, and analyses.” *Ontological turn*, in turn, means “a willingness to make *explicit* [italics in the original] the ontological imaginary that informs a theory’s more specifically political set of claims, criticisms, and analyses.” Jane Bennett, “In Parliament with Things” in Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*.

these beliefs in one's thought prefigures one's ethical and political dispositions. As the emerging genre of an ontological turn in political theory is oriented toward the political ramifications of ontology, it is commonly called "political ontology."¹¹

Three Challenges for Political Ontology

i. The Debate on Foundations and the Anti-foundationalist Challenge

The discussion on whether and how ontology is pertinent to our articulation of political positions has developed against the backdrop of the *foundationalism* debate. Anti-foundationalists of various philosophical commitments, but most notably Richard Rorty, broached the question by arguing that what we need in politics is not philosophical justification but political articulation,¹² as "nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitimizes them, [and] nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things really are."¹³ According to him, the search for foundations is doomed to go away "when the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism goes."¹⁴ In fact, the common challenge against the quest for foundations was posed by Rorty and other anti-foundationalists coming from postmodernist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist convictions.¹⁵ Their objection

¹¹ For some works that deploy this term, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000); Philip Pettit, "Rawls's Political Ontology," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 4, no. 2 (2005); Daniel McLoughlin, "The Sacred and the Unspeakable: Giorgio Agamben's Ontological Politics," *Theory & Event* 13, no. 1 (2010); Michael Marder, *Groundless Existence: The Political Ontology of Carl Schmitt* (New York: Continuum, 2010). Although I prefer political ontology, Connolly's "ontopolitics" is an alternative term that roughly amounts to the same notion. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 1.

¹² Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Two Hundred Years After*, ed. Robert Vaughan (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Cited by Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 235. Then "the attempts to ground a practice on something outside the practice will always be more or less disingenuous." Richard Rorty, "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 333.

¹³ Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," 240.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 44.

¹⁵ These trends are exemplified by Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida, respectively. The early forms of the anti-foundationalist challenge can be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger. Long before anti-foundationalism gained full force in the twentieth century and during the heyday of foundationalism, Nietzsche had already taken issue with this futile search for foundations: "[T]hey wanted to supply a *rational foundation* for morality –and every philosopher so far has believed he has provided such a foundation. How remote from their clumsy pride was that task which they considered

formed together a narrative of the “end of metaphysics,”¹⁶ whereby they declared the demise of metaphysics, a discourse that started with Plato. Here, the common archenemy was the mode of thinking that was searching for some *arché*, some ahistorical center of invariable presence. As all the attempts to gain a universal affirmation for any essence have so far proved futile, the argument goes, this search has to end. Thus we must acknowledge that all we are left with are narrative and metaphor, as opposed to anything that can be called essence and truth. But is it that easy to cut oneself cleanly from ontology?

The Unavoidability of Ontology and Post-foundationalism

It is hard to definitely argue that even Rorty, the most ardent supporter of “ethics [and politics] without principles”¹⁷ was able to make a complete break with ontology. Not only did he have to make a “begrudging concession” about its impossibility on one occasion,¹⁸ he also admits that “religious beliefs, or the lack of them will influence political convictions.”¹⁹ Moreover, he avoids a core self and human essence when he observes moral progress being made in the direction of greater human solidarity. He defines this solidarity as the ability to see such traditional differences as tribe, religion, and race as

insignificant and left in dust and must-the task of description-...” “Beyond Good and Evil” in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 287.

¹⁶ Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 252. Derrida voices one of the clearest statements of this idea: “The history of metaphysics like the history of the West is the history of ... metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence –eidos, *arché*, telos, energieia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.” Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1978), 279-80. Cited by, Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 175. Bernstein is skeptical about this narrative because it neglects the fact that there were always many other thinkers who renounced the so-called foundationalist discourse (Ibid., 251-3).

¹⁷ With reference to, “Ethics without Principles” in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

¹⁸ Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), 118-19.

¹⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 172. Cited by Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 2004), 89.

unimportant when compared to similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.²⁰ But does this not amount to devising a hierarchy based upon some basic facts about some human beings vis-à-vis others? Even further, if liberalism is defined with reference to the minimization of cruelty as its ethical content, does this not appeal to a human condition that we respond to each other's suffering?²¹

Similar examples can be brought from other anti-foundationalists to show how, in their best attempts to formulate metaphysic-free political positions, they still had to appeal to some ontological entities.²² In that sense, in my opinion they are not non-ontological political theories, but just alternative configurations of political ontologies. Some have moved away from a strong anti-foundationalism and toward an affirmation of the indispensability of contingent foundations.²³ Perhaps what these examples best reveal is that an anti-foundationalist position has yet to make a strong argument for a politics

²⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.

²¹ Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*, 115.

²² For instance, the moment Lyotard says "[c]atastrophic antagonism is literally the rule" in regard to nature, he is affirming something very fundamental about being, namely, affirming catastrophic antagonism as an ontological figure. Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 59. Thus his connections between an inexhaustible reserve of possible utterances of language and a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown (Ibid., 67) locate him within the terrain of political ontology. In turn, these connections could be analyzed as adopting a wide range of ontological imaginaries, such as Derrida's *ontology of difference* or Foucault's *ontology of actuality*. White also considers the ontology of difference a valuable ontological position, for it allows him to say that the world is a continual play of presence and absence, as opposed to seeing being as a kind of fixed presence. White, *The Ethos*, 86. Foucault's ontology of actuality figures in Vattimo's self-proclaimed *weak ontology*. Vattimo traces his *ontology of actuality*, where being should be thought of as an Event, back to the second Heidegger rather than Foucault. Vattimo, Zabala, and McCuaig, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 3-6. Being, in this account, is not something given once and for all, but rather is an event, happening, historicity (Ibid., 74). In Hyman's interpretation of Vattimo, any ontology other than the ontology of actuality will relapse into an appeal to *arché*. Gavin Hyman, "Must a Post-Metaphysical Political Theology Repudiate Transcendence? The Case of Gianni Vattimo" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 8, no. 3 (2007): 127-28.

²³ Judith Butler, who has come to this position, still retains her suspicion of *ontological essentialism* and a *metaphysics of substance*, both of which, she opines, are little more than occlusions of power. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 75-76. Her later position still does not anchor itself in some metaphysical reality; rather, its truth is subject to a process of contestation and historical-cultural translation (Ibid., 88). Ignatieff also eventually came to adopt the unavoidability of ontology. He had to move on from a pragmatic, minimal claim that denounces all foundations talk to one where he had to admit that human rights talk unavoidably depends on "deeper vocabularies" of ontological figuration and moral orientation that circulate around such concepts as human dignity and equality White, *The Ethos*, 58.

without foundations. But now, more thinkers on the other hand are converging around the idea of *non-foundationalism* or *post-foundationalism*.

Indeed, thinkers in the current ontological turn seem to be increasingly less interested in taking either the anti-foundationalist or the foundationalist side in this debate. In fact, recent literature seems to be inclining toward a *non-* or *post-*foundationalism, namely, a stance where “the quest for grounds is not abandoned, but is accepted as a both impossible and indispensable enterprise.”²⁴ This is not a *denial* of foundationalism, which would catch one in the web of that dichotomy, but rather a *subversion* of its premises.²⁵ My characterization of a good part of the current political ontology is along such post-foundationalist lines, more of which will be laid out in the section exploring Marchart’s analysis.

ii. The Liberal-Rawlsian Challenge against Ontology

Apart from the anti-foundationalist challenge against political ontology, other positions that draw on Rawlsian liberalism grant ontology’s unavoidability but would rather not make it part of our public discussions. From a Rawlsian point of view, which seeks an “overlapping consensus”²⁶ in a world defined by the fact of pluralism,²⁷ too much ontology talk will just get in the way. In this picture, any overemphasis on ontological differences will represent a hurdle we must overcome to reach mutually acceptable ethicopolitical principles among groups having different ontological commitments.

²⁴ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 9. As in the case of Mouffe and Laclau, sometimes *ground* is dropped due to its foundationalist associations, and replaced with *horizon* Strathausen, *A Leftist Ontology*, xxvii.

²⁵ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 13.

²⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 133-70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

A potential tension between political ontology and liberal models of secularism, in particular the Rawlsian and Habermasian models of public deliberation, might very well exist. After all, the incommensurability of ontological differences and the ensuing religious wars were among the major reasons for the development of liberal secularism in the first place along with its idea of ontology-free political deliberation. Therefore, one can be troubled by ontology's reintroduction into politics due to its potential for slippage toward political closure among different groups. Too much ontology talk could predispose them to see all political differences as being rooted in ontological ones and thus irresolvable. Thus, insisting on "final vocabularies"²⁸ would forestall any meaningful development of public reason.

However, perhaps the problem here is not paying attention to ontology in politics as such, but with how it was carried into politics in the past. The solution, then, does not lie in the sheer oblivion of ontology's relevance in political arrangements, as in major forms of liberal secularism, but perhaps in finding a more agreeable way to carry it into politics.²⁹ Otherwise, the pretension of a "political, not metaphysical"³⁰ idea of liberalism would simply amount to occluding the unjustified preference for the ontological content of liberalism over others in the public sphere.³¹

²⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.

²⁹ For examples of efforts to carry religion into public discussions, see, William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. Rawls also suggested his proviso as a revision to his earlier views by granting that "reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or non-religious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support" John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64(1997): 783fn.

³⁰ J. Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985).

³¹ For example, Larmore's reformulation of liberalism in the wake of White's challenge against Rawlsian political liberalism sees the solution in acknowledging (but also modifying) the moral foundations of liberalism toward a certain minimalism based on respect. However, it is questionable whether this move takes a lot away from the philosophical tradition of liberalism as we know it. Charles Larmore, "Respect for Persons," *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (2005).

iii. Do we really need ontology in real world discussions?

The final challenge I cover to ontology's return to politics is not so much about categorically denying its relevance or suppressing it in the public sphere, but simply underplaying its practical role in our public discussions. For instance, Flathman states that ontology gives us an improved perspective and thus there is some benefit to making it explicit. But we do not really have to resort to it while discussing political matters,³² for tracing every ethical or political disagreement back to ontological subtleties is unnecessary, if not annoying, while holding a public debate. But political ontology does not prescribe that particular course of action either. Rather than bringing up ontology on each and every occasion, an ontologically conscious political agent simply recognizes the entanglement of her political arguments with her ontological commitments at some point. Therefore, our ontological orientation is supposed to give us an improved perspective about ourselves in our discussions on particular policy problems. This will, hopefully, help us make more conscious ontological moves and lead to more self-restraint when proposing a viewpoint. Seeing others, whether religious or atheistic, as fellow reason-exchangers with their own ontologies on par with ours is expected to make a difference. Thus we will no longer see ourselves as neutral holders of liberal public reason responding to ontologically driven participants of deliberations who are simply reflecting their religious point of view.

In conclusion to my explication of the ontological turn in political theory amidst objections by anti-foundationalists and political liberals, I would describe the current turn as leading to an increasing awareness of the bedrock commitments operative in our

³² Topper, "An Interview with Richard Flathman," 104.

ethico-political actions. If ontology is unavoidable, then it would be more advisable to own up to it instead of living in denial among a community of conversants who are pursuing a political arrangement for a pluralistic world. In this sense, the political ontology's increasing pertinence refers to a new mood, temper, sensibility, or, to put it in Heidegger's terms, *Stimmung*.³³ Accordingly, I will locate my project in the analytical and normative *Stimmung* of *post-foundational political ontology*. While political ontology will place an analytical toolbox at my disposal in the setting of comparative political theory, its post-foundational dimension will mold my normative sensibilities as I wrestle with the question of democracy from within the Islamic tradition. At the global table of reason-exchangers, Muslim conversants appear as just another group of participants with their particular ontologies in our global attempt to accomplish self-government. I will proceed in this post-foundational political ontological terrain as I reflect upon these questions. But first, political ontology should be developed into an analytical device that can be deployed for discussions on comparative political theory.

³³ I am going to use *Stimmung* as opposed to *era* or *epoch*, because I agree with Bernstein's use of it to mean a mood that is "amorphous, protean, and shifting but which nevertheless exerts a powerful influence on the ways in which we think, act, and experience" Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 11. For Heidegger, *Stimmungen* manifest the tone of being-there. In his use of the term, mood can refer to the *sensibility* of an age (romantic), the culture of a particular company (aggressive), and even the temper of the times (revolutionary) Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 169. My appropriation of *Stimmung* in both western and non-western contexts will thus replace *periodization*, a term that would do violence to several particularities and differences subsumed under a general label. My preference for this term also goes along with the wider outlook of my dissertation, which aims at some kind of post-foundational weak ontology with a specific sensibility toward a protean and overabundant character of being. It is noteworthy that Lyotard calls modernity a *mode* rather than an *epoch* Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 24. Foucault also had to deal with this question of epoch in the context of modernity. His solution was to take it as an *ethos*: "Thinking back on Kant's text, I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by 'attitude,' I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an *ethos*. And consequently, rather than seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern,' I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of 'countermaturity.'" Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" <http://foucault.info/documents/whatIsEnlightenment/foucault.whatIsEnlightenment.en.html> (accessed May 9, 2012). The significance of this sort of conceptualization will become clearer as I move along with my ontological narrative of the contemporary Islamic political thought and its respective *Stimmungen*.

1.2 Political Ontology as an Analytical Device

In my attempt to use political ontology as a viable analytical device to dissect Muslim political thought, I use two major works in the literature that initially pointed out the ontological turn in Western political thought. Stephen White observes and pins down the contours of a new ontological terrain among primarily American thinkers,³⁴ whereas Oliver Marchart tracks down the emergence of similar sensibilities among mostly European figures to the left of Heideggerianism.³⁵ These surveys will also play a major role for my project. I will analyze their conceptualizations and key idioms to see how well they help us make sense of the Muslims' case. In particular, I will discuss whether somewhat converging vocabularies may arise from our crisscrossings. If so, do the advances we make in our journey through the Western ontological turn help us to envision a better way to analyze the issue of Islam and democracy? Against this background, I present White's and Marchart's surveys of the current political ontologies.

White's Weak Ontology

White defines the emerging ontological terrain as a "weak ontological turn."³⁶ He conceives certain tendencies that he has observed in recent political theory through an antinomy of strong and weak ontology. Strong ontologies are those that involve too much metaphysics and carry an underlying assumption of certainty that guides the move from the ontological level to the moral-political level.³⁷ Thus, political affirmations are *derived* from universal and unshakeable foundations so that ontological, ethical, and political

³⁴ In *Sustaining Affirmation*, he brings out weak ontological gestures among an unexpected variety of philosophical quarters: in communitarianism (Taylor), feminism (Butler), poststructuralism/postmodernism (Connolly), and liberalism (Kateb).

³⁵ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*.

³⁶ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

realms are in a more direct, linear, and determinate relationship. It is not too hard to identify such strong ontologies among many premodern and modern theories.³⁸ For instance, a clearly strong ontological tendency manifests itself when Augustine says, “believe in Him who justifies the ungodly, so that your good works may really be good works. For I should not call them good as long as they do not proceed from a right foundation.”³⁹

What White posits, then, is a weak ontological turn in the wake of anti-foundationalist de-struction or deconstruction of such once-powerful figures as God, reason, certain conceptions of human nature, and progress.⁴⁰ Drawing upon those he takes as participants of this turn, White identifies at least four “rough characteristics”⁴¹ that would, in turn, serve as *loose criteria* for assessing the felicity of any given contribution.⁴²

First, weak ontologies have a fundamental conception of the human being. But this is necessarily contestable, not just as a simple announcement but also as an enactment.⁴³ Second, weak ontologies do not proceed by categorical positings of human nature or telos; rather, they offer “figurations” of human beings in terms of such

³⁸ Ibid., 6. Non-theistic theories might also carry a strong ontological thrust, as is the case with many modern political theories such as Benthamian utilitarianism or scientific Marxism. For instance, Marx’s ontology can be exposed through a set of ontological figures, such as species being (*Gattungswesen*), being as production, being as praxis, or being as the practical self-activity of the subject. Simon Critchley, “True Democracy: Marx, Political Subjectivity and Anarchic Meta-politics,” in Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 224.

³⁹ “Grace and Good Works” [from “On Psalms,”] Augustine and Vernon Bourke, *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis, IN Hackett, 1974), 187. See also, “The city of the ungodly, which did not obey the command of God that it should offer no sacrifice save to Him alone, and which, therefore, could not give to the soul its proper command over the body, nor the reason its just authority over the vices, is void of true justice.” (From the *City of God*, Book IX), Ibid., 212. It is clear how strong figurations of God, as well as Baptized Platonic figurations of soul and reason, provide almost some sort of a switch button for the existence of justice. Despite the extent of dilution and weakening, Locke’s picture of the state of nature, which will come later, also retains a strong ontological thrust as well as a linear move from the ontological to ethicopolitical.

⁴⁰ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴² Ibid., 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

“existential realities” as language, mortality or finitude, natality, and the articulation of “sources of the self.”⁴⁴ These are universal constitutives of human beings, but the meanings of these existential realities are underdetermined in the sense that they have no essence or true meaning. Human beings are, therefore, a negotiation of these existential realities.⁴⁵ Third, weak ontologies are not simply cognitive in their constitution and effects because they have affective and aesthetic dimensions in the sense that they engender a certain sensibility⁴⁶ toward the reality of human being. Moreover, they do not force one to become convinced or convert, but encourage “cultivation” of oneself and one’s disposition to the world.⁴⁷ Fourth, although a weak ontology cannot help one derive any clear or incontestable principles or values for ethics and politics, the fundamental conceptualizations can still prefigure practical insight or judgment⁴⁸ in the form of a reflective bearing upon the possibilities of action and a mobilizing of motivational force.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9. The notion of “sources of the self” is drawn from Charles Taylor.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Connolly capitalizes on this dimension in an increasing manner. He defines sensibility as affectively imbued dispositions in which sensibility and thought are inter-involved. For one of his latest formulations, see William Connolly, “Foreword,” in Strathausen, *A Leftist Ontology*, xi. For him, sensibility defines the tone and spirit of a lived ontology and mediates between ontology and ethics.

⁴⁷ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 10-11. The term *cultivation* is repeatedly evoked in weak ontological configurations.

⁴⁸ Alongside the new ontological *Stimmung*, the term *ethos* has gained a new life. Heidegger again may be given some credit for this increasing emphasis due to his contention that *ethos*, under the influence of morality, is degraded to the ethical. Drawing on the contrast between *nomos* and *physis* among the Greeks, Heidegger asserts that “[ethos] denotes not mere norms and mores ... it is that which concerns free behavior and attitudes, the shaping of man’s historical being” Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 16. The distaste for taking ethics as morality or a universal moral code is a somewhat common sensibility among thinkers of the post-Nietzschean streak. In his erasure of the distinction between morality and prudence, Rorty, for instance, agrees with the view that “the villain is the rationalist, law-fixed tradition in moral philosophy,” “Ethics Without Principles” in Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 76. Further, the underlying theme of Connolly’s *Augustinian Imperative* is posing moral picture of the word as unethical (Ibid., 12). His contrast between moral code and ethical sensibility, in turn, leads to an affirmation of the Foucauldian political *ethos* of agonistic care (Ibid., 157). Connolly’s later work is a testament to his further articulation of a political ethos. In his *The Ethos of Pluralization* (1995), where his ontological articulation of ethics predominates, he supplants moralities of command and communion by a fugitive abundance of being (p. xxxv). In his *Pluralism* (2005), he further elaborates his particular ethos, or neo-Spinozist ethics of cultivation (Ibid., 45), by emphasizing that sensibility’s mediating role (Ibid., 47), affective dimension, and contestability of the final affirmation has gradually increased (see especially Ibid., 31-48). Finally, White picks up ethos against this backdrop to underline the aesthetic-affective dimension of ethics while developing his ethos of a late-modern citizen. See, White, *The Ethos*.

Ontology still articulates a human being's most fundamental intimations, but these should be conceived of as a "horizontal circuit of reflection, affect, and argumentation."⁴⁹

White identifies these four characteristics, but his conception inevitably remains open to contestation and renegotiation. Inasmuch as his conception applies to a number of diverse positions (e.g., materialism, post-structural feminism, and theology),⁵⁰ one can also look for similar trends in other circles or among non-Western thinkers. As I will take this road, I will both test its applicability to the thinkers I cover and renegotiate its categories and idioms to see if this border-crossing experience will add to the original contribution. Hence, I will investigate if contemporary Muslim thought contains anything comparable to weak ontology and probe whether weaker ontologies, although they may not be as weak as their "Western" counterparts, would enable one to cultivate similar ethical sensibilities or political dispositions.

An Alternative Onto-Story: Weber's Disenchantment

Another way of looking at White's observation of the move from strong toward weak ontologies is to consider it as an *onto-story* as Jane Bennett suggests.⁵¹ In her attempt to find alternative onto-stories, Jane Bennett brings up Weber's concept of *disenchantment*. For Weber, the fate of our times is "characterized by rationalization, and

⁴⁹ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 11.

⁵⁰ These instances of weak ontology are represented by Bennett, Butler, and Taylor, respectively.

⁵¹ A cautionary note must be made regarding whether weak ontology constitutes a *philosophy of history*. While Vattimo's onto-story of the self-consumption of metaphysics may sound like one, neither White's weak ontology nor Weber's disenchantment carries such implications. For this discussion in the context of Weber, see Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 186fn. As for White, it is not accurate to treat strong ontologies as *passé*, where metaphysical being dissolves or consumes itself to give way to a weakening of being. He says this not because, in his view, we have overcome strong ontologies or proven their foundations wrong, but because humanity has not yet wholly and universally affirmed any given foundation in being. White keeps Vattimo's weak ontology at bay for his anti-foundationalism and related philosophy of history. Stephen K. White, "Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 811. Nevertheless, Vattimo also says that metaphysics may be twisted, but never overcome, which is all the more reason why his anti-foundationalism is in fact not as enacted as declared, and why he lives more up to his notion of weak thought with an affirmed ontology of actuality Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 146.

intellectualization, and above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’”⁵²

Disenchantment is, so to say, another face of *rationalization*, a process that increasingly leaves almost no mysterious, incalculable forces untouched. Consequently, the human being takes on the power to master all things by calculation and renders the whole world explainable, calculable by the use of reason. And yet the world retains some “fragmented but still powerful magical elements” or fugitives that science will demystify as it continues to evolve. However, this process becomes costly in certain ways: the world becomes “robbed of gods.”⁵³ By materializing the world, science renders nature meaningless and causes human beings to feel the existential pain of the “loss of meaning, spirit, or sense of purpose.”⁵⁴ Hence, we are deprived of an important existential source, although the persistence of fugitive experiences of magic results in an increased interest in mysticism, eroticism, and other curiosities of the cultural field.⁵⁵

Bennett appropriates this Weberian concept in her attempt to re-enchant the world through a materialist ethics. Her project is geared toward cultivating attachments to the world not just through structures, entities, and events in nature, but also through literary, machinic, and electronic sites of the material world that is otherwise robbed of meaning.⁵⁶ The affective force of such re-enchanted moments⁵⁷ is expected to propel ethical generosity.⁵⁸ Thus while ethically more generous arrangements become more likely, meaning and magic will also be expected to return to the world. Bennett’s contribution

⁵² Weber’s disenchantment story is mostly from his “Science as a Vocation,” Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *Daedalus* 87, no. 1 (1958): 133. The original word Weber uses is *Entzauberung*. It is also translated as demagification. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁷ For Bennett, enchantment is a state of wonder, the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. Accordingly, to be enchanted is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter. *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

not only adds one more example to the genre of political ontology, but also effectively offers disenchantment and re-enchantment as handy tools for political ontological analysis. I join her to reclaim the onto-story of disenchantment–re-enchantment alongside the former binary of strong–weak ontology as a device to make sense of Muslim political thought, which has also been through an uneasy trajectory with reason. For instance Afghani, a major figure in the second part of this dissertation, is often said to have played a pioneering role in positing Islam as a perfectly rational religion. How this also might have given way to a more disenchanted understanding of Islam will definitely constitute an interesting case. More interesting, though, is how the ontological gestures of Qutb, who inherited but also subverted Afghani’s legacy in certain ways, re-enchanted both the natural and the social worlds through his all-encompassing understanding of *shariah* and God’s sovereignty. In my work, I will follow up this story by seeking to articulate more charitable forms of re-enchantment in a pluralistic world.

Marchart and Post-foundational Political Thought

The second major formulation of political ontology I utilize is that of Oliver Marchart, who expands our understanding of the current ontological turn by bringing in the Heideggerian lineage of political ontology as elaborated mainly by Continental thinkers.⁵⁹ Here, a potentially helpful distinction between the antinomy of *la politique* (politics) and *le politique* (political) that undergirds most of the works he covers will sharpen our analytical lens.⁶⁰ In simplified terms, the *political* is the pure disruptive/constitutive

⁵⁹ More specifically, Marchart sketches the contours of the emerging post-foundational political ontology from the Heideggerian Left, which he describes as the leftist version of post-structuralism and post-foundationalism. Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 2.

⁶⁰ This distinction between politics and the political draws on the leftist appropriation of Ricoeur’s binary of *la politique* and *le politique*. Ibid., 35-36.

moment of the social, whereas *politics* is the sedimented, institutionalized political. In other words, the political is about founding or reconfiguring the relations of power as they reach closure in the form of society.⁶¹ Some formulations present it as a mystical and often violent moment of founding,⁶² whereas politics is encountered in a political structure's established practices and institutions. This primordial moment of the *political* has a distinct ontological edifice of its own, whereby "political ontology" acquires the meaning of "ontology of the political." Hence, *political* emerges to be distinct from, for instance, "the ethical," "the economic," or "the aesthetic."

The Legacy of Schmitt and Heidegger for Post-foundationalism

At the risk of some diversion, the lineage of the ontologically conceived notion of the political that goes back to Schmitt and Heidegger has to be introduced. Without this second sense of political ontology, we will be unable to account for much of ontology's recent mobility.⁶³ This is also the ontological ground upon which some versions of radical democracy rest, as I will cover in the third chapter. Carl Schmitt (d. 1985), a German thinker who has been rediscovered in the Anglo-American world and whose work was appropriated by leftists to ground their most recent critiques of liberalism, is of critical

⁶¹ Then the political difference, as a founding difference, as a negativity, assumes the role of an indicator or symptom of society's absent ground, whereby the social is prevented from closure. Ibid., 5.

⁶² Derrida's insights on this pure political moment of the political is laid out in the context of the founding moment of law in his renowned essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority:'" "This moment of suspense, this epokh , this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of non-law. But it is also the whole history of law. *This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence.* It is in the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone. ...it is transcendent in the very measure that it is he who must found it, as yet-to-come [*comme   venir*], in violence. ... The inaccessible transcendence of the law [loi], before which and prior to which 'man' stands fast, only appears infinitely transcendent and thus theological to the extent that, nearest to him, it depends only on him, on the performative act by which he institutes it; the law [loi] is transcendent and theological, and so always to come, always promised, because it is immanent, finite, and thus already past. Every 'subject' is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance" Jacques Derrida and Gil Anidjar, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 269-70 (emphases in the original).

⁶³ Strathausen, in fact, places the whole question of political ontology along Schmittian lines: "We might reasonably refer to a 'political ontology' or an 'ontology of the political' as the attempt to examine the nature or essence of what Carl Schmitt named 'the political'" Strathausen, *A Leftist Ontology*, xxii.

significance here. Schmitt challenges liberalism by drawing upon an ontological distinction between *politics* and *the political*.⁶⁴ In his formula, the liberals' basic failure is their inability to grasp the distinct ontology of the political, which is radically independent from the ethical and the aesthetic. While the basic categories of the ethical are "good" and "evil" and of the aesthetic are "beautiful" and "ugly," *the political* hinges on a different ontological plane defined by the specific political distinction between "friend" and "enemy."⁶⁵ Liberals cannot comprehend the political because they subsume political distinctions under ethical and economic.⁶⁶ Consequently, they are unable to understand that conflict is politics' defining feature and thus try to eliminate it from political life in the futile hope of reaching an ethical consensus.⁶⁷

A closer glance will clarify the connections between Schmitt's political thought and Heidegger's ontological reflection. Indeed, Schmitt's *political difference* between politics and political finds its counterpart in Heidegger's *ontological difference* between *ontic* and *ontological*.⁶⁸ Heidegger's influence on political ontology is of formative significance because this distinction was critical to grasping the independent domain of the political as an ontological category as well as its grounding of politics.

In Marchart's interpretation, Heidegger maintains that the difference between being and beings was always operative as the matter of thinking in traditional metaphysics; however, it never came into view as a *difference*. Thinking, then, is required

⁶⁴ George Schwab, introduction to Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁷ The centrality of this view to Mouffe's critique of liberalism will be taken up in the third chapter.

⁶⁸ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 171-72. Marchart builds his account of political difference (politics vs. political) around Heidegger's ontological difference (ontic vs. ontological) in order to eventually invert it to give "the political" primacy over "the social" -including "the philosophical." This will be tantamount to assigning political ontology priority over traditional ontology.

to move from the metaphysical guiding question to the grounding question. But since the ontological level cannot be accessed immediately, given that it is not a solid ground, it is irredeemably separated from the ontic level but somehow still serves the function of grounding. In other words, the ontological is always going to escape our grasp because of this gap that exists between being and beings, ground and what is grounded. This is the moment at which Heidegger retains a fundamental dimension without being foundational, or a ground that is simultaneously an abyss.⁶⁹ This provides us with what Marchart dubs *post-foundationalism*, a conception that takes the ontological as well as political difference into account. Thus, Marchart views post-foundationalism as a “constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation” (e.g., totality, universality, essence, and ground).⁷⁰ In this picture “the political,” in its difference from “the social” and “politics,” serves as an indicator of precisely the impossibility or absence of an ultimate foundation for society. Consequently, the “political” emerges as an ontological category that grounds politics in all its elusiveness, whereas political ontology becomes an ontological gaze at the political.

Hence we reach a point where political ontology comes to mean the *ontology of the political*, which, in turn, constitutes the ontological level that grounds the political

⁶⁹ For Marchart, this also makes Heidegger a quasi-transcendentalist for his proximity to the search for the ontological conditions of the possibility of being, despite and alongside his abandonment of the search for grounds. Ibid., 22-25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2. Marchart’s thinkers develop their own version of post-foundationalism through a number of figures with family resemblances, such as contingency, event, conflictuality, and groundlessness. Contingency, like the prefix “post,” has become the sign of our age as it is an almost universal figure of post-foundationalist political thought. But here it manifests itself as a necessary contingency (Ibid., 141), as the operational term to indicate the impossibility of a final ground (Ibid., 25-6). In many instances, the impossible final ground, or the absent ground of the political, is not anti-ground but rather an a-byssal ground sustaining a productive absence by means of a never-ending deferral and withdrawal, where the moment of a definite and final foundation will never come (Ibid., 19). Since the ground has no ground, then only freedom grounds the unground (Ibid., 22). The political is this originary space of freedom (Ibid., 76), and so only it can step in as a supplement for the absent ground (Ibid., 164). The event of the political, therefore, disrupts the ontic order of politics (Ibid., 117), where politics is, in turn, the forgotten foundation (Ibid., 164). The former can assume the phenomenal or conceptual form of “event,” “contingency,” “antagonism,” “freedom,” or “undecidability” (Ibid., 154).

level in a post-foundational sense.⁷¹ Here, we continue to use “ground” in our thinking, but as an *absent* ground, knowing that we cannot stabilize it to build our ethico-political articulations. This is the moment when White’s and Marchart’s analyses of contemporary thinkers come closest to each other on a common notion of political ontology.⁷² Here, ontological level will be relevant for the political level as an unstable, contestable ground that will be always in flux due to the constant shuffling back and forth between them. That is to say, the “background sources” of a political agent will continually animate one’s explicit actions, judgments, and choices while these engagements with particular situations, in turn, will give further shape and clarity to those background sources. This web of complex circulation⁷³ predisposes me to conceive of political ontology through the metaphor of *constellation* instead of *foundation*. In this view, dimensions in one’s thought are not deemed to be integrated in a simple and straightforward way, but as “juxtaposed ... [a] cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to ‘a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle.’”⁷⁴ One’s ontology then will unavoidably prefigure his ethical sensibilities⁷⁵ and political affirmations, but they will, in

⁷¹ This idea of an ontological loop is parallel to White’s concept of the “ontological loop” of “hermeneutical circles” White, “Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity,” 814. The contemplation of the pure moment of the political, or of its distinct being, necessarily entrusts it with a grounding role for politics. Hence, the loop will start from the reverse direction of the political and folds into the ontological once it is conceived ontologically. At that simultaneous moment of political and ontological, it will instantaneously take on the ontological garb and prefigure this constellation’s ethical and the political levels.

⁷² Tonder and Thomassen bring several conceptions of the new ontology under the twofold ontological imaginaries of “abundance” and “lack” See, Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*.

⁷³ Although he does not borrow Adorno’s *constellation*, Connolly describes this web of complex circulation as “[a] network of partly interfused and partly separate elements with none simply determining the others and all entering into complex patterns of circulation.” Connolly, “Foreword” in Strathausen, *A Leftist Ontology*, xii.

⁷⁴ Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 8. In his deployment of this term, Coles elaborates on Adorno’s constellational mode even further by pointing out those aspects of the world’s specificity and excess that elude individual concepts. Thus, the relationships of overlappings and tensionality evoke what is essentially incommensurable to the singularity of a set of concepts Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas*, Contestations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 82.

⁷⁵ Weak ontological analysis, despite the appellation, does not necessarily take sides in the Heidegger-Levinas debate on the primacy of ontology or ethics White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 12. Neither one is assigned a privileged status, as

turn, fall back onto the ontological level to renegotiate those ontological sources. This is the analytical vision, as well as the normative horizon, that will guide me throughout this political ontological project.

An Illustration: A Political Ontological Analysis of Locke and Mill

By way of example, we can look anew at two canonical figures in the history of political thought, namely, John Locke (d. 1704) and John Stuart Mill (d. 1873), to show what political ontological analysis means. An examination of how their ontological premises, ethical sensibilities, and political positions are connected will bring about a clearer picture of certain tensions and associations that are otherwise blurred. Locke is known for his liberal state, which “has no other end but the preservation of property,”⁷⁶ which means a minimal consensual government that seeks to secure certain basic rights and liberties. Mill, the other founding father of liberalism, is renowned for his resolute defense of liberty against social tyranny. When a comparison between the two broadens its focus to scrutinize the ontological and ethical dimensions of their political thought alongside the political dimension, things get more interesting. Here, a well-read student of Locke can easily trace many Lockean liberal political principles to an ontological picture that comprises God, as well as a natural law that posits free, equal, and rational humans along with a pliable nature with its “inferior” creatures and amenable to human use.⁷⁷ Mill’s

they come about as always already entangled. Thus White considers ontology and ethics equiprimordial White, *The Ethos*, 129.

⁷⁶ John Locke and C. B. Macpherson, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1980), 51. Note how Locke defines property: “lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, *property*.” Ibid., 66.

⁷⁷ “The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it which obliges every one; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker -- ... and being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us that may authorize us to destroy another, as if we were made for one another’s uses as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours. Every one, ... ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice to an offender, take away or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of life:

liberalism, by contrast, foregoes the idea of natural right in favor of a utility-oriented outlook that cares for humanity's long-term benefits.⁷⁸ If we figure ontological and ethical dimensions into Mill's narrative, his defense of liberty will appear as relying upon a certain notion of truth⁷⁹ and a fallible human being in pursuit of truth along a meta-narrative of human progress.

The gains we acquire from the recent philosophical inventory will show their genuine effects when I scrutinize a non-Western tradition of political thought through this novel analytical lens. While I place a thinker's reflections under the scope of an *ontopolitical constellation*, I will also be seeking the onto-stories that could link different thinkers over time under a single narrative. As I delve into a thinker's work, I will track down the ontological figures (e.g., God, reason, human nature, revelation, and progress) alongside their interworkings with ethical virtues and political affirmations. I will probe, then, if these figurations can cast a new light on how these thinkers approach the question of self-government or Western notions of democracy. I will seek to articulate my normative ground against the background of these contemporary Euro-American and

the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another." Ibid., 9. (§ 6). Waldron's related work is a well-cited exposition of this argument that Locke's particular theism is a working premise of his whole political theory Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke's Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For White's analysis of the challenge of Lockean theism for liberals, see White, *The Ethos*, 55-56.

⁷⁸ "It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14. An ontological outlook will discern the meta-narrative of progress, as well as its end point "truth," as an existential figure in Mill's case for liberty. The relationship of a human being with truth is, though, fraught with his fallibility. Given this, the whole argument turns into proving liberty's utility for humanity in its gradual attainment of the truth and thus its progress, which could be possible only in an environment of free speech and discussion. For Mill's discussion on fallibility see, Ibid., 21-27.

⁷⁹ "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right" Ibid., 23.

Muslim debates. But before doing this, we must consider some pending issues on the normative implications of political ontology.

1.3 Political Ontology as the Normative Ground for Comparative Political Theory

Admittedly, political theoreticians' recent interest in ontology seems to have a great deal to do with the desire to account for certain repressive political dispositions with reference to how they relate with their fundamental sources. The link, for instance, between Jewish fundamentalists' calls to expel Palestinians from Jerusalem and their belief that God allotted them that territory as a "promised land" arouses an ontological interest. Once we see how his particular way of relating to God and revelation impels this ethicopolitical position, we become involved in a certain thought process: How can we figurate our "existential faith"⁸⁰ so that one would uphold more generous attitudes toward others and the world? This is the point at which political ontology's normative significance comes into clearer view. In this context, normative significance addresses whether a clear preference for the post-foundational or the weak ontological position is justifiable. In simple terms, the question here is are the post-foundational, weak ontological figurations the better ones, or can they be rendered in a better way? Furthermore, normative political ontology is the inquiry concerning the positive political potential of figures that are created on the new ontological terrain. That is, do weak ontologies promise us a politically better world? The attempts presented above, which sought to make sense of

⁸⁰ Tillich's concept of "existential faith," the elemental sense of the ultimate character of being, appears as a recurring theme in several works of Connolly, who provides, in his *Pluralism* (2005), a detailed account of it along with its horizontal (intellectual-creedal) and vertical (affective, visceral) levels. To him there are no constituencies, including the atheists, without some sort of existential faith. Ibid., 25-26, 28.

the current ontological turn, really do carry a normative thrust, although we do not always find full-fledged articulations of weak ontological or post-foundational theories in them.⁸¹

Normative Objections to Political Ontology

Efforts to establish ontology's relevance have also been enmeshed in various normative quandaries addressed by a whole array of skeptics. First, can we attain emancipation if and only if we adopt an anti-foundationalist stance in the form of a nihilism turned into a positive force, as asserted by Gianni Vattimo? Or should we follow Jodi Dean's advice by giving up the ontological struggle and take the fight against fundamentalisms to the political level? In addition, we can ask if the weakening of ontology is really a guarantee or a requirement for more worthy political positions, or if those positions are simply historical contingencies. In any case, what difference would "weak" ontologies make at the political level? Finally, if I am going to formulate my framework on this normative ground, what are the most common figures that populate this post-foundational terrain and what kind of ontological commitments would help me devise a post-foundational variety of Muslim political thought as regards self-government? My attempt to answer these questions will conclude my discussion on ontology and help me link it with political theology.

⁸¹ White makes the normative dimension of his weak ontology thesis clearer in his *Ethos*. In his early work, he took this direction by suggesting that we own up to our ontologies and augment them toward more felicitous articulations. This would hopefully point us toward living the structures of liberal democracy in a less "stingy" way through a more receptive ethos. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 151-53. His later book seeks to answer "what sort of 'characteristic spirit' or 'sentiment' should we be trying to cultivate as we seek to confront the deep challenges of late-modern life?" White, *Ethos*, 2. Marchart clarifies his work's normative dimension as he concludes his analysis by voicing his idea that inasmuch as democracy is ungroundable, every democracy has to be post-foundational. Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 158.

Ground and Terror, or Nihilism and Emancipation

Until now, I have refrained from labeling major examples of anti-foundationalism as non-ontological positions. Instead, I have subsumed them under my framework as anti-foundational political ontologies. I have done so because they do not just cease to imagine a relationship between ontology and politics when they express a distaste for talking about foundations. To the contrary, their anti-foundationalism amounts to a certain ontopolitical constellation that negates metaphysics for the violence it begets. Indeed, my reading suggests that the anti-foundationalist avoidance of ontology has a great deal to do with the strong link it conceives of between a stable ground and terror.⁸² Vattimo, for instance, is clear on this as he perceives a close link between the *arché* and the will to dominate. For him, the solution comes with the self-consumption of metaphysics that will bring about an *accomplished nihilism*.⁸³ But if anti-foundationalists see only violence and terror in any kind of affirmation of foundations, their challengers, in return, see a politically incapacitating nihilism and relativism in anti-foundationalism. In the absence of truth claims and fraught with uncertainties, the argument goes, one's moral life would be impoverished of the animating sources. Unmotivated by any positive imaginary to change things for better, one would end up as inactive.⁸⁴

⁸² Lyotard's closing words in his *The Postmodern Condition* is a good example: "[W]e can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 82. Vattimo, for his part, conceives the problem of violence through the prism of essentialism, ground, and in general metaphysics itself Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 46. He ascribes this idea to Heidegger's view that metaphysics produces a totalitarian and overly rationalist social structure. *Grund* itself then appears as an authoritarian idea. Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, "'Weak Thought' and the Reduction of Violence: A Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo," *Common Knowledge* 8, no. 3 (2002): 455. For Vattimo, then, as the attempt to grasp the *arché* was inspired by the will to dominate, the self-consumption of metaphysics has revealed its true meaning: the will to power, violence, and the destructiveness of liberty Vattimo, *Nihilism & Emancipation*, 7.

⁸³ Ibid., 146. This is non-metaphysical nihilism, in which being consumes itself and nothing remains of being as such.

⁸⁴ For Bennett, the ontological turn might also be ascribed to the dissatisfaction with critical theory's spending too much effort on a negative critique without giving a sufficient elaboration of an affirmative political response. She hopes

Post-foundational political thought represents a standpoint that would resist falling into this dichotomy once again. While the idea of a stable ground leading up to intolerance and violence is not unfamiliar to the post-foundational ontological thinking I have presented, it does not seek to leave it too “thin” to animate ethicopolitical action. Instead, its understanding of *ground* is expected to be “felicitous” enough to sustain our political affirmations. Felicitous ontologies differ from ontologies marred by continual indecisiveness, for they are more about how well ontological figures are articulated so that in their prefiguration they would be able to sustain and animate the ensuing affirmative gestures. It is about taking on the affirmative burden, but in a contestable way. For once, one might be led into Vattimo’s thinking that nihilism can reduce violence because it provides no legitimation and/or foundation for the violent domination and abuse of others. However, one must also realize that it provides no particular form of ethics and therefore no legitimation to resist violence.⁸⁵

The Inefficacy of Political Ontology against Fundamentalisms?

This might confirm the idea that some form of post-foundational or weak ontological standpoint will still have a better chance to resist fundamentalism. Yet again some may still charge it with inefficacy. For instance, Dean argues that an ontological articulation does not give us sufficient leverage to fight market or religious fundamentalisms.⁸⁶ What we need, then, may be a political, as opposed to an ontological, response to

that onto-stories might make up for this by giving political theory an extra dose of normative courage. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 161.

⁸⁵ Hyman makes this point in Hyman, “Must a Post-Metaphysical Political Theology Repudiate Transcendence?”: 132. Then the move from metaphysics to accomplished nihilism, as Vattimo does, may not be the answer because it promotes no particular form of ethics at all.

⁸⁶ Jodi Dean, “The Politics of Avoidance: The Limits of Weak Ontology,” *The Hedgehog Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 56-57.

fundamentalisms.⁸⁷ In fact, some current examples of the ontological struggle against fundamentalism might even be acquiescent toward the current system's larger structures.⁸⁸ In fact, might not some current formulations of political ontology seem as ineffective when faced with the dominant system, or perhaps seem to have very little problem with it?

But this is not a position that necessarily locks in a post-foundationalist political stance. For one thing, it neither seeks to replace "the political" with ontology nor to reduce to it, but just to make "the ontological" more explicit. Hence it would be self-conflicting for a post-foundational political ontology to posit a definite political view, even though it may still point toward the somewhat rough parameters of political options.⁸⁹ For instance William Connolly, a weak ontologist, has developed a micropolitics of critical responsiveness that seeks to *cultivate the (political) virtue of* presumptive generosity.⁹⁰ However, a wide range of other political options, restrained by

⁸⁷ This is also Critchley's main line of argument against political ontology for the sake of political action, which intrinsically is always an ethico-political action: "We are on our own, and what we do, we have to do for ourselves. Politics requires subjective invention, imagination and endurance, not to mention cunning. No ontology or eschatological philosophy of history is going to do it for us." Critchley, "True Democracy," 233-34.

⁸⁸ After all, joining with Taylor, White takes the modern welfare state and market economy as fixed features of contemporary lives rather than seeking for radical alternatives. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 70. However, he does not sound so enamored by these in his later work. White, *The Ethos*, 83-87. For instance, he largely agrees with Wolin's radical democracy of the fugitive kind, although he has deep reservations about its bleak description of the oppressiveness of state and capitalism. Paradoxically, it seems that in some instances a more sweeping opposition to contemporary structures might produce more acquiescence, for after a certain threshold the more pessimistic view one has of the current political situation, the more debilitating effect it has on her mobilization for political change. I think White is trying to capture and ameliorate this tension by his affirmative stance. This is why while he finds fugitivity a valuable ontological source to enliven our democratic life. Yet he still remains aloof to fully subscribing to some of its versions, for doing so would represent an indefinite deferral of change to a *democracy-to-come* (Ibid., 86-7).

⁸⁹ This understanding led a group of leftist thinkers in *A Leftist Ontology* (2009) to conclude that although a range of sensibilities held by the left can be teased out or associated with "the ones that come to terms with the inherent gap or ghostly remainder in the discourse of being qua being," the left has no ontology as such. Bruno Bosteels, "Afterword: Thinking, Being, Acting; or on the Uses and Disadvantages of Ontology for Politics," in Ibid., 239-40.

⁹⁰ "Presumptive generosity" and "critical responsiveness" are, if you will, among the chief virtues of weak ontology as Bennett, Connolly, and White formulate it in several of their works. Bennett defines the former as "rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them" Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 131. For White, it has a quality of initial openness as well as dampening the temptation to turn difference into otherness. White, *The Ethos*, 48. White's project of cultivating a democratic ethos is, in fact, centered on the virtue of presumptive generosity. The other Connollian term, *critical responsiveness*, also involves an attempt to dampen the propensity to react negatively to natality (i.e., the continual

weaker ontologies and certain ethical sensibilities, may go along with them to counteract fundamentalisms.

It goes without saying that weakening ontology does not guarantee more charitable political positions. Nevertheless, violent political tendencies are still not so independent from their holders' ontologies.⁹¹ In its normative dimension, political ontology is about giving an account of as well as owning up to our ontologies so that we can develop more conscious ontological moves on our way to affirming certain ethicopolitical goals. It is about creating a break in the vicious circle of clinging to an absolute conviction -religious or irreligious- that is accompanied by an exclusionary politics in order to counteract the exact same thing.

What is wrong with Fundamentalism?

If religious or secular fundamentalisms (including market fundamentalism, for that matter) are causing so much concern, we had better explain what is wrong with them and on what *ground* we can oppose them.

emergence of new identities) Ibid., 87. These two virtues act together to expand and renegotiate the limited boundaries of liberalism's tolerance and respect.

⁹¹ White's exchange with Miller is a case in point. Miller expresses his qualms about the link between violence and ontology, as well as his case for the contingency between them, through his interpretation of Davenant's revised Macbeth Ted Miller, "The Two Deaths of Lady Macduff: Antimetaphysics, Violence, and William Davenant's Restoration Revision of *Macbeth*," *Political Theory* 36, no. 6 (2008): 858. Through a review of Davenant's modifications to Macbeth, mostly to the effect of a weaker ontology, he asserts that any weakening of the revised play's ontological registers did not result in any ensuing move toward more non-violent dispositions. Thus it should be seriously considered that the desire and ability to uproot and critique the deepest assumptions about beings may be largely independent from the admirable ethico-political impulses. Miller's preferable explanation is closer to a Rortian standpoint: that these impulses could be, in a historicist sense, context-dependent, always already there, rather than intimidated by certain ontological moves (Ibid., 876-77). The problem, in short, is the near-complete identification of violence and metaphysics. In the end, the question of violence and the question of metaphysics may be the two sides of the same coin; however, violence is yet a larger problem Ted H. Miller, "In Hermeneutic Circles: A Reply to White," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 819, 21. Miller may be right to point out that any weakening of ontology in a certain instance does not ensure political moderation, and that this alleged ontological weakening was also way back in history. But the weak ontological point is neither about a guaranteed political moderation nor our lucky progressive times; rather, it is the very basic insight of the new ontology that it precludes any such determination of the political through ontological gestures.

Connolly gives one response: the dogmatism of modern thought is to be sought in its modernization of the *Augustinian imperative*.⁹² The globalization of contingency, our shared experience in late-modern times,⁹³ helps engender opposing currents. On the one hand, *anti-* or *post-*foundational sensibilities arise to take contingency as a key ontological figure, while on the other hand one finds a deepening search for a stable ground via more fundamentalist tendencies. These tendencies become clearer when the “rift in being” puts those Augustinians, who are dying to preserve an omnipotent, innocent, salvational God, in a very precarious and eventually punitive position.⁹⁴ In other words, this will to punish, for the post-Nietzschean Connolly, seems to reflect a certain drive for revenge against a world that always manages to escape their affirmative answers. Thus the only trick left seems to be transcendentalizing the uncanny in order to fill in the onto-ethical gaps and save God’s omnipotence from any trace of the responsibility for evil. Coupled with the constitutive paradox of identity construction, in the sense that it is always already entangled with a construction of difference that could quickly turn into otherness,⁹⁵ evil can find its way into one’s “others.” For Connolly, one can actually wish to affirm the tragic and embrace these rifts or gaps in being and identity to articulate some sort of agonistic politics.⁹⁶ Alternatively, one can adopt the Augustinian view and seek to cure her existential resentment by means of a confessional politics of

⁹² Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 12.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁴ William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 116.

⁹⁵ The most articulate exposition of how the identity construction process is fraught with a temptation to create otherness is found in William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 9-10, 64-65.

⁹⁶ Along with critical responsiveness and presumptive generosity, “agonistic respect” is another recurring *virtue* of Connolly’s *ethos*, roughly in the sense that “each party comes to appreciate the extent to which its self-definition is bound up with the other and the degree to which the comparative projections of both are contestable.” His inspiration for this term is again Nietzsche’s “spiritualization of enmity” Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 155-56. White’s interesting discussion of the Nietzschean distinction between agonism and antagonism can be found in his White, *The Ethos*, 39-43.

redemption that would sacrifice both self and other in order to save God's omnipotence and innocence.⁹⁷

The implications of Connolly's appropriation of the Augustinian parable are remarkable for a non-religious or non-Western analysis. In fact, notwithstanding its Christian character, Connolly extends Augustinianism and the problem of evil to an *Islamic Qutbism* and even to certain forms of atheism.⁹⁸ It could apply to anybody to the degree that one feels besieged by those who hold different existential faiths without threatening one's life or stopping one from practicing one's own.⁹⁹ As the notion of existential faith trivializes the difference between secular and religious groups, the difference between theology and philosophy also becomes far less useful than one is used to thinking.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps in this post-foundationalist, weak ontological *Stimmung*, the only evil left, as Marchart maintains, is the attempt to ground the ungroundable.¹⁰¹

The ontological sensibilities surrounding my comparative political theoretical reflections will carry the imprints of this new ontological *Stimmung* into political theory. I will continue to use *ground*, but only in the sense of an unstable and even absent ground that exists not in accordance with "being as presence," but in the sense of fugitive presencing. Hence, all that is left of ontology is that which is haunted by its own absent ground.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative*, 127. It must be noted that I have presented a quite superficial version of these alternative Nietzschean and Augustinian parables, as well as of the whole constellation of the problem of evil, identity/difference, agonistic politics, and pluralization/pluralism. One can find bits and pieces of Connolly's agonistic political ontology in a wide range of works dispersed over approximately two decades.

⁹⁸ Connolly, *Pluralism*, 14-19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰¹ Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 126.

¹⁰² Marchart is clearly of the opinion that given the injection of a "ground/abyss" of radical instability into the field of being, and hence the field of ontology, it is only in the sense of hauntology, an ontology lacking its very object (being-

To conclude this debate on political ontology and transition to the second chapter, several quite diverse tendencies can be pointed out to capture the emerging new intellectual terrain. This is the ground on which we tackle the question of democracy from a post-foundationalist perspective, as will be explicated in the third chapter. As the boundaries between philosophy and theology blur,¹⁰³ Augustinian imperatives manifest themselves in both religious and secular forms. This also proves that theology is more pertinent when one sees how the problem of evil haunts both religious and secular theories. Theodicy will form a significant topic in the second chapter, alongside the mythical and messianic element in the political and the ensuing formulation of the “democracy-to-come” (*démocratie à venir*). The foregoing moves signify a new disposition that has mainstreamed the discussion of religious and secular themes together and rendered them as being entangled in political theory. I will now turn to recent political theology to give an account of these parallel moments and tensions. In this way, I will capture some of the sensibilities that will, in turn, help me articulate my take on radical democracy and broach whether a post-foundationalist, weak ontology is necessary for democracy.

as-ground) that the term *ontology* may still be employed Ibid., 163. For Derrida’s own presentation of this term, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9-10, 63. Although Derrida takes this category as irreducible and different from ontology, in the broader sense of my project it is safe to characterize it as a deconstructive ontology. Žižek joins Marchart by rebuffing any pretensions to an order of being as a positive ontologically consistent whole because its false semblance relies upon the self-obliteration of the Act. This Act is not introduced into the order of Being afterwards, for it is the condition that actually sustains every order of Being to call for some sort of shift from ontology to hauntology. Spectrality prevents the closure of ontological edifice Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 238.

¹⁰³ Even Rorty, at one point, said that when both religion and philosophy are broadly defined everybody, even atheists, will be said to have faith in the Tillichian sense of “symbol of ultimate concern,” and thus everybody, including those who shun metaphysics, has philosophic presuppositions Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 250. It is important to note that, as Bernstein remarks, this section of the original manuscript was removed from the published version.

CHAPTER 2

RECLAIMING THE THEOLOGICAL IN THE POLITICAL: THEOLOGICAL TURN AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

“Mankind is incurably religious.” Berdyaev

..But, if it be allowed that Providence manifests itself in such objects and forms of existence, why not also in Universal History?... Our intellectual striving aims at realizing the conviction that what was intended by eternal wisdom, is actually accomplished in the domain of existent, active Spirit, as well as in that of mere Nature. Our mode of treating the subject is, in this aspect, a Theodicaea — a justification of the ways of God —...so that the ill that is found in the World may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil. Indeed, nowhere is such a harmonizing view more pressingly demanded than in Universal History; and it can be attained only by recognizing the positive existence, in which that negative element is a subordinate, and vanquished nullity. On the one hand, the ultimate design of the World must be perceived; and, on the other hand, the fact that this design has been actually realized in it, and that evil has not been able permanently to assert a competing position. Hegel¹

Coming to terms with the ontological element of our political thinking is only part of the story of contemporary political thought's ontological turn. If we recall, the ontology of disenchantment held that our time has, in principle, become devoid of any “mysterious incalculable forces,”² as the world was robbed of deities. Yet the loss of meaning that came with disenchantment has nonetheless coexisted with and even fostered some “fugitives,” defined as fragmented but still powerful elements.³ Some might choose to see this situation as the persistence of an “existential faith” in the sense of “a symbol of

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 29.

² Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *Daedalus* 87, no. 1 (1958): 117.

³ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 65.

ultimate concern”⁴ that has survived through the secular age against all expectations to the contrary. This chapter will focus on these fugitive elements and moments of faith, inasmuch as they add to the ontological dimension of the political. In more specific terms, my goal in this chapter is to situate and articulate the *theological* in the political by tracing its manifestations in recent works on political theory or political theology.⁵ Consequently, I will seek to relate this theological element to my analytical framework as well as the major normative goals in this dissertation as laid out in the first chapter.

Toward this end, I will proceed according to the following outline. First, I will present the theological turn in political theory that largely reclaimed Schmitt’s legacy (2.1). On the whole, the more discernible deployment of theological concepts in political theory recognizes the ineradicable theological element even within the most ardent pretensions of neutrality among radical secularists. My concern here is not just to suggest reconciliation with the *ineradicable theological*, but also to seek the means to render it productive for political theorizing.

I will take up this task in the second section (2.2) by illustrating three theological elements that have had quite an afterlife within secular political theories: *mythos*, *messianicity*, and *theodicy*. My quest to render these concepts relevant for political theory will mainly rely on the respective accounts of Milbank, Derrida, and Connolly. Again, I

⁴ Apart from this definition, Tillich is an exemplary case for this chapter’s overall point. To him, *religion* means “being ultimately concerned” and “no human mind is entirely without an ultimate concern and some practical and theoretical expression of it.” This central concept of his theology is also vital to his political theology. Anticipating many thinkers, he saw all aspects of culture, including specifically the political, as having a religious dimension in which theology and politics were tightly entangled: “Social ideas and actions, legal projects and procedures, political programs and decisions” are objects of theology because they all have the “power of actualizing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately.” Louis C. Midgley, “Ultimate Concern and Politics: A Critical Examination of Paul Tillich’s Political Theology,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1967): 1-32.

⁵ The idea here is neither to theologize the endeavor of political theorizing, which would turn it into a quasi-religious discourse with many conversation-stoppers, nor, in Weber’s terms, to let the “sacrifice of the intellect” absorb chunks of freethinking. Rather, I seek to show the ineradicable theological element even within the most ardent pretensions of neutrality among radical secularists and how one can come to terms with it.

am not interested in only tracking down the fugitive theological elements operative in our political thinking, but in reclaiming their respective theological concepts for my comparative political theory framework. Hence, Muslim participants in our dialogical engagements will not merely be entitled to toleration by those seculars who occupy a neutral and post-religious position. Instead, I will suggest that we perceive this dialogical setting as a medium in which each conversant's viewpoint is entangled with a particular *mythos* and different messianic impulses, one in which political theodicies could be identified and acknowledged. These conversants, then, would engage with each other on a more equal footing in their collective quest for more equal, just, and free political arrangements.

Recognizing these theological moments as intrinsic and productive elements of our political debates will guide my attempts to articulate normative reflections on self-government within Muslim contexts. In this vein, opening the floor to a debate on theological leitmotifs of the political could clarify certain dynamics in Muslim political thought. For instance, I have chosen to focus on messianicity so that, eventually, I can propose it as a positive ideal to replace precarious forms of Islamist utopias based on *shariah*.

After my account of these theological concepts, I will shift my focus to current theology by looking at the recent rise and convergence of political theology⁶ with political theory (2.3). Notwithstanding the conservative overtones in its initial spark by

⁶ De Vries' account of political theology's development attests to its novelty: "When this collaborative effort was first discussed, in 1997-98, *political theology* was a term seldom heard in the wider academic debate, beyond historical references to the writings of Ernst Kantorowicz, Carl Schmitt, and 'theologies of liberation.'" Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), xi.

Schmitt in the first half of the twentieth century, political theology's recent trajectory has been profoundly shaped by its more critical versions, especially that of Latin American liberation theology.

As an instance of political theology that has exerted quite an influence on the political thinking and praxis of many religious-minded people during the last century, Gustavo Gutiérrez's formulation of liberation theology occupies a special position. By assigning a specific section to his work (2.4), I will attempt to demonstrate that certain politically oriented theologies can address very similar ontological concerns that I brought up previously in regard to political ontology. Accordingly, they might as well be analyzed via the analytical tools of political ontology. These *critical* political theologies, therefore, pose a challenge to more traditional secularist understandings of religion as an inevitably conservative or regressive force.

My interest in liberation theology is connected with some parallel concerns and sensibilities that I have come across in certain formulations of Islamism and liberation theology. Further along the way, this will help me disentangle different moments of Islamism as well as clarify distinctions between Islamism's fundamentalist moments and those that can be better grasped as a Muslim version of liberation theology.

My assessment of liberation theology and its relevance for contemporary Muslim political thought will conclude my endeavor to pin down the *theological* in the *political*. The new *Stimmung* molded by the ontological and theological turns will have certain implications for the next chapter, which posits that any articulation of democracy may now have to tackle pluralism and difference on a radically different ground. Accordingly,

my discussions in the first two chapters will be connected there with the recent debates on radical democracy, especially as regards ontological imaginaries.

2.1 The Ineradicable Theological Element in the Political

The idea of inescapability from forms and conceptual maps of religious thinking, despite the post-medieval era of secularization, has been in circulation for some time. I broach it anew to identify the common thread in the post-foundationalist *Stimmung* that runs through some versions of political ontology and political theology, as manifested especially in several political theorists who point to the theological residues in the political. Drawing on this, I eventually seek to render some of the theological figures in this inventory productive for my comparative framework.

The spark that touched off the current debate most forcefully can be traced back to Schmitt's 1922 declaration, which has become the new truism during the recent wave: "[A]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development... but also because of their systematic structure."⁷ This insight, which remained relatively untapped until rather recently, was spelled out from time to time in the history of political thought.⁸ More recently, as in the case of Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan's edited volume, it has

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36. Schmitt expanded on this theological tracing of political concepts by the correspondences he made, for example, between exception and miracle as well as between the modern state and deism. Moltmann's account of Schmitt extends this list by drawing further parallels between political sovereignty restricted by natural law with the God of the cosmos; the sovereign of the absolutist period with the nominalist concept of the almighty God; constitutional monarchy with the deistic concept of God; and the democratic doctrine of the people's sovereignty with pantheism. Moltmann in Leroy S. Rouner, ed. *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 43.

⁸ Certain interpretations of Rousseau and Descartes may be pointed out to this effect. Boutmy says: "Rousseau applies to the sovereign the idea that the *philosophes* hold of God." Atger, on the other hand, argues that "the prince is the Cartesian god transposed to the political world." Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46-47.

received serious attention.⁹ These editors have brought together diverse thinkers concerned with the immanent theological element in the political. Their major goal was to take stock of the growing interest in the continuous thread between the theological and the political, as embodied in the recent works of several contemporary political theorists.¹⁰

The common inclination of theologically oriented political thinkers was to unravel mechanisms indicating the imbrication of religion and politics while making the case for the persistence of the theological. This could take the form of pointing out the religious quality of “affect” in being itself and its implications for the political.¹¹ But, more significantly, the theological was often traced to what I characterized in the previous chapter as the ontological event of “the political.” In this sense, whenever we think of the principles that generate society and name them “the political,” religious phenomena are automatically included in the field of reference.¹²

⁹ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*.

¹⁰ That is to say: “Even where ... political concepts tended to be defined in down-to-earth terms, in the wake of a seemingly ‘disenchantment of the world’ ... their formal features and fundamentally ontological weight continued to be invested in -indeed produced by- the very religious tradition whose historical privilege they sought to overcome, or at least to hold in check” (Ibid., 27). It is interesting to note that the thinkers Marchart covered in his survey of the post-foundational turn (e.g., Nancy and Lefort) could also appear in de Vries’ edited volume by virtue of their cognizance of the theological in the political.

¹¹ Nancy, who makes this point, moves on to invite the political to “take charge of a force of affect inherent in being-with.” Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 156-7. Thus according to Lefort’s view on the permanence of theologico-political, any move toward immanence also denotes a move toward transcendence and the symbolic dimension does not wither away. While this does not mean that the religious and the political can coincide, it does mean that “one cannot separate the elaboration of a political form –by virtue of which the nature and representation of power and social division (divisions between classes and groups) can stabilize, and by virtue of which the various dimensions of human experience of the world can simultaneously become organized–from the elaboration of a religious form, by virtue of which the realm of the visible can acquire death, and by virtue of which the living can name themselves with reference to the dead, whilst the human word can be guaranteed by a primal pact, and whereas rights and duties can be formulated with reference to a primal law.” Ibid., 156. But Lefort still wonders whether democracy constitutes a radical break from this narrative, as opposed to just a new episode of transferring the religious into the political. Along with democracy, a new experience of the institution of the social began to take shape, and religious is reactivated only at the weak points of the social in order to make its efficacy no longer symbolic, but only imaginary. Ibid., 187.

For example, Derrida finds the theological element in the transcendence (of the law) that occurs during the “founding moment”¹³ to be an ungraspable revolutionary instant that “belongs to no historical, temporal continuum.”¹⁴ Interestingly enough, from this moment emerges the line that connects the dots between Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political* and his *Political Theology*. The distinct ontology of the *political* in the former is made clear by the sovereign in the latter, as he is the one who decides on the miraculous, or mystical, moment of exception (the founding). Consequently, theologically oriented political theorists hold that political theology’s major concern is the elusive and absolute element that unconsciously drives the public domain.¹⁵

So far, I have attempted to capture the emerging propensity among some contemporary political theorists to acknowledge the persistent *theological in the political* amidst the presumed secularization and profanization of modern life. I will now illustrate the theological residues in our political thinking by tracing the afterlife of three specific theological concepts, namely, *mythos*, *messianicity*, and *theodicy*. My analysis will concentrate on how Milbank, Derrida, and Connolly, respectively, tackled them. Aside from my intent to substantiate the interminability of the theological, my interest in these three themes is also geared toward incorporating them into the normative structure of my developing perspective. Accordingly, I view these concepts as significant conceptual tools that will help me address important issues in Muslim political thinking. To me, they

¹³ “Mystical foundation of authority” (Ibid., 239) or “founding or revolutionary moment of law” (Ibid., 269) are the exact phrases Derrida uses. Jacques Derrida and Gil Anidjar, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁴ Ibid., 274.

¹⁵ In de Vries’ own words, political theology is “the scientio of the elusive and absolute that often governs and unconsciously drives and inspires, or destabilizes and terrorizes, the public domain (‘the theologico-political’), and on the other hand, especially in its plural dimension, [is] the name and description of the many diverse forms in which this ‘empty’ notion or open dimension can become dogmatically fixated, socially reified, aesthetically fetishized.” De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 46.

shed light on certain moments and tensions of the thinkers under study and will become productive in regard to normative discussions on identity, difference, or coexistence in Muslim contexts.

2.2 Exemplary Theological Residues: Mythos, Messianicity, and Theodicy

i. Mythos

Milbank begins with the Nietzschean idea that mythos is an intrinsic part of our cultural formations, and we have to realize that we always construct a mythical truth.¹⁶ In this sense, “the mythic-religious can never be left behind.”¹⁷ But this is not to suggest that the mythical character of truth is a sorry state of affairs. Convinced of the inevitability of myths, Nietzsche affirmed every culture’s need for a mythology, because without one a given culture would lose its natural power of creativity.¹⁸

His interest in Nietzschean mythos stems from his desire to include social theory within a theological discourse rather than recounting yet another story of the religious discourse’s secularization. By subsuming the history of social theory under a mythical framework of truth, Milbank seeks to show how this history must be seen as a train of successive *mythoi*.¹⁹ In this narrative, one particular mythos comes right after the other,

¹⁶ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 137. This notion of truth closely resembles Rorty’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s definition of truth as a “mobile army of metaphors,” which had a definite impact on his own postmodern challenge to truth and foundation. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 17-20. Thus he sees human history as a “history of successive metaphors.” The parallels between Rorty and Milbank also manifest themselves in the latter’s view of narrative as our primary mode of inhabiting the world. This is yet another reason to see him as part of the post-foundationalist *Stimmung*. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 359.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 92.

¹⁹ This idea pervades his social theory narrative, which only proves (to him) the critical non-avoidability of the theological and metaphysical. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

from Machiavelli to Hobbes, from positivism²⁰ to postmodernist nihilism. Mythos might be located in the construction of the idea of property, sovereignty, or *virtu*.

For our purpose, the more significant thing about truth's mythical character is that it extends to relations of power to prove "all power.... entirely self-founded," that power "has no legitimation whatsoever outside its own self-establishment through mythical inscription."²¹ If the founding moment of law is mythical, then it might as well be stated that the founding event of the political is mythical, meaning that "the political is mythical."

In this case the founding event, which I have delineated an ontologically distinct moment, can also be conceived of as an instance in which we can identify the mythical in the political. Having recognized this, political actors engaged in a dialogical exchange designed to bring about a mutually agreeable political arrangement will have to call for a change of heart, a movement from a conception of neutral public reason to an alternative dialogical setting in which the parties involved are cognizant of their founding narratives' mythical character. Hence, my earlier call for the conversants to own up to their ontologies will now take the form of mutually acknowledging their respective mythoi. This in itself promises to render *mythos* a productive resource for political theorizing based upon the following assumption: When the mythical element has been recognized and reclaimed, what remains to be discussed is whether certain mythoi, in all of their

²⁰ Ibid., 70. With an admirable grasp of the many intricacies of the modern West's socio-political theorists, Milbank enters into the meta-theoretical/ontological level of numerous major social theories to narrate how the space of secular was invented as a space of pure power; i.e., how an ontology of violence/power, as a perverse theology, prefigured all major known secular theories. In this instance, for example, "positivist discourse solved the antinomy of social creation by invoking a direct divine/natural presence which is benign organicism and harmony, but also the necessary violence of sacrifice" to form the defining theological elements in the positivist discourse. In short, "every secular positivism is a positivist theology." Ibid., 139.

²¹ Ibid., 55.

contingent character, can engender more restrained and agreeable political positions.

Based on this understanding, I relate mythos in political theory with messianicity and theodicy.

ii. Messianism and Messianicity: Derrida's Democracy-to-Come

As the long history of political thought shows, the utopian impulse has often been considered an essential motivation of political theorists. Several political theologies, in turn, have formulated this impulse through different versions of messianism. For many Christians, messianic is linked with the *promise*, which makes the Bible a book of *hope*. Although utopianism has fallen out of favor due to the tragedy and terror caused repeatedly by radical moral reformers, the utopian element cannot be so easily discarded from political thinking altogether.²² Some deem this impulse to be the imaginative dimension of political thinking.²³ In my view, the theological concept of messianicity is useful because it can enable the coming together of several forms of this impulse in religious or secular political projects.²⁴ Here, Derrida's appropriation of messianicity, inasmuch as it offers a quite original understanding of justice and democracy, deserves attention in its own right.

In his *Specters of Marx*, Derrida desires to capture the messianic dimension of the political by re-interpreting Marx in order to give him his due by particularly attending to

²² Klosko's work is a good example of trying to capture the paradoxical nature of the radical moral reformists' utopian impulse that, ironically, breeds the very seeds of violence and terror it opposes. George Klosko, *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). In regards to utopia's positive function, on the other hand, Ricoeur says, "Only utopia can give economic, social, and political action a human focus." Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 138.

²³ "Imagination in politics is called utopia," says Blanquart. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 137.

²⁴ This common impulse also led Russell to call Marxism a "secularized messianic religion." Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 142.

the messianic dimension.²⁵ The fact that Derrida is unapologetic about the Marxist utopia's failure does not interfere with his desire to honor the inheritance of at least one spirit of Marxism. In fact, he sees the Soviet Union's collapse as removing the alibi of there being no need to re-read Marx.²⁶ In his view, totalitarian disasters are neither perversions nor accidental and pathological corruptions, but a necessary deployment of an essential logic present at the birth, of an "originary disadjustment."²⁷ Yet what he likes most about his favorite *spirit* of Marx is the critical idea, the questioning stance, and, above all, a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation.²⁸ This is the legacy he wants to reaffirm by reclaiming Marx through the positing of a Marxist ontology, which, in turn, requires a messianic eschatology.²⁹ Hence he places Marx within the orbit of his conception of ontology (i.e., *hauntology*),³⁰ with its non-religious, mythological character.³¹

Pointing out Marx's indebtedness to the imagery of *Hamlet*'s specter in the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*, Derrida directs his attention to the notions of specter and haunting in order to elucidate their ontopolitical significance. Here, specter is "the paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994). He articulates his theological-political ideas, specifically hauntology and messianicity, mainly in this book.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 114. As will become clear later, "they are an effect of an *ontological* treatment of the spectrality of the ghost."

²⁸ Ibid., 111. It is "a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any *messianism*." He thus radically opposes thinkers like Althusser in their dissociation of Marx from any messianic eschatology. Ibid., 112.

²⁹ Ibid., 73.

³⁰ Hauntology is irreducible to ontology or theology, either positive or negative. The moment of the political, therefore, is neither living nor dead; neither present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse of Being or beings. Ibid., 63.

³¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 113.

form of the spirit.”³² Haunting, on the other hand, means to engineer a habitation without properly residing therein, as in the manner of a ghost.³³ For Derrida, to haunt is different from being present, and it must be introduced to the very construction of every concept, beginning with being and time. This is why he pits hauntology against ontology.³⁴

These conceptual clarifications are just a prelude to Derrida’s affirmative use of specter in his deconstructive method. For him, the task of deconstruction is neither Marxist nor non-Marxist, and yet it remains loyal to a spirit of Marxism.³⁵ It is the affirmation and experience of the impossible, the radical experience of “perhaps.”³⁶ This calls for clarifying how deconstruction is linked with messianicity in terms of Marx’s legacy.

Derrida conceives of a specter as the return of the dead or the persistence of a present past. In Marx’s sense, it is a presence to come.³⁷ One can never distinguish between the future to come and the coming back of a specter.³⁸ The moment of the *political* itself is a spectral and a spectralizing moment. Therefore, communism has always been and will always be spectral.³⁹ “[T]o be just” is a spectral moment.⁴⁰ In that

³² Ibid., 5. It is neither soul nor body. It is both one and the other. It must be added that the spirit and the specter are not the same thing.

³³ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁴ Derrida, continuing with his figurative language, states that “Ontology opposes [hauntology] only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.” Ibid., 202.

³⁵ Ibid., 94.

³⁶ Ibid., 112.

³⁷ Ibid., 126.

³⁸ Ibid., 46.

³⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xix.

sense, justice is not here yet, not yet here any longer, no longer present, and never will be.⁴¹

At this point, justice and democracy can be linked with messianicity. Democracy has to remain a messianic emancipatory promise, just like communism,⁴² because it is a promise. It should, therefore, be understood as democracy-to-come, which is quite different from a utopia, a future democracy (future present), or a regulating idea.⁴³ It is this messianic emancipatory promise that remains undeconstructable,⁴⁴ a realization that also applies to the undeconstructability of justice.⁴⁵

Derrida thus formulates communism, along with justice and democracy, as a messianic promise. Thus for him, a messianic moment does not refer to a utopian one. In fact, Marxism's essential mistake was to conceive of the messianic as a future state of affairs. Misperceiving hauntology as ontology, it failed to grasp the elusiveness of the political. The future to come, in this sense, is neither deferred nor postponed,⁴⁶ but rather it is messianic without messianism (i.e., a structure of experience rather than a religion). It is still a messianic hope, but a hope without a waiting for, an absolute hospitality, a saying "yes" to the arrivant-to-come.⁴⁷

In this affirmative form, messianic can function as an emancipatory promise without any utopian delusions that could breed the totalitarian politics needed to force a utopia to come. By shifting from ontology (being as presence) to hauntology, Derrida

⁴¹ Ibid., xviii.

⁴² Ibid., 74.

⁴³ Ibid., 81. "Its 'idea' as event of a pledged injunction that orders one to summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence, is the opening of this gap between an infinite promise... and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise."

⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 210-11. This leaves little ground to argue that the normative overload here is postponed to the future in order to evade the present task.

invites us to reorient our conception of *the political* as well as such political concepts as justice and democracy. This will encourage one to surmount the self-conceitedness of actual democracies, while maintaining his messianic hope, without falling into utopian fantasies. Hence the messianic theological element in our thinking could serve as a vibrant theoretical resource to animate our ethico-political action. This view has a lot to say to both secularist and religious people. Some secularists could use this resource to acknowledge the interminable theological element in their thought that sustains and animates their political affirmations. It could encourage them to give up utopian urges that pursue justice and equality by overly rationalized and violent means in order to create a worldly heaven.

This view could also appeal to religious people who, disillusioned with the injustices of this world, might have postponed their hopes for justice to the afterlife in a religious version of nihilism. Viewing this new outlook as an invitation to actively engage with the world could cause them to join the struggle for justice without being possessed by the mundane.⁴⁸ Alternatively, those religious people who wish to see justice established through their own agency may find an important corrective in Derrida's view. They could moderate their zeal by admitting the always incomplete, elusive, and *to-come* character of justice, which could shift their struggle from the purely political to the properly ethico-political sphere. I will take up the full implications of this position while discussing messianicity in Muslim contexts.

⁴⁸ Religious circles sometimes phrase it as being *in* the world but not *of* the world.

iii. “Political Theodicy” and the Political Significance of Evil

Few other secularized theological concepts have entertained such a considerable afterlife as the problem of evil. Perhaps only a few non-theistic political thinkers have been so preoccupied with it as William Connolly. In fact, he is the one who affirmed that “secularism, in one of its dominant modes, constitutes the afterlife of Augustinianism.”⁴⁹ In this section, I will engage with theodicy, insofar as it concerns this chapter’s main point, to show how the notion of evil constitutes an important theological residue in the *political*, one that suffuses certain identity construction processes. Coming to terms with the intrinsic theodicy in our political formations will help me distinguish among forms of political theodicies related to various ontopolitical constellations. My broader goal is to capitalize on this notion in order to point to a family of political theodicies that accords well with my project’s normative goals.

While I focus on Connolly’s account of evil in political theory, Milbank’s theistic perspective provides an alternative baseline to consider religious and secular theodicies. Milbank states that during the medieval period, the church did not really recognize the “problem of evil” as theoretical in nature. In other words, a “science” of theodicy did not seem to exist, although there were some intimations of it. In the seventeenth century, theodicy was approximated to the theoretically observable fact of imperfection. Sociology, on the other hand, took evil as a given for which a rational explanation could be provided.⁵⁰ After all, it was one of the heirs of post-Leibnizian theodicy.⁵¹ The

⁴⁹ William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 145. Echoing many others covered in this chapter, Connolly asserts that “secularism is better conceived, not simply as a counterpoint to theism, but as an ambiguous phenomenon that confronts theism on some places and absorbs its legacy into secular vocabularies and practices on others.”

⁵⁰ Hegel’s epigraph would also fall in that category for, in Milbank’s reading of Hegel, evil is necessary to the development of finite subjectivity, the emergence of virtue, and the final realization of love. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 158. Hegel, then, subordinates ethics and justice to theodicy. *Ibid.*, 171.

alternative Augustinian-Thomist tradition viewed evil as a misdirection of will and thus refused to reify it or ascribe to it any positivity, for doing so would have required a compensatory, consoling, or apologetic “explanation.” Thus, at least according to Milbank, religion should not be reduced to a theodicy in the form of a coping strategy with imaginary “gaps” in being.⁵² In fact, it can dispense with such “problem management” altogether.⁵³

While Milbank might be quite correct in his objection to such a reduction, Connolly is equally unsure about theodicy’s secularly constructed character. Joining with him, perhaps we can subsume the history of social theory under a theological narrative. In that case, secular theodicy would be situated within the train of those inescapable moments that have constituted themselves out of the debris of broken theologies.⁵⁴

As noted above, Connolly designates the source of (the problem of) *evil* as the “Augustinian imperative,” a view, in his opinion, that covers both the secular and the religious forms of the identity construction processes. He even includes non-Western formations, including Qutbism, as having their fair share of this tension.⁵⁵ Yet *identity/difference* is the particular locus of his argument for evil’s political significance. Here, the relation of identity to difference constitutes “the site of two problems of evil.” What makes Connolly most curious and leads him into theology’s beginnings is a certain political problem: “[W]hat ... are the compulsions that drive a church, a state, a culture, an identity to close itself up by defining a range of differences as heretical, evil,

⁵¹ Yet it would project this on all cultures and religions. In Weber’s account, for instance, there are only three types fundamental types of theodicy: the Zoroastrian variety and the Hindu doctrines of karma and theories of predestination. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 125.

⁵² It would relegate religion to a universal psychological need in this case.

⁵³ Ibid., 124-125

⁵⁴ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 2.

⁵⁵ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 14-19.

irrational, perverse, or destructive, even when the bearers of difference pose no direct threat of conquest?”⁵⁶ A preliminary answer is given by the existential resentment that is intrinsic to certain psychological processes of identity construction:

An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized...Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure is the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity ... involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates. Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.⁵⁷

The pressures or “causal mechanisms” that mediate between a given state of difference and the creation of otherness lie in an onto-theological imagination that “demands or presupposes an ultimate answer to the question of being.” This, in turn, perceives being as “the ground in which being as such is grounded” and places Hobbes as well as Augustine on the same plane of ontotheology.⁵⁸ The primordial experience of suffering, therefore, has been transposed into the theistic problem of evil.⁵⁹ In other words, the real problem is this imagination of wholeness that defies the rhizomatic or tragic state of being.⁶⁰

Connolly formulates the problem as the “two problems of evil,” as most typically observed in Augustine. First, existential suffering must be a sign of evil, from which it follows that some agent other than God must be responsible for it.⁶¹ Thus benevolence of an omnipotent deity is saved by exempting it from any responsibility for evil. The second

⁵⁶ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁰ For Connolly, the real evil is perhaps this quest for a whole, secure, centered, and transcendental way of being; the demand for wholeness and purity. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 161.

⁶¹ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 146.

problem flows from diverse political tactics through which doubts about self-identity are posed and resolved by constituting an “other” against which that identity can define itself.⁶² The real danger with this imaginary occurs when these problems are conjoined with the intrusion of civil and ecclesiastical power into the interior of the self. In that case, there would always be external enemies to be conquered and internal enemies to be contended with:

Let them perish before your face, O God, even as vain talkers and seducers of men’s minds perish who detect in the act of deliberation two wills at work... They themselves are truly evil, when they think such evil things. Thus they are made into a deeper darkness, for in horrid pride they have turned back further from you.⁶³

Connolly conceives the Augustinian account of evil as presented in these examples as a “political theology of a transcendental egoism”⁶⁴ and a “strategy of earthly power.”⁶⁵ This can also be articulated as a “political theodicy,” as one of several attempts to account for evil and a certain ontopolitical constellation that goes with it. In its Augustinian version, this takes the shape of a particular onto-theology and a punitive politics to surmount it.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid., ix-x.

⁶³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, Bk 8, chap. 9. Cited by Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 117.

⁶⁴ It is because Augustine’s hope to live forever in heaven is bolstered by the confirming beliefs of those who surround him and, more importantly, by the plight of those who deviate from the doctrine imposed by his church. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 135.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 124. This is perhaps what led Ricoeur to conclude that the Augustinian account of evil must be rewritten if Christianity is to transcend the most punitive dispositions of its history. Ricoeur Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Cited by Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 136. Milbank draws starkly opposite interpretations on difference for the Christian *mythos*. In his reading, for Augustine (as well as for Dionysius), evil or untruth is neither a simulacrum nor a bad copy of a real thing. It is not even a mistaken combination, but rather a “pure negation.” This neither contradicts nor denies identity, which suggests a real act of violence, but simply is a *lack* and therefore something to be defined in relation to desire as opposed to logic. Once evil and falsity are no longer seen as permanent forces against the Good, there are no more illusions. In this way, the Christian *mythos* can rescue virtue from its deconstruction into violent, agonistic difference. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 375-76. Although a different interpretation of Christianity might render Connolly’s paradox of identity/difference less persuasive, it is hard to disagree with his demonstration of how constructing a Christian identity simultaneously invents a benevolent, omnipotent God innocent of all evil as well as evil “others,” whose responsibility for evil would justify certain political measures to eradicate evil forever.

⁶⁶ One can try an alternative reading of Augustine, as Johnson does, to develop a political theodicy that is more open to difference. Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181-82. Holding on to Augustine’s legacy in her argument for pluralism, Johnson offers another interpretation of Augustinian difference that would not create evil out of difference.

But this is not the only way to cope with existential resentment; moreover, it might also be a quite bad way. Connolly's alternative political theodicy, which builds on an Epicurean reaffirmation of contingency in life and being and is coupled with a non-theistic conception of evil,⁶⁷ seeks to overcome existential resentment through a positive ethos of engagement. This, in turn, entails our working upon ourselves as a form of self-artistry in order to rise above the demands for wholeness and purity in public life.⁶⁸ It may be interesting to investigate whether certain forms of political theodicy might be developed in weak ontological terms.

At the end of the day, we can conclude that since some account of evil will perhaps always permeate our ontopolitical thinking, we need to better recognize how political theodicies operate in our political thought processes. Even further, we could incorporate this concept into our normative reflections. Accordingly, as in the case of Connolly's ethos of engagement, we can develop alternative ways to engage with others/difference. In the comparative context of my project, the initial step might be to delineate what kind of a conception of evil operates in the thought of a particular Muslim thinker. If a conception of evil seems unavoidable, then looking into how it is constructed and identifying what kind of a political theodicy emerges from it promises to be a novel analytical way to dissect a thinker. The analytic value of political theodicy will be more

By quoting his endorsement of humanity's multicultural and multi-linguistic character, she tries to show a way out of the nation-state model. Even further, she invites Christians to see reflections of their own images in the images of their "enemies," for they are united in createdness and sinfulness. While any articulation of an Augustinian position that honors difference is refreshing, her account cannot appeal to people who do not share in the Christians' common purpose and common worship. Prior to Johnson, Milbank had already drawn a picture of Augustinian evil and difference that posed a stark contrast to Connolly's. This one considered theodicy as a problem invented by the very same forces that created the secular domain dominated by the *libido dominandi*. All in all, we have yet to find counter-readings of Augustine's passages that Connolly effectively utilizes to point toward a certain constellation of ontotheology, theodicy, and punitive politics.

⁶⁷ Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 12. Connolly also considers Kateb as having a non-theistic conception of evil.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

obvious when I reflect upon the construction of evil in Afghani's political thought, for instance, compared to that of Qutb, insofar as their theodicies are related with their ethico-political positions. It might be even more interesting to probe whether Qutbian political theodicy undergoes a shift along with the emergence of liberal Muslims' new political mood. In other words, do contemporary liberal Muslims conceive of and propose a qualitatively different political theodicy?

The next step could be a normative quest to devise alternative formulations of political theodicy. If these were to stand out by engaging with difference in cross-cultural sites, they would go much further than the familiar accounts of evil by virtue of their cognizance of their own embedded ontopolitical constellations. If such a development were to occur, comparative political theory would genuinely be able to attend to the Muslims' attempts to come to terms with difference and otherness.

2.3 Political Theology: Old and New

As noted earlier, the theological turn in political theory has paralleled recent critical political leanings within theology to form a certain convergence between political theory and political theology. In point of fact, political theology is not so much of an unfamiliar term as this recent surge might seem to indicate. What is unfamiliar, however, is its increasing proclivity to make inroads into the central questions of political theory as opposed to the original metaphysical impetus.⁶⁹ I bring this up here for several reasons.

To begin with, political theologians have joined many of the earlier debates I have

⁶⁹ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 25. For Johnson, the ontological turn in political theory opens the way for a theological turn: "Theology offers nothing if not accounts of human being and what there is more generally, while the questions of unity, diversity, and community with which political theory is engaged are questions that lie at the very heart of theology." Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 22.

touched upon concerning foundations and the hermeneutic circle among ontology, ethics, and politics.⁷⁰ In this sense, a significant portion of the current *Stimmung* is molded by their works. Paying closer attention to them, then, will provide a much better understanding of the state of current political ontological debates.

Moreover, political theology offers a valuable framework by which one can differentiate between divergent articulations of the political consequences of speaking of God. I therefore dedicate a good portion of this section to presenting its trajectory toward its current critical forms. This account will seek to revise the commonplace view of religion as a hopelessly conservative or reactionary political force and to show how religious experience could be just as liberative as dangerous.⁷¹ My best case to this effect will be liberation theology (covered in section 2.4) While I consider it under Critical Political Theologies or the New Political Theology, my preoccupation with liberation theology has an additional ground. As I will make clear in chapter 5 liberation theology presents a comparative case that can help us make better sense of Islamism. At that point,

⁷⁰ See, for instance, Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). For other important works exemplifying the convergence and conversation between political theory and political theology, see, Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000); William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T & T Clark, 2002); Derrida and Anidjar, *Acts of Religion*; Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, & Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Aakash Singh and Péter Losonczi, *From Political Theory to Political Theology: Religious Challenges and the Prospects of Democracy* (London: Continuum, 2010), and Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012). Especially De Vries's edited volume marks this theological conjuncture with examples from both sides of political theory and political theology.

⁷¹ I borrow this distinction from Moltmann, who differentiates between the liberative "return of religion to politics" and the dangerous "return of politics to religion." Jürgen Moltmann, "Christian Theology and Political Religion," in Rouner, *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, 44-45. In this context, "dangerous" refers to the political use of the incurable religious element in one's psyche. Moltmann one-sidedly recognizes the return of religion to politics only in the critical movements of his time, such as the peace movement, the Third World Movement, and the ecological movement. Although this is a useful distinction, as far as my work is concerned separating the liberating critical religious experience from the fundamentalist or conservative versions of politicized religion is more crucial.

I will probe the extent to which Islamism, at least in certain forms and moments, can constitute a Muslim version of liberation theology.

Most political theorists are familiar with political theology through Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). Schmitt reinvigorated this concept, after centuries of oblivion, in 1922 with his *Politische Theologie*.⁷² His stated reason for doing so, to demonstrate "the continuous thread that runs through the metaphysical, political and sociological conceptions,"⁷³ sparked an intense debate on the status of the theological vis-à-vis the political among German theology and political philosophy circles for the next several decades.⁷⁴ This debate was interposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as one of the twentieth century's most important events for theology, specifically political theology.⁷⁵

These Continental (mostly German) discussions found serious reverberations in the United States.⁷⁶ This was most significantly put in context by Metz's "New Political

⁷² Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2008), 35. Schmitt thus affirms his polemicist Peterson's reference to him as "the one who introduced the phrase 'political theology' to literature." If we turn to De Vries' account on political theology, the term itself can be traced to Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), who juxtaposed it with mythical and cosmological theories. In the Greek *poieis*, political religion served to insure democratic tranquility and prosperity by appeasing the deities. The state ended up being the object of worship during Roman times, a practice that Augustine staunchly attacked. However, Christianity eventually shared the same fate by becoming a political religion. Accompanying the political events, political theology recurrently disappeared and resurfaced.

⁷³ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 47. Here, metaphysics would be "the most intensive and clearest expression of an epoch." Ibid., 46. In clearer terms, "the metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization."

⁷⁴ *Political Theology II* is a response to Peterson's argument for the theological impossibility of any political theology in Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus Als Politisches Problem: Ein Beitrag Zur Geschichte Der Politischen Theologie Im Imperium Romanum* (Leipzig: Hegner, 1935). Among leading figures of this discussion from both the political and the theological sides were Karl Barth, Karl Rahner (with *The Spirit in the World*), Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Maier (especially his *Kritik der Politischen Theologie*); Hans Kelsen, Hans Urs von Balthasar, J. B. Metz (*Theology of the World*), Jacob Taubes (*Political Theology of Paul*), Jürgen Moltmann (*Religion, Revolution and the Future*), and Dorothee Sölle.

⁷⁵ It should be noted that Schmitt dedicated his *Political Theology II* to Hans Barion, one of the foremost critics of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5).

⁷⁶ For a glimpse of the German-American interactions on the new political theology with articles by such leading figures as Tom McCarthy, Moltmann, Bellah, Metz, and James Cone, see Rouner, ed. *Civil Religion and Political Theology*. Here, Moltmann traces the new political theology to Metz and himself, followed by Sölle, Jan Lochman,

Theology.” As opposed to Schmitt’s civil religion, a pillar of political authority, this new political theology was a theory of the church’s public, critical, and liberative functions in modern society.⁷⁷ It was, therefore, not just affirmative but critical,⁷⁸ for it presupposed, rather than abandoned, the emancipation and autonomy of the political from the religious order.⁷⁹ It adopted the “deprivatization of religion” as its task not so that it would put an end to disinterest in politics, but so that it would not mix politics and religion in the form pre-critical political theologies had done.⁸⁰

Beyond suggesting a novel relationship between religion and politics, this new political theology also stood out due to its unique and ambivalent theoretical conversation with the legacy of Marxism.⁸¹ This new trend regarded Marxism as an intellectual resource to be attended to seriously beyond its expected contribution to refining and developing political theology’s critique of religion and society.⁸² It was to counter the image and the baggage of political theology, which had been little more than a

Helmut Gollwitzer, George Casalis, Giulio Girardi, and other European theologians. He thus contrasts it with the existing (and old) *political theology* of Schmitt.

⁷⁷ It is, therefore, not the theory of a political religion of this society. Also, Schmitt held that only states, revolutions, and counterrevolutions could be historical subjects. The new political theology, however, wants to transform the church into an “institution of socio-critical freedom,” as Metz put it. *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁸ Metz differentiated his project from pre-critical thought, which “does not take into account the challenge born of the Enlightenment that catalyzed the process of emancipation and autonomy of the political sphere.” *Ibid.* On the opposite side were those pre-critical theologies that “politicized directly and did not distinguish the public sphere of the state and the Church as power, from the public sphere in which the interests of all persons as a social group are expressed.” Or to put it simply, as they did not distinguish between the state and society, they could be just as authoritarian and repressive as political theologies that seek to restore a “Christian State.”

⁷⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 127.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 128. Paralleling that, Moltmann and Herzog spoke of “awakening the political consciousness of theology.” Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), xiv.

⁸¹ Despite Metz’s contention that theology did not pay tribute to the legacy of Hegelian Left, political theology’s ambivalent relationship with Marxism, one that is characterized by a clear indebtedness as well as enduring reservations, goes back to the 1930s-40s with the work of such figures as Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain. Hence it is outside the German debate. Dennis McCann, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain on Marxism: A Comparison of Two Traditional Models of Practical Theology,” *The Journal of Religion* 58, no. 2 (1978): 141.

⁸² Sölle, *Political Theology*, xi-fn.; McCann, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain,” 140. Some, such as Dom Helder Camara, have suggested that Marx may be for our time what Aristotle was for the theologians of the thirteenth century. *Ibid.* Besides, despite his known atheistic philosophy, some of his statements provided some space. For instance, he characterizes religion as “the sigh of the oppressed culture” and “the heart of the heartless world, the soul of the soulless conditions.” Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, & Revolution*, 40-41.

theological metaphysic granting religious sanction to existing social and political structures.⁸³ This was the background of a largely acquiescent church against oppressive socio-political structures. Against this, the Marxist ideology-critique informed by the Hegelian Left provided a viable alternative to pre-critical theologies that drew on the transcendental philosophy of Kant and German idealism. When approached from this angle, the key question becomes: “[W]hat prevents political theology from becoming just another political ideology?”⁸⁴ In response, critical political theology asserts that because it has the power to be self-critical, only it can prevent this critique from dissolving into a new ideology.⁸⁵

With that, the new political theology tasks itself with answering the question: “[W]hat are the social and political consequences of speaking of God?” The goal here is to break away from the authoritarian legacy by reconceiving God as the “God of the oppressed” and then probe “the ontological status of the God of the oppressed.”⁸⁶ Such a break enables us to conveniently place the new political theology on the same plane as political ontology, which makes the hermeneutic circle among its ontological, ethical, and political elements amenable to our political ontological analysis.

By way of example, Sölle conceives God as the God of the Oppressed, Jesus as a minister of “liberation,” and human beings as having the potential to become a *cooperator Dei*. Human existence will then be constituted by the contradiction between the experience of “I” (freedom) and the experience of being determined by the heteronomy of external circumstances. Resting on this ontological ground, she

⁸³ Sölle, *Political Theology*, xi.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, xi-xv.

renegotiates and works out the ethical concepts of sin, radical evil, forgiveness, responsibility, and eschatological promise.⁸⁷

Above all, the most significant case of critical political theology is arguably the version of liberation theology articulated by Gustavo Gutiérrez. Since his theory is the most recognized version of twentieth-century critical political theology, I will now embark upon my political ontological analysis by relating its significance to my project's overall development.

2.4 Liberation Theology and Its Aftereffects

Despite the long line of precedents outlined above, liberation theology appears to be the best known case of critical political theology. Nonetheless, Gutiérrez differs somewhat from the German-American theological development despite his considerable drawing from Metz's new political theology. This difference expresses itself in his far more cordial relationship with Marxism, arguably owing to his (post)colonial subject position.⁸⁸ In any case, as it emerged amidst the exploitative postcolonial socioeconomic circumstances alongside the region's historically acquiescent church, during the 1960s, liberation theology was Latin American theology's primary event.⁸⁹

Gutiérrez's political theology is important for my overall project for several reasons. As an example of a "critical" and "liberative" political theology, it provides a Third World political theology that grounds its demands for social justice and anti-

⁸⁷ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

⁸⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 8.

⁸⁹ Gutiérrez dates the movement's beginning to 1968 (Ibid., xviii). Many other figures, among them Hugo Assman, Juan Luis Segundo, Emilio Castro, Luis Pagan, and Julio de Santa Ana, contributed important works in this movement. For a reviewer, while Assman is liberation theology's apologist, Gutiérrez is its theologian, and Rubem Alves is its prophet with his *A Theology of Human Hope* (1969), generally considered the movement's precursor. J. C. Anderson, review of *A Theology of Human Hope*, by Rubem A. Alves, *Journal of Church and State* 18, no. 2 (1976).

imperialism in a theistic ontology. Consequently, it serves as a good case for my comparative framework with Muslim theories of social justice and anti-imperialism, most significantly in the thought of Qutb. On this ground, I will seek to capture and articulate certain moments of Islamism as a liberation theology in its own right, juxtaposed with other moments that are better matches with fundamentalism.⁹⁰

Gutiérrez's liberation theology also offers a good case for my political ontological analysis, for his work is premised on the conviction that "we cannot separate our discourse about God from the historical process of liberation."⁹¹ Accordingly, his major concern is to clarify the relation between salvation and human liberation,⁹² in which Christ is the Liberator.⁹³ This view becomes more relevant as he undertakes the task of articulating a new, critical political theology via definite ontological moves.

Gutiérrez develops Rahner's idea that God's universal salvific will creates a deep affinity in human beings, one that becomes a gratuitous ontological determinant of human nature. Given this, we know humanity only as beings actually called to meet God, insofar as they constitute a community. This single convocation to salvation reaffirms the presence of grace, a personal relationship between God and all persons, that leads to the idea of a Christianity beyond any church's visible frontiers. Gutiérrez sees the fluid

⁹⁰ As early as 1996, Robin Wright differentiated between versions of politicized Islam and drew parallels between liberation theologies and Islamism. See: Robin Wright, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: Two Visions of Reformation," *Journal of Democracy* 7.2 (1996): 65. Shabbir Akhtar and (most recently) Hamid Dabashi consciously situate themselves within this genre of political theology in their articulations of the Muslims' political statement. See Shabbir Akhtar, *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (London: Bellew Pub., 1991); Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008). For a dissenting position that considers Islamism as qualitatively different from liberation theology, see Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xviii.

⁹² Ibid., 29. Gutiérrez reveals the close link between salvation and liberation in no uncertain terms: "Salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation," and "the historical, political liberating event is the growth of the Kingdom and is a salvific event" (Ibid., 104) (Emphases in the original).

⁹³ Ibid., 83.

frontiers between the life of faith and temporal faith (i.e., the church and the world) as the most immediate consequence of this viewpoint.⁹⁴ This fluidization, in turn, gives religious value to human action in history, both Christian and non-Christian alike. In clearer terms, as “the building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom,” participating in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work.⁹⁵

By affirming creation’s separation from the Creator and proclaiming humanity as the lord of this creation, Gutiérrez seems to affirm certain facets of secularization for their perfect coincidence with a Christian vision of human nature, history, and the cosmos. In this interpretation, worldliness “is a necessary condition for an authentic relationship between humankind and nature, among human beings themselves, and finally between humankind and God.”⁹⁶ Such a partial concession to secularism alarms such staunch anti-secularist contemporary theologians as Milbank and Hauerwas.⁹⁷ Still, Gutiérrez formulates his position as “being in the world without being of the world.”⁹⁸

Gutiérrez gives a human face to revelation mostly to bring the Christian task down-to-earth by reconceiving theological concepts in their sociopolitical sense. Yet this endeavor is often mediated by Marxist social theory. For instance, human self-creation intercedes between creation and redemption, even though the human work of creation

⁹⁴ Ibid., 43-45.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁹⁷ Actually for Hauerwas, the discourse of social justice in itself attracts one to secular discourses. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 162.

⁹⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 76.

must be un-alienated for it to be considered a creation.⁹⁹ Thus humanity must be freed from the tutelage of an alienating religion that tends to support the status quo.¹⁰⁰

Accordingly, sin is not a personal spiritual reality but a socio-historical fact that demands radical political liberation.¹⁰¹ Humanity, as the crown and center of creation, must begin to forge itself by transforming the world.¹⁰² This makes the struggle for justice on Earth a religious duty, a struggle for the Kingdom of God,¹⁰³ for to know Yahweh is to establish just relationships and recognize the rights of the poor.¹⁰⁴ Injustice is not just an offense against the poor or a social disorder, but also a violation of the divine law.¹⁰⁵

As his theo-centric political theory makes clear, one's ethical duty toward justice and political struggle consists of one's realization that it occurs in a conflictual political arena.¹⁰⁶ This shows that an ontology of conflict, as opposed to the ontologies of harmony that we find in most other religious figures, could accord with a political theory

⁹⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 102. In Gutiérrez's vision, liberation has three levels: political liberation, human liberation throughout history, and liberation from sin and admission to communion with God (Ibid., 103).

¹⁰² Ibid., 90.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 111. Also, "to know God is to work for justice" (Ibid., 156).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 31. As with R. Niebuhr, Gutiérrez differs from many other political theologians due to his conception of the political, which draws on an ontology of conflict. In this sense, he is closer to the agonistics than are Milbank and Johnson, who hold to an ontology of harmony. Both of them also point out the existence of a tension between an ontology of peace/harmony and an ontology of conflict among the onto-theologically oriented thinkers/theologians. Johnson argues that the major difference between the agonistic and Christian thinkers is not that the latter fail to recognize conflict, but that the former take conflict as an ontological reality. Christians, such as Matthewes and Milbank, want justice to prevail over power, which is the dominant feature of the *libido dominandi*, and therefore seek an ontology of harmony. Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 138-142. Connolly would see this quest for harmony as part of the onto-theological tradition and associate it with the first problem of evil. Whitewashing the omnipotent God demands a responsible agent for those who disrupt this harmony. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*. All in all, there is an obvious contrast between Connolly's onto-politics with that of Milbank. However, as we see in Gutiérrez, this contrast does not lend itself to a generalized trait of theologically oriented political thinkers. Niebuhr, for instance, takes conflict as inevitable contra "moralists" and opines that power can be dealt with only by power. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960), xvi, xxiii. For him, ethical and coercive factors will eventually meet in politics (Ibid., 4). Thus he is not concerned with eliminating conflict, but with how it will be used.

undergirded by faith in God.¹⁰⁷ One might be troubled by such an ontologically informed politics, for it might leave little ground for people of other faiths or philosophical commitments. Gutiérrez might have a hard time in clarifying the status in the hereafter of those who struggle for justice without taking Jesus as their savior. Nevertheless, he attributes to their actions the character of “salvific work.”¹⁰⁸ Besides, his insight that “some chapters of theology can be written only afterwards” points toward the incertitude and apprenticeship in the struggle for justice and thus affirms the provisional and incomplete character of every human achievement.¹⁰⁹ Thus grounding a certain ethico-political action ontologically does not necessarily exclude others from God’s work or guarantee the godliness of a Christian’s actions. This attitude leaves room for contestability, even if Gutiérrez’s political theology may not exactly qualify as a weak ontology.

Perhaps what we could do best in this regard is to focus on those moments in Gutiérrez that tend to weaken ontology, such as when he proclaims that he is not fashioning a theology in order to deduce from it a certain politics.¹¹⁰ In this sense, he forestalls any immediate relationship between faith and political action by denouncing the derivation of norms and criteria for particular political options directly from faith.

The eschatological element, the ontology of what is not (instead of the ontology of being),¹¹¹ or, to put it in theological terms, hope and promise, might be the other place

¹⁰⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xviii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 46. This contrasts with Augustine’s belief that only belief in God can transform them into good works, as I quoted in the first chapter.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 155-6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 125.

where a certain degree of ontological weakening takes place.¹¹² What he calls a dangerous politico-religious messianism is a backward-looking reaction to a new situation,¹¹³ a response that respects neither the *autonomy of the political* nor that of an authentic faith liberated from its religious baggage.¹¹⁴ In his alternative version, the promise is revealed gradually, *already* fulfilled in historical events but *not yet* completely.¹¹⁵ The core of this eschatological thought is then “towards that which is to come.”¹¹⁶ Thus the attraction of “what is to come” is the driving force of history.¹¹⁷ In a nutshell, in order to turn the messianic moment into an active historic force and motivation for social praxis, he joins the theology of *hope*,¹¹⁸ *promise*, and *utopia* together. Although he still uses the language of utopia, he has clearly taken important steps to articulate the messianic impulse without falling into messianism.

Reactions to Gutiérrez

Liberation theology, with its articulation of social justice through a theistic ontology and an obvious indebtedness to Marxist social theory, attracted the sympathies of some Marxist-leaning theorists. For instance, Eagleton goes so far as to assert that “all authentic theology is liberation theology.”¹¹⁹ However, it has not always been received so enthusiastically among theology circles. Hauerwas sees the “liberation” of liberation

¹¹² This utopian element of liberation theology is the other area in which Gutiérrez integrates theological and Marxist elements. Ibid., 94-5; 122-3; 138-9.

¹¹³ Ibid., 138. In another place, he carefully distinguishes between the “Christianity of Beyond” and the “Christianity of the Future.” It should not be a futuristic illusion, and therefore an evasion, but something rooted in the present, at the heart of praxis. Ibid., 124.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 91-93.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁸ For Gutiérrez, hope is the psychic representation of that which “is not yet.” When it becomes a conscious act, however, it assumes a concrete utopic function. It is “an ontology of what is not yet” as opposed to the static ontology of being. Ibid., 123. Note the striking parallels between this idea of hope and Derrida’s messianicity.

¹¹⁹ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, & Revolution*, 33.

theology as incompatible with the Gospel,¹²⁰ for this much concern (at least according to him) with social justice and democratic aspirations would preoccupy Christians with “the way of the world” rather than with Christian virtue.¹²¹ More significantly, Milbank’s challenge to liberation and political theologies is worth deeper consideration, because both Gutiérrez and his critics pose important questions for the central concern of my work as regards religion and politics. As secularism is a common predicament for both Christian and Muslim political thinkers, political theological responses from within Christianity might also resonate with Muslims who wrestle with comparable questions.

Milbank’s critique also has a specific significance for my project’s ontological dimension, because his arguments are pretty much grounded in the theoretical concerns of post-foundational thought. Although he positions himself around what he calls the “postmodern” and “post-Nietzschean” juncture, it could more accurately be regarded as echoing the notion of the *absent ground* in Marchart’s analysis of post-foundationalism: “Suppositions about transcendence are ungrounded and mutually incommensurable, although necessary for the slightest cultural decision.”¹²²

To reiterate an earlier point, in his particular narrative of social thought’s history, Milbank reconstructs social theories as theologies in disguise. Accordingly, forms of secular reason are *constituted* by arbitrary moments as a space that is more *neo-pagan* than *antireligious*, a viewpoint that, paradoxically, leads us to see the institution of the secular as a shift within theology.¹²³ Here, although it seems as if political theology and

¹²⁰ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 149.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹²² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2-3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

social theory pose a sharp contrast to each other, political theology is in fact *intellectually atheistic* because it borrows both diagnoses and prognoses from Marxist analyses.¹²⁴

Liberation theology's relationship with Marxism is only part of the problem for Milbank. At that level, buying into Marxism so easily was quite unnecessary, for Christian and republican socialism had already leveled a more fundamental critique of capitalism.¹²⁵ But beyond that, the deeper problem is political theologians' subscription to the dominant secular discourse at the level of its very fundamentals. This refers to Gutiérrez's contention that secularization eventually politicizes everything in order to make the "political" the defining feature of the modern framework. As a result, the Christian task in Gutiérrez's hands took the shape of translating the Gospel's message into "political" terms.¹²⁶ In effect, those political theologians who believe that theology requires a secular social science have displaced the Christian meta-narrative, the essential constitution of faith, with new modern stories.¹²⁷ Consequently, they reduced salvation to a quasi-Marxist concept of liberation without any legitimate reason.¹²⁸

Milbank's narrative of the invention of the secular as well as political or liberation theology's unnecessary subscription to secularism may be well placed in many instances. However, the extent to which he can keep himself from being enticed by his own time's social theory is a matter of debate in its own right. For instance, when he identifies the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 3. It might also be argued that they have mutually inverted their views as political theology has come to accept secularization and the autonomy of secular reason, whereas social theory recognized that mythic-religious cannot be left behind.

¹²⁵ He repeatedly laments this oversight of the Christian socialist tradition. Ibid., 178, 190, 228.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 243. Instead of creating a pure theology of the political, they simply end up with another reinterpretation of Christianity in terms of the dominant secular discourse of the day.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 245. "Such a politicization in a secular character amounts to sundering all their ties to previous Christian socialism" (Ibid., 243).

¹²⁸ Ibid., 209, 232-33.

Christian task as articulating a specifically Christian counter-ontology, does he not already operate within the realm of the post-foundationalist discourse?¹²⁹ This question is especially relevant, given that he declares his goal to be the restoration of the possibility of theology serving as a meta-discourse, because even this move carries the considerable imprint of postmodern thinkers.¹³⁰ How he can construct a specifically Christian ontology when the very forms and categories of his ontology are given by the post-foundationalist, post-Nietzschean genre of social theory is a question well worth asking.¹³¹

Writing during the ontological turn in political theory, Milbank might be in a better position than Gutiérrez to identify the “unchristian” elements in that particular form of conversation between Christianity and Marxist thought. However, does he not also need to recognize the futility of any quest for authenticity, the presumption of the possibility of a true and uncorrupted nature of things in our systems of thought?¹³² In short, should we not come to terms with the always already mixed, the “inauthentic,” so

¹²⁹ Ibid., 381.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1. Milbank’s favorite postmodern figure is MacIntyre. Actually, he expresses his goal as radicalizing MacIntyre’s thought, which he calls “benign postmodernism (Ibid., 326-27). Some of the features that justify placing Milbank among postmodern thinkers are the following: he affirms the unavoidability of ontology, takes difference as true universal a priori (Ibid., 308-10), follows an archeological method, draws on a Post-Nietzschean understanding of mythos, and finally views narrative as our primary mode of inhabiting the world (Ibid., 359). Still, his struggle to hold onto *virtue*, his deconstruction of agonistic, violent difference, and his stand against what he calls “postmodern nihilism,” (especially its [non]regulation of conflict by conflict), i.e., his rejection of an ontology of conflict, distinguish him from most of them (Ibid., 321-26, 376). That is why Johnson brands Milbank’s thought as “postmodern critical Augustinianism.” Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 137.

¹³¹ All the while, Milbank’s stance against the agonistic tradition originates in his commitment to “an ontology of peace.” Kristen Johnson’s work revolves around her quest to place Christian theology, especially that of Milbank, vis-à-vis the agonistic thinkers who maintain an ontology of difference. Ibid. Perhaps Milbank is not after full authenticity in his pursuit of a Christian counter-ontology; however, one needs to recognize and even theorize the hermeneutic circle between his approach to the secular body of thought and his background faith commitments.

¹³² My use of *authenticity* differs from its existentialist or psychological meanings of self-fulfillment or self-fashioning, although those meanings may also be applied to a socio-cultural context. It is, in a certain sense, an extension of the nationalist *cult of authenticity* to religious settings or systems of thought. Anthony Smith elaborates on this sense in his eighteenth-century account of nationalism: “The demand by Herder and his German and East European followers for a distinct sense of ‘identity’, ... placed a premium on the need for authentic national forms of life and culture. According to the new nationalist vision, the idea of ‘authenticity’ was regarded not just as signaling what is ‘mine’, ‘my own’ and nobody else’s, or ‘ours’ alone, but as that which is ‘original’, ‘innate’ and ‘pristine’ to us, stripped of all later accretions, and therefore ‘true’, ‘genuine’ and ‘real’. Hence the increasingly widespread rejection of all that was ‘false’, ‘corrupt’ and insubstantial as ‘inauthentic’, in particular the artifice and corruption of modern civilization.” Anthony Smith, “‘The Land and Its People’: Reflections on Artistic Identification in an Age of Nations and Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (2013): 90.

to say, patterns of thought at the deepest ontological level? The point about authenticity has direct relevance for contemporary Muslim political thought in the context of some contemporary Muslim thinkers' (especially Qutb) unrelenting pursuit of fully authentic Islamic thought.¹³³

Concluding Remarks: Reclaiming the Theological for Comparative Political Theory

Eagleton contends that "[a]ll politics is ultimately faith based."¹³⁴ In this chapter, my preoccupation with the theological in the political has progressed toward several distinct goals. First, by noting the growing persuasion among contemporary political thinkers regarding the interminability of the theological element, I attempted to show that the recent ontological turn cannot be fully appreciated unless its theological dimension is also given due recognition. Accordingly, I have sought to complement the idea of ontology's unavoidability, one of the major points of my last chapter, with the intrinsic theological element in the political. In this sense, the current *Stimmung* represents a conjuncture at which political theorists and political theologians converge in terms of their attentiveness to the relationship between the theological and the political. While political theorists have become more inclined to acknowledge and theorize their theological residues, critical political theologians are now more mindful of theology's critical political task.

Creating awareness about the *political's* theological dimension in an attempt to

¹³³ In an Islamic setting, *authentic* could take the meaning of what belongs to original, pristine, true Islam as opposed to the "alien borrowings" or later accretions that would corrupt its Islamic identity (*Islamicity*) and original integrity. For works that pay particular attention to Islamic authenticity, see Robert D. Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997); S. M. A. Sayeed, *The Myth of Authenticity: A Study in Islamic Fundamentalism* (Royal Book Company, 1995). As a discursive move, authenticity claims are usually employed to declare a Western concept to be "alien" or "un-Islamic." Exactly what is (and is not) Islamic, as well as what Islam can (and cannot) integrate into its structure without losing its identity and integrity, is a many-century-long discussion that shows no sign of ever abating. The debate on authenticity of *philosophy* itself preoccupied both the advocates of classical Islamic philosophy and its religious opponents. The famous works of al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd were a crucial part of this debate.

¹³⁴ Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, & Revolution*, 134.

enhance our analytical vigor has not been the sole motive for my preoccupation with it in this chapter. Beyond that, coming to terms with the theological residues in our political thinking becomes more significant when we deploy them as theoretical resources for our normative reflections on collective self-government. For one thing, owning up to our *mythoi* will inevitably change how we relate with each other in the public sphere, which liberal secularism conceived of as a neutral space. Our conversation partners no longer appear simply as adherents of comprehensive doctrines who are therefore obliged to give public reasons for their particularistic arguments to those liberal seculars who purportedly occupy a neutral standpoint. All conversants, including liberal secularists, with their mutually acknowledged and theologically imbued ontologies, need to approach each other as fellow reason exchangers in their collective quest for good government.

Similar normative concerns hold true for messianicity, which I contemplated especially via Derrida's analysis. Here, not only does it seem that our messianic impulse will remain present for quite a while, but it might even prove to be a useful theoretical source while articulating our common hope for perfect justice and democracy. Even further, Derrida's and Gutiérrez's alternative formulations attest to the fact that this impulse can help motivate us and animate our ethical lives without causing us to fall into dangerous utopianism or messianism. As the later parts of my dissertation will make clear, the messianic impulse has significant reverberations for contemporary Muslim political thought. The desire of most Islamists to pursue *shariah* can be better grasped as examples of their expressions of the messianic impulse. Rather than abandoning it by settling with the secularist status quo or pursuing it zealously as a panacea for all social problems, Muslims can embrace it with a clear consciousness of its always elusive,

always to-come character.

The concept of evil likewise poses itself as another theological category with valuable comparative ramifications. We might approach its various perceptions in diverse forms of political thinking as a source of alternative versions of political theodicies that account for difference in dissimilar ways. This surely seems to be a better move than living in utter denial while holding a conception of evil in the background. An even better move would be to pursue more generous notions of difference and otherness by more rhizomatic accounts of being, as we observe in Connolly. In fact, following Hamid Dabashi, I will make use of this framework to suggest a political theodicy from within Islam.¹³⁵

My decision to dedicate lengthy analyses to political theology and liberation theology resulted from their significance to my dissertation's major theoretical points. The transformation of political theology into a critical theological account of sociopolitical relations exemplifies alternative ways of politicizing the faith. It also defies certain perceptions of religion that take it as inevitably authoritarian and conservative. The analytical lens of political theology, therefore, will enable me to disentangle more liberative interpretations of religion from the authoritarian ones. As an example of critical political theology, liberation theology is especially significant in this regard. I have paid special attention to Gutiérrez not only because his liberation theology was a good case of a political theology that proved susceptible to political ontological analysis, but also because his critical formulation of religion provides a theological articulation of emancipation that resonates well with a range of the concerns and goals of the Muslim

¹³⁵ Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology*. For Dabashi, the time is ripe to move from liberation theology to liberation theodicy, which not just realizes but also embraces its normative shadows (Ibid., 168).

thinkers I cover in this work. This is also true for the unresolved issues and challenges that crystallize especially in Milbank's critique, as in the question of authenticity. The full implications of this perspective will be clearer when I analyze Sayyid Qutb's political ontology.

How might my investigations of political ontology and political theology figure in our reflections on democracy? In other words, are certain formulations of democracy more suited to post-foundational political ontology and critical political theology? Given the prevailing dissatisfaction with the supposedly neutral space of liberal public reason and liberals' own oblivion of their ontologies, how can we formulate a new ethos of democracy? Are better options worth pursuing for our post-foundational, late-modern times that give non-Western quests for good government their due? In short, is there a specific form of democracy congruent with weak ontology that would appeal more to Muslim quests for self-government? I will now turn to this question before starting my onto-narrative of contemporary Muslim political theories of self-government.

CHAPTER 3

RADICAL DEMOCRACY: POSSIBILITIES FOR A POST-FOUNDATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being. ... Democracy is a political moment, perhaps, the political moment. Sheldon Wolin.¹

Democracy should not be restricted to a form of state, and thus to an ontic set of institutions establishing the organization of the social. Rather, it should be considered an ontological category. Sorin Radu-Cucu²

Is there a specific conception of democracy that goes with weak ontology? Could some formulations of democracy have more appeal for Muslim thinkers who want to articulate an Islamic democracy? What exactly do they mean by *democracy* when they undertake this endeavor? It should come as no surprise that any engagement with political ontology and the theological residue in the political will eventually have to renegotiate the received understandings of democracy. For one thing, it is not so far-fetched to argue that democracy without adjectives is generally taken to have “liberal” in parentheses and have a close affinity with capitalism. Even further, most recent attempts at Islamic democracy have taken liberal democracy as almost the sole form of democracy. Therefore, when all participants of our dialogical engagements are invited to

¹ Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 43.

² Sorin Radu-Cucu, “Politics and the Fiction of the Political,” in *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*, ed. Carsten Strathausen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 157.

own up to their ontology and reclaim the theological elements in their thought, it is only natural to open this particular term's dominant liberal conceptions to contestation.³

At this point of my dissertation, I will tackle the question of democracy from a perspective informed by our earlier ontological and theological discussions. More specifically, I will take steps toward resolving two major issues. First, if we conceive of the current *Stimmung* as “post-foundational” and affirm the ineradicable theological element in our ethico-political reflections, does this give rise to a particular understanding of democracy? In other words, is it possible to talk about post-foundational, weak ontological democracies? Does the large number of ontologically oriented political thinkers branded as “radical” or “agonistic” democrats⁴ establish radical democracy, with its definite ontological imaginaries, as the democracy of post-foundational political thought?

Given that my project at its root tackles non-Western efforts to Islamize democracy, I will also explore whether radical democracy is the best interlocutor for such an endeavor. Even further, if we position ourselves on a broader ground to articulate an Islamic theory of collective self-government from a “post-Western”⁵ point of view, does

³ Further, this inquisitive stance will undoubtedly take issue with the calls of political liberalism and liberal secularism for a neutral public sphere characterized by a conception of public reason free of comprehensive doctrines.

⁴ This list includes such figures as Mouffe, Laclau, Wolin, Coles, Connolly, and Bennett. White can be placed among agonistic democrats as well. Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2009), 34. This is not to identify agonistic democrats with radical democrats, although it is safe to argue that almost all advocates of agonistic democracy advance it while they articulate radical democracy. Some other radical democrats are post-/ex-Marxists or proponents of deliberative democracy, such as Iris Young. She does not fall into the dichotomy of agonistic vs. consensus models, but prefers to call her project “communicative democracy.”

⁵ I suggest *post-Western* because of its associations, in my view, with a post-foundational imaginary that has given way to at least a partial dissolution of the Western project. Hence, it is coincidental with the eventual dissolution of modernism and foundationalism, as well as their Western supremacist associations.

radical democracy manifest itself as a better partner in such an agonistic conversation between different *traditios*?⁶

This chapter will build on the preceding chapters' conclusions in order to complete the argument made in the first part of my dissertation. Ultimately, I contend that in a global community of conversants where everybody owns up to her ontology and the mythos operative in her ethico-political reflections, the consequent conceptions of collective self-government might stand for more justifiable political arrangements.⁷ In regards to the first question, I argue that radical democracy, or any formulation of democracy for that matter, cannot be posited as *the* democracy of weak ontology just because it is more congruent with weak ontology. Moreover, weak ontology does not necessarily imply radical democracy because any such derivation of politics from ontology defies the complex patterns of hermeneutic circulation between the ontological and political spheres that weak ontology involves. The most we can say is that radical democracy and weak ontology form a more coherent ontopolitical constellation. In this sense, one could argue that both of them are animated by similar sensibilities, an argument that would render the ensuing ontopolitical edifice more open as opposed to other available formations. In short, although there is no ontology of radical democracy

⁶ Informed by a certain sympathy toward such theorists of tradition as Yoder and MacIntyre, Romand Coles develops this *new mythos of traditio* to go beyond their restricted and more traditionalist use in order to emphasize transitions, crossovers, and hybridity; in short, to refer to "a new way of *passing on* tradition." Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 193.

⁷ Here, I am neither suggesting a form of deliberative democracy even as a regulative ideal, nor a Rawlsian overlapping consensus between members of a variety of faiths or philosophical views. Fully aware of the concept of the "political" of the new ontological imaginary that has emerged out of the preceding discussions, I do not seek to recuperate ontologies of harmony that would generate a post-political and post-democratic state. Rather, my goal is to position the "political" dimension vis-à-vis the ontological, ethical, and theological elements of the ongoing post-foundational constellation in question. I seek to accomplish this undertaking while keeping the broader comparative political theoretical framework in view, for this is where Muslim views on collective self-rule and democracy are the primary object of analysis and normative reflection.

as such⁸ and no definite version of democracy to be derived from weak ontology, a certain affinity between weak ontology and radical democracy is still conceivable. This affinity has lately become more apparent, now that recent works have clarified radical democracy's ontological imaginaries.

In response to the latter question, I maintain that radical democracy is a more congenial interlocutor for any non-Western theoretical conversation with the democratic tradition. More specifically, the radical (as opposed to the liberal) version of democratic tradition appears to be a better conversation partner for Muslims who are trying to formulate theories of self-government, even when different vocabularies with distant grammars are used. This is even more so for certain brands of Islamic political thought that hold stronger sensibilities of social justice and that pursue an emancipatory Islamic political theology.⁹

With these broader goals in mind, section 3.1 opens up the debate by juxtaposing liberalism and democracy in order to elucidate their uneasy relationship. As radical democrats bring up this tension the most, their own uneasy relationship with liberalism will eventually become my major concern. Thereafter, I will focus on the works produced by Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Romand Coles, some of liberal democracy's major radical democratic critics (3.2). This assessment will also reveal the increasingly crystallized ontological thrust of their radical democratic theories. As my special emphasis on radical democracy's ontological imaginaries will attest, this analysis will pave the way for the specific issues tackled in the last two sections: whether weak

⁸ This echoes the major conclusion of *A Leftist Ontology*, which argues that there is no ontology of the left as such. Bosteels, "Afterword" in Strathausen, *A Leftist Ontology*, 239.

⁹ Here I only lay out this argument in a provisional manner. I will present it in a far more elaborate form in chapter 7.

ontology and radical democracy make a good pair (section 3.3) and the potential broader appeal of radical democracy in the context of comparative political theory (section 3.4). The chapter's final pages will recapitulate the arguments presented in the three chapters of my dissertation's first part. My position on democracy, presented at the end of this chapter, will constitute a first sketch of the argument to be made in my dissertation's concluding chapter and will provide the major framework for analyzing the Muslim thinkers presented in the second part.

3.1 Liberalism and Democracy: An Uneasy Relationship

Democracy is arguably the “moral Esperanto of the present day nation-state system.”¹⁰

When used without adjectives, however, it is generally presumed to be liberal democracy.

Given that democracy and market capitalism have historically enjoyed a certain mutuality as well,¹¹ many people view democracy as an organic totality of liberal-capitalist-

democracy. In point of fact, this presumption is implicit in many comparative politics

studies on democratization that address its compatibility with Islam, Confucianism, and

the like. For the most part, democracy is taken for granted and the “other” is

problematized. I contend that any attempt to prove/disprove compatibility that does not

¹⁰ John Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 192. Cited by, Peter Euben, “Taking it to the Streets: Radicalizing Democracy and Radicalizing Theory,” in *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*, ed. David Trend (New York: Routledge, 1996), 72.

¹¹ See, for instance, how Dahl illustrates this perception in his pocket-book version of democratic theory, especially in the chapter “Why Market-Capitalism Favors Democracy.” Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 166-72. It should be added, however, that he offers a more balanced view by concluding that beyond a certain level of consolidation of democracy, the economic inequalities churned out by market-capitalism produce serious political inequalities (Ibid., 178). In another instance, while describing polyarchies (in his words “non-ideal democracies”), Dahl points to liberalization and inclusiveness as the two dimensions of democracy, for, in a certain way, they correspond to the current composite's liberal and democratic dimensions. He credits himself and another scholar with having coined the term *polyarchy* in 1953 as a handy way to refer to modern democracy with universal suffrage (Ibid., 90). In a non-ideal world, as opposed to the ideal world of democracy, relatively but incompletely democratized regimes have been substantially popularized and liberalized. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 8. There is, of course, an immense democratization literature on the complicated relationship between democracy and capitalism with several intricate arguments that need not to occupy us here.

disentangle this liberal-capitalist democratic totality will inevitably subsume the “other” under liberalism and thereby remain oblivious to the contentious nature of democracy that, in theoretical terms, has many alternative formulations.

Indeed, alongside many other possible or historical formulations of democracy and implying a rather contingent relationship, liberal democracy’s articulation goes back only to the nineteenth century.¹² To show the analytical distinctness between the two, Bobbio points out that the democrats of antiquity were ignorant of natural rights and limited government, while modern liberals right from the outset were extremely suspicious of all forms of popular government.¹³ Accordingly, the liberalism and egalitarianism found in these distinct traditions are rooted in profoundly divergent conceptions of the human being and society.¹⁴

Mouffe formulates the antithesis of democracy and liberalism through the idea of “democratic paradox.” Reiterating MacPherson’s point about the historical contingency of the link between liberalism and democracy, she associates the liberal tradition with the rule of law, the defense of human rights, and respect for individual liberty, whereas the democratic tradition has more to do with equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty.¹⁵ Pointing out the “democratic deficit” stemming from the present-day liberal democracies’ neglect of popular sovereignty, she argues that

¹² Citing Macpherson, Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), 10.

¹³ Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990), 31. Bobbio also brings up Benjamin Constant’s contrast between the “liberty of ancients” and the “liberty of moderns” to prepare the ground for his point. Accordingly, the former was about distribution of power, while the latter was about security in their private possessions (Ibid., 2). This distinction also parallels Berlin’s dichotomy of positive and negative liberty in some ways. In fact, Bobbio ends up relating the former dichotomy with this latter one (Ibid., 89-90).

¹⁴ (Ibid., 32-33). Nevertheless, Bobbio’s narrative is geared toward accounting for their eventual convergence and fusion to prove that current-day democracy is the extension and proper realization of the liberal state (Ibid., 37).

¹⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 2-3.

the two logics in question are ultimately incompatible.¹⁶ In Wittgensteinian terms, the constitutive tension existing between their corresponding “grammars” can never be overcome, but only negotiated in different ways.¹⁷ The point of this story is to keep democracy analytically separate from liberalism.

Radical Democracy and Liberalism: The New “Friendly Enemies”?

Was the upsurge of radical democracy in the 1980s partly an expression of the disaffected socialists’ turn to it after the socialist movement had been seriously damaged by its own proponents?¹⁸ One might indeed discern a defeatist mood vis-à-vis liberalism by some former Marxists’ adoption of radical democracy, given that it looked like liberal institutions were not going to disappear any time soon.¹⁹ However, it is far more than the last refuge of socialists. In reality, it is a new conception of social transformation. The publication of Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*²⁰ in 1984 was of decisive importance in this sense, for it indicated that post-Marxism and radical democracy were searching for a new self-conception.

These two thinkers set out to reformulate the socialist project in terms of radical and plural democracy by reinscribing socialist goals within the framework of pluralist

¹⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5. This initial disentangling move is the background against which Mouffe ultimately dissociates political liberalism (liberal democracy) from economic liberalism (capitalism). She also builds substantially on Schmitt’s analysis on the way.

¹⁸ Stanley Aronowitz, “Towards Radicalism: The Death and Rebirth of the American Left,” in Trend, *Radical Democracy*, 99. He contends that “Socialism as a framework has been seriously damaged by the history of the socialist movement. We must invoke an older, but really new conception of social transformation that may be designated *radical democracy*.” Giddens also argued that socialism was for Fordist times and that radical democracy would replace it for as the democracy for the post-Fordist times (Ibid., 128).

¹⁹ As Bobbio came to believe, “We should not expect the emergence of a completely different new type of democracy, and that liberal institutions are here to stay.” Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 104.

²⁰ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001). But while they argue that every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, they do not propose radical democracy as a substitute for socialism; rather, they take the latter as only one dimension of radical democracy (Ibid, 178).

democracy²¹ and extending the democratic ideas of equality and liberty to more areas of social life.²² The goals here are to radicalize and deepen the democratic revolution²³ and to democratize liberalism,²⁴ rather than just struggling to destroy it. For them, the problem with liberalism is not its values, but the system of power that redefines and limits them.²⁵

The subsequent trajectory of the post-Marxist upsurge of radical democracy is that of a gradual drift away from its entanglement with socialism. Mouffe's shifting emphases in her later works are a good case in point. While she reaffirms her aim as something distinct from creating a completely different society, she suggests using the liberal democratic tradition's symbolic resources to struggle against the many forms of subordination, including (but not limited to) the economic one.²⁶ The best socialist goals one could achieve, then, would be their realization within the liberal democratic framework.²⁷ This would obviously exclude both Marxist socialism and social democracy.²⁸

The detachment of the ex or post-Marxists' conception of radical democracy from socialism is now almost complete, for their latest works on radical democracy contain almost no mention of socialism.²⁹ In short, what started out as a self-critique of socialism

²¹ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 90.

²² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

²³ Ibid., 163.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Ibid., xv

²⁶ Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy or Liberal Democracy," in Trend, *Radical Democracy*, 20.

²⁷ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 105.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Public Sphere," in *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack*, ed. Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005). Published two decades after *Hegemony*, this edited volume contains only trivial references to socialism. In one of the few pieces that take up the challenge of Marxism, Simons points out that radical democracy in this work is distinct from how it was understood during its emergence among the New Left. Jon Simons, "The Radical Democratic Possibilities of Popular Culture," in Ibid., 149.

has now been transformed into a discourse almost totally characterized by its post-foundational sensibilities and economic critique of liberalism. The most significant contribution in this area has been the work of Tonder and Thomassen, who explicitly attempt to situate radical democracy vis-à-vis the ontologies of lack and abundance.³⁰ I will now turn to the critiques of liberal democracy posed by Laclau, Mouffe, and Coles in order to observe their eventual transformation into an ontological critique.

3.2 Radical Democratic Critics of Liberalism

Mouffe and Laclau: Hegemony and the Ontology of the Social

Laclau and Mouffe's project, generally characterized as transitioning from Marxism to post-Marxism,³¹ envisages the deconstruction of Marxism's central categories.³² This effort would be mediated by the intellectual transfigurations of their time within analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and structuralism. The decisive influence in this

³⁰ Tonder and Thomassen, editors of arguably the most ontologically oriented work on radical democracy, contend that radical difference can best be conceived of by referring to the two distinct ontological imaginaries of *abundance* and *lack*. The "ontology of lack," which conceptualizes radical difference in terms of a non-symbolizable lack, maintains that there is always a constitutive non-symbolizable lack at the heart of any subject or system of signification. Here, identity is simultaneously constituted and decentered by this lack. Most explicitly developed in the psychoanalysis of Lacan, any attempt to fill this lack is always incomplete and temporary. The "ontology of abundance," on the other hand, approaches radical difference as an abstract multiplicity from which contingently defined networks emerge, and thereby adds both depth and stature to the flows of experience. It emphasizes networks of materiality, flows of energy, and processes of becoming, as well as experimental modes of affirmation, inspired by the works of such thinkers as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze (Ibid., 6). The metaphor of the rhizome has deep reverberations within this imaginary. For Tonder and Thomassen, while Mouffe and Laclau typically represent the ontology of lack, figures like Connolly and Bennett exemplify the radical democracies articulated from the ontology of abundance. These imaginaries tend to prefigure distinct forms of politics: while the former emphasizes the hegemonic nature of politics, the latter cultivates a strategy of pluralization (Ibid., 7). A political regime organized around lack signifies an empty place of power, which is simultaneously subverted by it (Ibid., 5). Lefort's famous dictum on the *empty place of power* suggests that democracy's distinctiveness lies in its continuous reoccupation of the lack. Accordingly, the heart of democracy contains no identity but only an ineradicable lack (Ibid., 6). More specifically, lack in a social sense implies the impossibility of viewing society as a closed ensemble. Political articulation thus becomes possible insofar as society is impossible. Oliver Marchart, "The Absence at the Heart of Presence: Radical Democracy and the 'Ontology of Lack'" in Ibid., 25.

³¹ It should be noted that Laclau and Mouffe, who did not invent the label "post-Marxism," have no problem with embracing it in the sense of the process of reappropriating as well as going beyond the Marxist tradition. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, ix.

³² Ibid., ix.

vein came from post-structuralism, in particular deconstruction and Lacanian theory.³³

What most concerns my project here is the corresponding shift of ontological imaginary that they embraced by employing Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Derrida's notion of undecidability, and Lacan's concept of *point de capiton* (nodal point or master signifier).

Laclau and Mouffe's ontological imaginary contested the received view of the social, which deemed it to be a structurally determined field. In contrast, the new imaginary views the social field as permeated by "undecidables." Hegemony emerges in this terrain that is populated by undecidables as a theory of decision to cope with contingency through hegemonic articulations. This is undertaken by a "master signifier," identified as the particular element that assumes the "universal" structuring function without any predetermination.³⁴ Thus we once again encounter the primacy of the political as an act of political institution; a self-founded event. The *political*, thus, ceases to be a superstructure and is reconceived as the *ontology of the social*.³⁵

Reformulating socialism as a radical and plural democracy involves more than just incorporating identity and recognition along with redistribution, for it is, in actuality, a new way of conceiving the *political*. It also means that transitioning from Marxism to post-Marxism was, in essence and in their own words, an "ontological change."³⁶ This makes radical democracy, from its very beginning, a democratic discourse that has flourished against the background of the ontological turn. The interjection of Schmitt's

³³ Ibid., xv. This would enable them to construct their argument about discursive mediation.

³⁴ Ibid., xi.

³⁵ Ibid., xvi. This refers to the second sense of political ontology that Marchart suggested, namely, the ontology of the political, which I covered in the first chapter.

³⁶ Ibid., x. "Any substantial change in the *ontic* content of a field of research leads also to a new *ontological* paradigm." Here, Laclau and Mouffe present their own account of political ontology as it relates Plato and seventeenth-century rationalism with their respective ontologies. Hence, any reformulation of socialism necessitates dissolving the ontological legacy of Marxism that is Hegelian and naturalistic.

concept of the *political*, especially in Mouffe's subsequent works, was critical to this development.

Mouffe's Ontology of Agon

Mouffe's growing inclination toward Schmitt's critique of liberalism sets out from the latter's provocative thesis that liberalism and democracy negate each other.³⁷ Mouffe reappropriates Schmitt's major contention, that liberalism fails to grasp the distinct ontology of *the political*, in her contention with a deliberative democracy of the Rawlsian and Habermasian types.³⁸ This does not mean, however, that she fails to see how Schmitt's thought flows into fascism quite effortlessly. She upholds liberalism's anti-fascist and especially anti-paternalistic ethical accomplishments, namely, that individuals should be able to organize their life as they wish, choose their own goals, and seek to realize them as they think best.³⁹ She also commends liberalism insofar as it creates a space in which confrontation is kept open, power relations are always questioned, and no victory can be final.⁴⁰ Even further, she supports them insofar as they break with the *modus vivendi*⁴¹ liberalism or the *modus procedendi* of Schumpeter's aggregative

³⁷ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 105.

³⁸ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 84. Mouffe is aware of certain differences between the two schools, both of which seek to secure a strong link between democracy and liberalism. Collapsing Rawlsian and Habermasian liberalism this way into a single category of deliberative democracy might be misleading in certain instances. For example, Benhabib clarifies deliberative democracy's difference from Rawlsian liberalism on three grounds: (1) the deliberative model insists that the agenda of public debate be open, while Rawls restricts the exercise of public reason to deliberation about a specific subject matter (constitutional essentials); (2) public reason is more like a regulative idea than a process of reasoning among citizens; and (3) public reason's social space is limited to Rawls' limited public sphere of state and its organizations, primarily the legal sphere. Deliberative democrats, on the other hand, include associations and the larger civil society in their definition of the public sphere, an area in which public reason and deliberations are freely exercised. Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and Difference*, 75.

³⁹ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 104.

⁴⁰ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23. Note how Rawls insistently makes the point that overlapping consensus is never a *modus vivendi*. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 45-50. Mouffe's agonistic democracy should not be understood as leaving no space for consensus, for she does admit that a proper political discourse operates on a certain consensus regarding those constitutive matters and ethicopolitical values that inform political

democracy, which reduces democracy to a merely procedural form of making decisions via the aggregation of preferences.⁴²

However, their objective of creating a moral and not merely a prudential type of consensus around basic liberal institutions and political fundamentals is both ill-informed and dangerous. It is ill-informed because it cannot distinguish between the *ethics of the political* and *morality*,⁴³ when trying to provide a core morality for the peaceful coexistence of different conceptions of good. Hence, the very idea of the *political* may well be absorbed by the Rawlsian conception of well-ordered society.⁴⁴ Under this dangerous utopia of reconciliation,⁴⁵ certain individuals are not seen as adversaries but as unreasonable, uncooperative members of society. According to this circular logic, those who reject such liberal principles as the priority of right over good are illiberal and therefore, by default, unreasonable.⁴⁶ This attitude allows only a class of liberal conceptions to enter the public sphere,⁴⁷ which transposes a difference that belongs in the category of the political to the ethical sphere. In short, a political exigency is couched in the terms of a “moral exigency.”⁴⁸

In another vein, Mouffe posits that deliberative democracy simply misses the *ontology of the political*, which is characterized by the ontological figure of agon, or the

association. The problem is with liberalism’s moralistic incapacity to think in truly political terms. Chantal Mouffe, “For an Agonistic Public Sphere,” in Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 124-25.

⁴² Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 81; and Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy, Power and the ‘Political,’” in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 248.

⁴³ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁵ Or, *Aufhebung*, as I earlier borrowed from Hegelian vocabulary. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 29.

⁴⁶ Mouffe, “Democracy, Power and the ‘Political,’” 249-50.

⁴⁷ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 29.

⁴⁸ Mouffe, “Democracy, Power and the ‘Political,’” 249.

“ontology of conflict.” Drawing on Derrida’s notion of the “constitutive outside,”⁴⁹ she reconceptualizes Schmitt’s “friend” and “enemy” distinction – the ever-present antagonistic dimension of the political.⁵⁰ This Derridean addition leads her to revise Schmitt’s distinction by dividing antagonism into *antagonism proper* (between enemies) and *agonism* (between adversaries).⁵¹ The ones in the latter category are defined, paradoxically, as “friendly enemies” because they share a common symbolic space but want to organize it in different ways. Thus one can conclude that Mouffe’s political ontology draws on an *ontology of agon*, where the locus of agonism is *the political*. What follows from this is an idea of democracy along the lines of agonistic pluralism,⁵² a view that rejects any reabsorption of alterity into oneness and sees the quest for harmony as hopeless. Accordingly, undecidability is the very condition required for the possibility of decision, freedom, and pluralism.⁵³ In this context, the political moment of decision, this self-founded event is that which constitutes the political. As a result, social objectivity is created by acts of power. What liberalism fails to realize is the basic idea that the political is always constitutive.

Consequently, due to its agonistic argument, radical democracy has in effect become an ontologically oriented critique of liberal democracy based on an alternative ontological imaginary. Still, my preoccupation with its ontological dimension is not meant to overshadow its socio-economic concerns, which have been no less significant. It

⁴⁹ This “outside” is incommensurable with the “inside,” while it is simultaneously the condition of its emergence.

⁵⁰ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 12-13. Note that this constitutive “outside” poses a contrast to dialectical negation, for the latter ultimately promises reconciliation.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

⁵² Ibid., 13-14.

⁵³ Ibid., 33-34.

is also characterized by a clear stance against the “managed democracy”⁵⁴ of neo-liberal hegemony and its ideological terrain that has transformed a conjunctural state of affairs into a historical necessity.⁵⁵ To that effect, radical democrats have chosen to detach political liberalism from capitalism in order to pursue the extension of “egalitarian imaginary to ever extensive social relations” in order to eliminate various forms of subordination.⁵⁶ My point is simply to highlight how the radical democratic critique of liberal democracy goes well beyond the economic and/or cultural fields.

From a comparative perspective, this has obvious implications for non-Western engagements with liberal democracy. This particular ontological critique of liberal democracy may open up a space for similar ontological critiques of liberalism from a Muslim perspective. Furthermore, such engagements will give Muslims the chance to converse with alternative ontological imaginaries as they strive to theorize collective self-government. Yet before that, I would like to juxtapose Romand Coles’ agonistic argument with that of Laclau and Mouffe, for his perspective alleviates the ethical

⁵⁴ I refer here to Sheldon Wolin’s characterization of the dominant version of liberal democracy in Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). His radical democratic theory conceives of democracy with a specific reference to its dimensions of equality and participation. To him, democracy can be seized in the “fugitive democratic moments,” defined as those moments of outburst that occur during a politics of redress. It is there, in those instances of common action, when the demos struggles to alleviate the sharp inequalities of wealth and power (Ibid., 223) and when the people appear tumultuous to the dominant classes. Democracy is not confined only to political matters, for it also is relevant to social, cultural, and economic relationships (Ibid., 212). It is first and foremost about equality; the equality of power and sharing the benefits made possible by cooperation (Ibid., 60). Demos, the active agents involved in the exercise of power (Ibid., 60), improve their lives by becoming political beings. As a result, they view democracy as legitimizing their participation in self-government (Ibid., 260). In this case, democracy differs from a mere form of government by being understood as an anti-organizational, self-transformative, and anti-institutional experimental mode of being that remains a recurrent possibility in its fugitivity. In this understanding, while the demos makes itself political by means of revolutionary transgression, institutionalization signals the attenuation of democracy. Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 39. Here, the danger lies in the risk of self-conceitedness that could occur when democracy becomes an assumption and antidemocratic elements become integral to the system. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 212.

⁵⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xvi.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 188.

thinness found especially in Mouffe's works, resulting from her excessive engagement with Schmitt's political ontology.

Coles: An Ethical Agonism of Generosity

Coles' agonistic version of radical democracy contains commitments and sensibilities that are very similar to those embraced by Mouffe. For example, he takes issue with how liberalism deals with consent and consensus by breaking down Kant's transcendental narrative of the sovereign subject. He takes this further by showing how liberalism's mishandling of difference is reflected in its attitude toward "uncivilized people," which exposes the link between liberalism and empire. Thus, even the epistemological and moral foundational narratives of liberalism are complicit with the frequent failures of modern liberal societies concerning otherness in the form of "a systematic kind of oblivion, imperialism, and theft."⁵⁷

Although Mouffe and Coles are united by their common indebtedness to Derrida for their agonistic arguments, Coles' incorporation of Adorno into his theory sets him apart.⁵⁸ This is most evident in his preference for interpreting Adorno as offering an attractive ethical project rather than reading him as offering a universal ontology.⁵⁹ Coles thus pursues a perspective in which the agonistic dimension emerges through "an ethical

⁵⁷ Romand Coles, *Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas*, Contestations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4.

⁵⁸ Coles's *Rethinking Generosity* articulates an ethical reading of Adorno, who is credited with "ethically opening practical engagement with otherness," to contest the view that Adorno's work contains little dialogic theory and ethics. See, especially *Ibid.*, 97, 119. He ultimately wants to arrive at a position where striving for consensus with non-identity would be supplanted by an unending dialogical effort that nevertheless remains marked by consensual moments (*Ibid.*, 127).

⁵⁹ Coles notes that Adorno warns, in part two of *Negative Dialectics*, against making nonidentity just another ontology (*Ibid.*, 96). Instead, he offers a dialogical ethic of receptive generosity animated by a constellation of agonistic solicitations (*Ibid.*, 180).

relation in a dialogical generosity and grace articulated through the difficult relations which are the condition for freedom among interdependent non-identical beings.”⁶⁰

This is where we can compensate for the ethically thin agonism discerned especially in Mouffe’s earlier works. At first glance she might seem to be on the right track, for she uses Schmitt to develop an ontology of agon as a useful intellectual resource to contest the deliberative model. However, it is hard to miss how Schmitt’s political ontology smoothly develops into a fascist politics. In this sense there seems to be a fundamental discord between his ontology of conflict and the kind of pluralist ethics envisaged by Mouffe.⁶¹ One indeed needs a far more robust ontological repertoire to prefigure the democratic ethos desired by Mouffe than Schmitt’s ontology of conflict, no matter how “tamed” it is.⁶² This is where Coles’ move from an *ontology of antagonism* toward an *ethical agonism of generosity* offers a fundamental corrective. In this endeavor to sustain a forceful ethical dimension, Coles draws upon such unexpected figures as MacIntyre and Yoder (a theologian).⁶³ Given the nature of my project I am inclined to follow Coles, for his dialogic efforts seem to overcome Schmitt’s ethically antagonizing effects as well as allow clearer attentiveness to theological sensibilities.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 108.

⁶¹ In White’s words: “Whether this joining of the Schmittian onto-logic of politics to the pluralist ethos of a restrained contest between legitimate adversaries is actually felicitous seems rather doubtful.” White, *The Ethos*, 38.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ In Coles’ reading, MacIntyre joins with Derrida to discordantly co-inhabit a set of terms and concerns, such as tradition, community, vulnerability, risk, and teleology. Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 167. Yoder, on the other hand, interests Coles with “the ways he combines bearing evangelical witness to his confessedly provincial tradition with vulnerable and receptive dialogical practices with others.” Along this path, for Coles, Yoder articulates a theology of *traditioning* that addresses many of the problems he identifies in MacIntyre (Ibid., 111).

⁶⁴ In the last chapter I referred Niebuhr and Gutiérrez, who seek to integrate an ontology of conflict with a more generous ethical relationship with others. Coles is quite significant for my project in this regard, for he is a radical democrat who situates agonism within the ethical sphere while paying a remarkable degree of attention to theological concerns and concepts.

What Coles finds missing in Mouffe's agonistic coalitional project is an adequate ethical account of the possibilities and heights of "being with others as others," i.e. striving to engage their otherness and the possible agonizing grandness of plurality. Without such an ethic, he fears that we might simply oscillate between relations of assimilation and indifference immersed in a logic of difference and liberty that is subordinated to equality, in effect approximating the very systematic totality Mouffe seeks to avoid.⁶⁵

Coles offers a more comprehensive version of his radical democratic theory in *Beyond Gated Politics*, a book "borne by radical democratic efforts ... to deepen democracy and justice."⁶⁶ Here, he forges ahead with the Adornian dialogical ethics of engagement with nonidentity. He also pursues a transfigurative politics of an agonistic and rhizomatic style of relationship-building as an alternative to a politics of moralizing from on high.⁶⁷ The ensuing similarities and contrasts with Mouffe's project are quite significant.

Like Mouffe, Coles puts the "political liberalism" of deliberative democrats on the spot, especially their "fiction of universal communicability," which he sees as being accompanied by a "rhetoric of currency" that immerses both fairness and neocolonialism in the logic of capital.⁶⁸ Coles asserts that Rawls omits the corporate power-laden and consent-compromising context in which working and poor people have often opted for compromise. This comes along with Rawls's oversight, he thinks, of their struggles for far more participatory and agonistic dialogical practices of "reciprocity," "fairness,"

⁶⁵ Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 186-91.

⁶⁶ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, x.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33. In this respect, he echoes many other critics of the post-Lockean myth of tacit consent.

“liberty,” and “equality.”⁶⁹ In another way, Rawls’ *reasonable* imagines a public reason that would by itself determine the moral limit to be obeyed by all vernacular reasons in a pretension to know the boundaries of legitimate contestation ahead of time.⁷⁰ Coles’ alternative espouses liberty, equality, and fairness in ways that affirm their hybridizing and reciprocally inflecting relationship with the particularities of tradition, doctrine, and authoritative figures without any claim to being the sole governor of the political limit.⁷¹ This engagement with others is characterized by receptive generosity and listening even to those who are not receptive.⁷² In this sense, his agonistic formula promises to be more receptive to the particularities of the Muslim tradition than the one proposed by Mouffe.

The second dimension of Coles’ critique of political liberalism and its “rhetoric of currency” has to do with its unwillingness to renounce the colonial relation.⁷³ The progressive liberal cosmopolitanism and its discourse of globalization are still framed by this Lockean imaginary, which conceals imposition, power, and coercion.⁷⁴ In this context, when the logic of capital (viz., efficiency and equivalency) begins to govern our understanding of practical and ethical life, it begins to have an undemocratic and depoliticizing effect on our political formations.⁷⁵

In his alternative articulation of a tensional ethics⁷⁶ for a radically democratic generosity, Coles combines elements from Derrida and Adorno. To him, being open to

⁶⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

⁷¹ Ibid., 38.

⁷² Ibid., 35.

⁷³ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 46, 49.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., xxiv.

nonidentity is more than a quality; it is a verbal *opening*, “a dynamic relation that is yet to be, greatly involving the abundance of others as a condition of possibility.”⁷⁷

Perhaps justice is possible only in the midst of this tension,⁷⁸ for in a certain sense it is a particular response to the tragic dimension of political life. While political liberalism is informed by a certain reading of the tragic,⁷⁹ Coles suggests that we should try to minimize tragedy by partially shaping and governing ourselves in light of our recognition of our finitude. Thus, a tragic sensibility should evoke an awareness of the weakness of our capacity, so that our acknowledgement of tragedy would somehow allow us to adequately respond to those who question our political directions. This, in turn, challenges liberalism’s sense that it is *a priori* more capable of adequately accommodating tragedy than any of its rivals.⁸⁰

Coles’s critique of liberalism is characterized by his overt emphasis on the ethical sphere and thus occupies a more central role in my framework. However, a radical or agonistic critique of liberalism is in no way limited to my accounts of Laclau, Mouffe, and Coles, for many other figures, among them Sheldon Wolin, Cornel West, William Connolly, and Jane Bennett, understand democracy in a way that overcomes the various limitations of liberal democracy. However, since covering radical democracy’s different figures and features would be a book in itself, I intend to focus more on the ontological definition of democracy offered by radical democrats and deal with some of the challenges it poses.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁹ Coles develops this critique in reference to Moon’s discussion of the tragic dimension in political liberalism, which presents it as the mode of political theory and practice that best recognizes the tragic in order to minimize the most tragic conflicts. Hence, in Coles’s interpretation, “liberalism best assimilates tragedy by assimilating itself *to* tragedy, by recognizing and allowing tragedy to work upon liberalism in ways that diminish its probability.” Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

3.3 Weak Ontology and Radical Democracy: The Weak Ontological Paradox

I have brought radical democracy into closer focus mainly because of its use of egalitarian and pluralistic commitments to overcome the democratic gap of liberal democracy. In this respect, radical democracy has much to offer the Muslims' quest for self-government and inclusion with its more generous notions of difference, otherness, and deep pluralism in a post-colonial world. Just as important is its deep embeddedness in the ontological turn from its inception onward, a phenomenon that is explicit in the radical democrats' characterization of democracy as an ontological category instead of an ontic set of institutions.⁸¹ I find this understanding of democracy as an "infinite ideality" of crucial value for my normative attempts to renegotiate democracy for Muslim contexts.⁸²

In this section, I will seek to clarify the connection between weak ontology and radical democracy. This will, however, cause the following problem to arise: If we make the link between radical democracy and weak ontology too strong, would it not denote a performative contradiction, on the grounds that weak ontology forecloses any deduction of politics from ontology? Thus how should we perceive the nature of this link, given that

⁸¹ This refers back to my discussion in the first chapter on the distinction between *the political* as an ontological category and *politics* as an ontic set of institutions or a sedimented form of the political.

⁸² I borrow the phrase *infinite ideality* from Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 149. He imagines this ideality as a condition in which our perceptual and practical relations with others are absolutely dialogically just and non-violent. To him, this must be an inexhaustible and never fully achieved horizon of our work. The link between his ontology and his view of democracy is quite clear, for he draws on an ontology that acknowledges the contradictory, paradoxical, and manifold being of the world and ourselves. Coles, *Rethinking Generosity*, 123. Thus he would reimagine democracy, or "collective self-rule" by the demos, as an infinite question unto itself, (Ibid., 139). In a political ontological sense, it would come to mean "endlessly renegotiating and transfiguring ... relations of historical thrownness." Democratic politics, he continues, "is the effort to constitute a discerning volition of nepantlist generosity in the midst of a world always already and endlessly taking form and generating pressures in other directions" (Ibid., 73). In short, for Coles, democracy is democratization and will always be beyond democracy as we know it. Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xi-xii.

my goal is eventually to develop my ideas on Muslim self-government on the normative terrain populated by weak ontology and radical democracy?

Beginning with democracy as an ontological category implies two closely related but distinct meanings. The first sense attends to the *process* of democratization. Thus, democracy denotes an infinite movement of democratization without any hope of final reconciliation,⁸³ for it is a practice always in search of itself, a constant recreation and renegotiation.⁸⁴ In this sense, radical democracy is nothing but the awareness of the radical impossibility of a fully achieved democracy.⁸⁵ If society as a closed ensemble is impossible, then democracy is a regime grounded on the very absence of a stable ontological ground.⁸⁶ Its temporary occupation of the place of power is an ontic practice of democratic politics against the background of a fundamental indeterminacy. In other words, democratic politics operates only as an impossible attempt to occupy society's absent center. In short, democracy is a necessary but impossible attempt to institutionalize lack.⁸⁷

The second meaning puts more emphasis on democracy's messianic aspect, as exemplified in Derrida's democracy-to-come. In this sense, even when conceived as a manifestation of universality, modern democratic universality is a horizon that is out of reach. In fact, it is a good that exists as long as it cannot be reached.⁸⁸ As a commonly

⁸³ Simon Critchley, "Marx, Political Subjectivity and Anarchic Meta-politics" in Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 227.

⁸⁴ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xi.

⁸⁵ Chantal Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today" in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 14.

⁸⁶ Oliver Marchart, "The Absence at the Heart of Presence" in Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 25.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 24. The lack here is in the same sense as used above in this chapter's footnote 30.

⁸⁸ Pitted against both a foundation and a regulative ideal, democracy as a horizon signifies an idea of democracy in which justice and harmony would be instantiated as a conceptual impossibility. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 137

shared understanding among radical democrats, therefore, the democracy envisaged by radical democrats is always “to-come.”⁸⁹

As for the link between radical democracy and weak ontology, I have already argued that most radical democrats make conscious ontological moves while articulating their theory of radical democracy. The fact that many political theorists with an ontological orientation tend toward a more radical version of democracy, however, might not be enough to draw a strong inference about the relationship between weak ontology and radical democracy. Therefore, I will formulate my inquiry on the possibility of a strong link between weak ontology and radical democracy as “the weak ontological paradox.”⁹⁰ That is to say, does an interpretation of being that lays down the ultimate boundaries of the thinkable and doable unavoidably jeopardize radical democracy’s quest for openness and radical indeterminacy?

The notion of the absent ground of society, around which the radical democratic idea has flourished, clearly indicates a post-foundational ontological commitment. But since the radical democratic event of *the political* forbids any necessary grounding at the ontological level, how does one articulate their co-habitation on a common ontopolitical

⁸⁹ Tonder and Thomassen, “Introduction,” in *Radical Democracy*, 3. Some theorists of radical democracy, despite their ontological conception of democracy and their affinity with the idea of messianicity, still see democracy as manifesting itself through rare glimpses of democratic moments. Wolin, for example, seeks to distinguish democracy from a form of government, yet still sees it as a recurrent possibility of those rare “political” moments that are necessarily episodic and fugitive. Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 43. This also draws on the “ontological difference,” mentioned in the first chapter, among the ontic, institutionalized democracy, and the event of the political. Politics is the continuous, ceaseless, and endless legitimized public contestation. The political, in contrast, is both episodic and rare, the moment of commonality when collective power is used to promote or protect the collectivity’s well-being (Ibid., 31). As opposed to the sedimented, institutionalized form of democracy, democracy is a mode of being, a political moment (Ibid., 43), the political moment of formation of the demos when it acts from outside and against the system. This demotic action, consequently, is informal, improvised, and spontaneous- what Wolin calls “fugitive democracy.” Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, 254. This is what he means by defining democracy as “participating in self government” (Ibid., 260).

⁹⁰ I develop this term from Kioupkiolis’s notion of “ontological paradox.” Alexandros Kioupkiolis, “Keeping It Open: Ontology, Ethics, Knowledge and Radical Democracy,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 6 (2011): 693. Here he inquires whether one should give up ontology totally, as even the very act of articulating an ontology of contingency - a picture about how things are in a mutable, indeterminate world- inevitably performs a certain closure (Ibid., 697).

terrain? In other words, how can radical democracy be grounded given the absent ground of the political? Indeed, any conception that upholds the non-closure of the social and renounces a universal foundation of the political has to account for the temporary occupation of the social, i.e., for substantive political action. That is to say, who is going to fill the absent ground of the social by what sort of political action?

Laclau and Mouffe give one possible answer: *hegemony*. In the absence of a society and a stable political ground, particular agents will have to assume certain subject positions to stand for this lack. But if hegemony will “define the terrain in which a political relation is constituted,” it will be “the essence of the political,”⁹¹ which might mean a strong-ontologization of *hegemony* that negates the very social contingency with which they started.⁹²

Here, I suggest that we inquire about the extent to which political articulations of differing notions of democracy can live up to their ontological commitments.⁹³ After this, we then acknowledge the permanent necessity to make a decision in an undecidable

⁹¹Ibid., 694. In his view, this tension is more particularly visible in the way Laclau affirms the necessity of “radical exclusion,” asymmetrical power, antagonistic frontiers, and limited accountability. This is especially the case when Laclau stipulates hegemony as a necessary process of the late modern. A. Kioupkiolis, “Radicalizing Democracy,” *Constellations* 17, no. 1 (2010): 145.

⁹² If we continue to tackle this particular problem through Kioupkiolis’s discussion of Laclau, it seems that the latter already guards against any unmediated translation of ontological conjecture into ethico-political prescription. Kioupkiolis, “Keeping It Open,” 692. There is no direct route from ontology to ethics or politics, or from ontology to radical democracy. His ontology establishes only structural places, elements, and processes that can be filled in by different contents and can give rise to variable figures of the social. However, his particular notion of hegemony circumscribes the bounds of political possibility in its capacity as the parameter-setting horizon (Ibid., 696). Despite this drawback, those of his ontological ventures that affirm society’s fundamental indeterminacy and that contest necessary structures, fixed a priori, and fully unifying foundations nevertheless do clear the ground for radical democracy as an always open and undecided endeavor. Therefore, if any critique is to be leveled at Laclau’s political ontology, must it target his essentialization of hegemony rather than take up the problem as an intrinsic ontological paradox? Kioupkiolis, for instance, raises alternative political figurations to hegemony that underlie the horizontal workings of network mobilization as opposed to subordinating differences to an overarching particularity. Among these alternatives, Hardt and Negri’s idea of “multitude” signifies a social formation that is not defined in reference to foreclosure and antagonism.

⁹³ I argued in the first chapter that post-foundational thinkers do not necessarily assume that ontology can initiate or determine political action and secure its outcomes. The point here is this: Whenever we make a political argument or initiate a political action, our moves are already entangled in a complex circle of an ontopolitical constellation. Thus our best approach is to recognize this and give a better account of ourselves in our engagements with others.

terrain, to occupy an absent center. In other words, some agent provisionally occupying a subject position will have to bring about the event of the political. This could comprise a plurality of actors sanctioned by the radical democratic imaginaries, in which Laclau's hegemonic coalition is just one among many.⁹⁴ Whoever the actor is, these founding moments of the political will occur within an ontopolitical constellation, which in itself does not imply a necessary grounding. Likewise, affirming any of the ontological figures of lack, finitude, agon, or abundance will not provide any determinate content to democracy, not even the *form* of radical democracy, although they may prefigure it as a contingent event of the political. This event could conceive of itself as an infinite ideality and a constant renegotiation of its own contestable values in its attempt to reach an unreachable horizon. The most we could say, then, is that radical democracy stands out because it internalizes its own contestability and undecidability and thus can more smoothly fold back onto a weak ontological imaginary. It may therefore be viewed as more prone to cultivating dialogical and generous ethical formations than any other available alternative constellations. In this sense radical democracy is a question unto itself, for its very fundamentals are always up for grabs. Its sole purpose is to keep the struggle among different perceptions of democracy alive.⁹⁵

The only remaining question is radical democracy's non-Western appeal. In this regard, could we argue that radical conceptions of democracy, with their deep pluralism and infinite opening to "others," can serve as better conversation partners for non-Western pursuits for self-government?

⁹⁴ The others may be, for instance, Wolin's demos that erupt during episodic demotic moments, or the "multitude" of Hardt and Negri.

⁹⁵ Kioupiolis, "Keeping It Open," 697.

3.4 Radical Democracy and Comparative Political Theory

My project is not confined to democratic theory as it emerged in the West, where the non-Western intellectual traditions are merely on the receiving end. Instead, I have deliberately broadened my topic in order to include normative theories of collective self-government before and after the concept of democracy universalized itself.⁹⁶ Given the current dominance of the Western theory and practice of democracy, how can one formulate self-government from within Muslim thought? Moreover, given the always already mixed lineage of philosophical concepts, how should Muslim political theorists engage with Western notions of democracy? If my project situates itself within the normative as well as the analytical terrain of the post-foundationalist *Stimmung*, then do the radical democratic imaginaries covered here manifest themselves as better interlocutors for me? Or, as Dhaliwal asserts, does “democracy, even its more radical versions ... act as a (neo)-colonial discourse by virtue of its deployment to assert Western superiority?”⁹⁷

In this section, I will discuss radical democracy from a comparative political theory perspective. I will first focus on the possibility of an intellectual conversation between non-Western pursuits of self-government and the Western tradition of democratic thought, and then discuss whether radical democracy (as opposed to other perceptions) can open up more space for such mutual engagements. I will specifically

⁹⁶ The sizeable body of literature on the Iroquois Confederacy and how the Founding Fathers arguably benefited from their experience is a good case in point. On the other hand, I focus on the intellectual discourse of *shura* in Muslim political thought, for it lends itself to comparative political theorizing on collective self-government.

⁹⁷ Dhaliwal, A. “Can the Subaltern Vote? Radical Democracy, Discourses of Representation and Rights, and Questions of Race” in Trend, *Radical Democracy*, 56. Dhaliwal does not imply, though, that an eternal and inevitable weddedness of democracy to a (neo)colonial discourse exists (Ibid., 57).

emphasize the promise of radical democracy's ontological orientation for non-Western political ontologies and their pursuit of self-government.

My project's initial main underlying motive was to make sense of the increasing integration of Muslim political thinkers into the global intellectual discourse of democracy. This took the form of breaking with the rejectionist attitudes held by fundamentalist Islamism during the mid-twentieth century, as seen in Qutb's thought. Yet, if we take one step back, from a purely Islamic point of view the original political theological question would look something like: "How can we best manage the Muslim community's affairs and achieve our Islamic ideals in a pluralistic, secularized, and globalized world?" If the answer is sought in a theory of collective self-government, then the West's democratic discourse at the very least offers a vibrant resource of theoretical reflection. Thus, democracy could enter this discourse as another way to think through political matters.⁹⁸

Even when such an opening to Western democratic theory is affirmed, non-Western theories of democracy or collective self-government still have to recognize the plurality of democratic imaginaries. They might subscribe to or interact with Rawlsian, deliberative, communitarian, radical theories, or any combination of them. Yet regardless of their preferred tradition, accounting for their choice by engaging with it at the ontological level will be of critical significance,⁹⁹ for this undertaking may result in a staunch critique or even a rejection of liberal democracy. The key is not to succumb to an

⁹⁸ Even then, the Foucauldian power-discourse complex and its application to an international scene would still be part of this debate.

⁹⁹ Dhaliwal, for instance, in his own critical, post-colonial perspective, identifies radical democracy as not just complicit with colonial discourse, but also as a modernist legacy in both its ethicopolitical conceptualizations and its epistemological and ontological premises (Ibid., 43).

imposed dichotomy between subscribing to a particular theory of democracy in order to avoid sounding anti-democratic, or to resist this discourse altogether to protect the purported authenticity of one's own tradition. In their stead, and following Wittgenstein's lead, one can pursue family resemblances between diverse formulations of collective self-government across different traditions. Thus, one can acknowledge and valorize the diversity of ways in which the "democratic game" can be played.¹⁰⁰

This may run counter to some liberal universalist solutions that argue for the global application of democracy by establishing a rational consensus based on universal principles. But a radical democratic alternative, however, would definitely pay attention to Coles' point. While advancing the notion of *traditio*, he seeks to bring together two responsibilities: teleological responsibilities to cultivate the knowledge and practices we inherit, and ateleological receptive responsibilities so that we remain radically open to and opened by others, as well as by new events beyond "our traditions."¹⁰¹ This openness calls for inviting others to explain how they might articulate what they have come to embrace as a result of their own struggles. It is an inquiry about "how their meaning is transfigured, what their relative priority is in the constellation of ethical-political traditions and visions from which [they] draw strength and lean into the future."¹⁰² This responsibility to listen to others may also help one to bring one's own message back home. Coles notes that it was thanks to Tolstoy and Gandhi that Martin Luther King Jr. was able to bring Jesus' word on violence back into the churches. Likewise, it was the

¹⁰⁰ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 73.

¹⁰¹ Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xv.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 70. Coles also relates Tully's account of the Iroquois Confederacy in his attempt to go beyond the "foundational, universal, and fixed background to democracy" and offer a democratic ethos necessary for a post-imperial age (*Ibid.*, 71-2).

outsider Marx who partly enabled a restatement of the unspoken message of the Law and the Prophets by liberation theologians.¹⁰³ One might make the same point about how “Western” democracy has helped Muslims realize the significance of the Qur’anic principle of *shura*.

This openness of radical democracy to the “non-Western other” by no means forbids similar articulations between democracy and non-Western ideas of collective self-rule from within deliberative or communitarian theories.¹⁰⁴ If radical democracy is about radical openness and contestability about itself, then it will not monopolize the field of articulation among diverse traditions. But one should also realize that the radical democratic discourse, in its pursuit of deep pluralism¹⁰⁵ and agonistic difference, has specifically taken issue with foundationalism, essentialism, universalism, and the subsumption of difference into identity.¹⁰⁶ This is why I suggest that radical democratic theories are more amenable for an agonistic dialogue among different traditions.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor’s attribution of primal significance to the notion of “background sources” or “sources of the self” as a foreground to multicultural political projects is a good case to exemplify how communitarian notions of democracy might leave room for such articulations between different traditions. See, for instance, Charles Taylor and James Heft, *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ The ethical vision embraced by radical democrats takes issue with Rawls’ “fact of pluralism.” They pursue some form of “deep pluralism” as an axiological principle, as we observe most explicitly in the accounts of Connolly and Coles. Their correction to liberal pluralism has a lot to do with the post-foundational view of radical difference. Here difference, or *différance* in Derrida’s terms, is construed as the condition of possibility of being. Therefore, pluralism is considered a tragic condition not to be taken care of grudgingly, but rather as a value that we should celebrate and enhance. Chantal Mouffe, “Culture, Identity and Democracy,” in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*, 246. In Connolly’s view, for instance, pluralism emerges as “a possibility to pursue” rather than the certain effect of determinate conditions. To the extent that it is attained, it remains a fragile achievement to be cherished, rather than an outcome to take for granted. William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 63-4.

¹⁰⁶ In certain ways, difference has appeared as a shared commitment among liberal and agonistic democrats. However, the later versions of radical democracy go beyond the former’s identity-difference dualism. Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 3. Benhabib brings up difference and its more metaphysical permutations, such as Derrida’s *différance* and Lyotard’s *le différend*, as rallying points against Enlightenment-type rationalism, essentialism, and universalism. Additionally, difference manifests itself as a cultural battle cry of those who insist on the experience of alterity, otherness, heterogeneity, dissonance, and resistance. Benhabib, “Introduction” in *Democracy and Difference*, 5. In short, most radical democrats see difference as a “radical difference” that constitutes identity itself. Thus for them, difference always escapes subsumption to the supposed identity of some universal. Tonder and Thomassen, *Radical Democracy*, 1-2. Laclau and Mouffe state this tension as follows: “The impossibility of closure (i.e., the impossibility

In this regard, we can point out several advantages of a radical democratic discourse. First, its ontological critique of Western liberal modernity clears the ground for alternative ontological articulations, along with their own *mythoi* and founding events, to coexist with Western onto-stories. Further, as it rejects the subsumption of difference into identity, it leaves room for alternative conceptions of collective self-rule among non-Western traditions by not insisting upon assimilation into the predominant discourse of democracy. Hence, it may allay the skeptics' concerns that radical democracy is a neocolonial discourse.¹⁰⁸ All things considered, its dissolution of the "Western project's" foundationalist claims gives the ontological imaginary of radical democracy the potential to dissolve the West itself to make a post-Western conception of democracy possible.

Cornel West, a radical democrat, provides a good case of such a dialogue between the Islamic and democratic traditions. His own radical democratic project, which professes a clear indebtedness to Emerson as well as Wolin's radical democratic theory, also stands out for its appreciation of Islam's prophetic commitment to justice.¹⁰⁹ To counter the discourses of clash or imposition, he advances a Socratic process of examining a rich past of cultural cross fertilization between the Judeo-Christian and

of 'society') has up to this point been presented as the precariousness of every identity, which manifests itself as a continuous movement of differences." Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ One may dispute this claim by bringing up Rorty's anti-foundationalism, which contains no similar openness to the other: "It may have *just happened* that Europe began to prize benevolent sentiments and the idea of a common humanity, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments and any such moralities." Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 185. The first chapter of my dissertation has already challenged his attribution of radical contingency to "the political" with a complete detachment from the ontological level due to its avoidance of the unavoidability of ontology. Suggested here is an ontologically conscious political outlook that acknowledges the necessity of contingent links between these levels.

¹⁰⁸ It may be noted that Dhaliwal's unease with even radical democracy's modernist baggage proves to be less persuasive in the face of radical democracy's deconstruction of the ontological premises and teleology of democracy that he sees as characteristic to democratic theory.

¹⁰⁹ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: The Penguin Books, 2005). 19. In this respect, West brings up the emancipatory vision of such Muslim figures as Malcolm X and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (Ibid., 35, 108).

Islamic traditions.¹¹⁰ Thus his case for democracy from within Islam and couched in Islamic terms implies that Western-style democracies are no more than just another a member in the family of democracies.¹¹¹ Islamism, on the other hand, has to be conceived of as the Muslims' attempt to enter the modern world on their own terms rather than a childish rejection of modernity.¹¹² This further attests to the contestatory and undecided character of radical democracy, which resists the absolutization of its very own terms.

In conclusion, radical democracy can be suggested as a crucial conversation partner for non-Western engagements with the Western democratic tradition. Radical democratic theories stand out because they recognize contingency, contestability, and difference in their own articulations as well as in those of others. However, my preference for it in no way establishes a prefixed link between radical democracy and non-Western ontopolitical constellations, for that would make radical democracy just another strong ontological, and hence colonial, project.¹¹³

Concluding Remarks:

The New Ontological Stimmung and Comparative Political Theory

In the first part of my dissertation, I sought to clarify the concepts of political ontology, political theology, and radical democracy. My ultimate goal is to develop them into a framework that will enable me to make a comparative political theoretical analysis in the next part of the dissertation. More specifically, I hope to deploy this launch pad as an

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 132.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 138.

¹¹² Ibid., 130. More striking is his avowal of ontology's primacy: "I speak as a Christian- one whose commitment to democracy is very deep but whose Christian convictions are even deeper. Democracy is not my faith" (Ibid., 171). This point illustrates the primacy of theological ontology among even radical democrats, which could help us to make some sense of some non-Western thinkers' rejection of Western democracy on ontological grounds.

¹¹³ Certain remarks of Mouffe that offer radical democracy as the only alternative to the current power configuration might pose such a risk.

analytical tool to examine the shifting attitudes towards democracy in contemporary Muslim political thought. Accordingly, I will approach particular Muslim thinkers from different eras as embodying distinct ontopolitical constellations and then seek to understand their theories on self-government as part of a constellation. My attempt to gain a deeper comprehension will be accompanied by my efforts to make normative interventions. The final question to be addressed by my dissertation will be: “How can one approach the question of self-government from within the Muslim intellectual tradition at this critical juncture of comparative political theory?”

At this point, I will try to wrap up the preceding argument by linking the various pieces laid out in chapters 1-3. The first chapter, which laid the groundwork for establishing ontology’s relevance to political theory, attempted to demonstrate the unavoidability of ontology in any instance of political theorizing. Next, I suggested that whatever happens once we engage in political theorizing must be understood in terms of ontopolitical constellations. There, the ontological, ethical, and political levels of one’s thought are caught in the web of hermeneutic circles. As an analytical tool, political ontology implies viewing a thinker’s political thought as an ontopolitical constellation and determining how each level prefigures the other. As for the normative dimension, political ontology, observing the violence that results from the idea of a strong foundation, pursues the possibility of alternative constellations. It looks into how ontology prefigures the other levels and how they, in turn, fold back onto ontology so as to constitute more generous ethico-political formations.

The second chapter sought to complement the first chapter’s ontological orientation toward the ineliminable theological element in the political. Of particular

importance were the concepts of *mythos*, *messianicity* and *theodicy*. My interest in these theological residues did not just result from pointing out how they operate in our political thinking; rather I also tried to transform them into productive theoretical resources for normative theorizing.

I then tried to link these ontological and theological reflections in the earlier chapters with conceptions of democracy, specifically radical democracy, in chapter three. Indeed, the ontological approach to political theory co-inhabits the current post-foundational intellectual terrain with various notions of radical democracy. Since my project's larger concern is to give an account of Muslim notions of self-government in a comparative context, the discussion of which conceptions of democracy are more open to this cross-cultural dialogue is essential. Equally crucial was the clarification of the link between weak ontology and radical democracy, as they seem to form a coherent pair in a post-foundational intellectual context. In the end, I suggested radical democracy as a more congenial conversation partner with the Muslims' efforts to formulate self-government.

The next part of this project will provide an ontological narrative of the Muslims' theories of self-government in the post-Afghani period. Thus the political ontological outlook advanced up to now will serve both as an analytical toolkit and a source of normative reflection. It will therefore help me develop my further reflections in pursuit of more persuasive ways to grapple with the issue of democracy, or more broadly collective self-government, from within a Muslim point of view.

PART II

AN ONTOLOGICAL NARRATIVE OF CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM POLITICAL THOUGHT

PRELUDE

In this part of the dissertation, I will present an ontological narrative of contemporary Muslim political thought. Since the discussions on self-government have been held mostly among reformist (*islahi*) thinkers, my narrative will focus on the *islah* tradition's fluctuated trajectory. In general, I will argue that we will gain an enhanced analytical lens by approaching each Muslim thinker's unique attitude toward democracy as part of an ontopolitical constellation. In other words, I will analyze his political thought by subsuming it into a framework that entangles political positions with ontological commitments and ethical sensibilities.

The second part of my dissertation, therefore, will draw on the mode of analysis developed in the first part. Here, I will improve on it by recounting an ideological transformation through an ontological narrative, as I will expound below. This ontological narrative will narrate the political theories of Afghani, Qutb, Rahman, El-Affendi, Abou El Fadl, An-Na'im, and Hashemi as a series of ontopolitical constellations. I will relate their political thoughts to their core foundational commitments. In an Islamic context, these commitments will take shape within the nexus of their conceptions of a human being and his relationship with God, the revealed text, other human beings, and the universe. As those themes, concepts, and sensibilities that are unique to Muslim thought will continue to emerge from this narrative, they will form the groundwork for my normative reflections.

Before embarking on my ontological narrative with Afghani in chapter 4, I will introduce certain concepts to make my analysis as clear as possible. After this, I will provide a brief outline of the second part's general argument by elucidating what I mean

by an “ontological narrative” and then explain my terminological preferences with regard to several terms emphasized by the Muslim reformist tradition. The prelude will be concluded by a general outline of the upcoming framework for chapters 4 to seven.

Ontological Narrative

I will make the point that contemporary Muslim political thought on self-government can better be conceived of in the diachronic form, by means of an ontological narrative.

Accordingly, I will look at how the issue of self-government (through such concepts as *shura*, constitutionalism, republic, and democracy) has occupied Muslim political thinkers since the nineteenth century, rather than just comparing the views of current thinkers. After explaining the fluctuating discourses on democracy via this political ontological analysis, I will present my own normative views in the later part of chapter 7, where I will draw on the concepts and sensibilities of both the reformist legacy as well as the normative commitments I developed in the first part.

When I introduce a particular thinker’s political theory, I will pay particular attention to what goes on around his bedrock commitments while he formulates his version of the best form of government. In order to develop this into an ontological narrative, I will identify and elucidate the selected political thinkers’ ontological figures and analyze the ensuing ontopolitical constellations. In this endeavor, the concepts of strong and weak ontologies, onto-stories of disenchantment-reenchantment, and how the concept of “the political” is perceived will be given a particular weight alongside other analytical concepts brought in from the first part. The Muslim side of this self-government debate will also be able to renegotiate these categories or present some of its own.

Key Reform Terms: *Ihya'* (Revival), *Islah* (Reform), *Nahdah* (Renaissance), *Salafiyya*, and *Islamic Modernism*

Several unique terms and categories stand out in Muslim intellectual history,¹ among them Qur'anic terms and themes that were reformulated in an attempt to reform certain aspects of Islamic theology or political theory, such as vicegerency. Others emerged from Muslims' self-understandings on their projects, while yet others were coined by later scholars so they could group several early thinkers and ideas under common frameworks. I introduce some key ones below without any claim to having exhausted the wide repertoire of such terms and concepts.

Nahdah (rebirth or renaissance) refers to a post-1850 Arab intellectual movement that sought to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization while simultaneously reviving classical Arab culture.² Ibrahim Abu Rabi', who assigns an analytical significance to this concept, places Afghani and his intellectual successors, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, in the second phase of the *nahdah*, a time when the first nationalist phase was superseded by pan-Islamist terms.³

Salafiyya (the path of predecessors) is more often used by Muslims to signify movements that champion the motto of "going back to the Qur'an." This generally means adopting a critical attitude toward Islamic history and its disciplines in order to retrieve Islam's original purity and then revive it within contemporary circumstances. Thus it is

¹ This terminological debate is a significant part of the discourse on contemporary Islamic movements. For instance, see John Voll, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 32-47; John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6, where he prefers *islah*; and Fazlur Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method, and Alternatives," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 4 (1970). More recently, Amoretti and Fuentes have drawn a conceptual analysis of *islah*. See Juan A. Macías Amoretti and Juan Marsá Fuentes, "The Struggle for Reform: Contested Conceptualizations of *Iṣlāḥ* in the Maghreb," *The Muslim World* 102, no. 2 (2012).

² Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

commonly referred to as revivalism (*ihya'*). In its strict forms, revivalism means a more conservative and sometimes reactionary inclination, as seen in the Wahhabi movement of the eighteenth century. There, without any meaningful mediation of the faculty of reason, they sought – and continue to seek – to purify Islam from all later accretions and strive to create an exact replica of it as practiced in seventh-century Arabia. Most reformist (*islah*) movements deploy the same revivalist language, as they also want this same pure form of Islam. However, and most important, they envisage a return to the spirit of early Islam through a rational critique of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Thus they seek to “return” to the foundational sources of Islam (the Qur'an and the Sunna) in order to understand its primary message and values in a rational manner. As a result, they want to bring those values into the contemporary world not in the sense of replicating those long-ago social circumstances, but in the sense of giving them a fresh interpretation.

Therefore, the Salafiyya's envisaged “return to the Qur'an” might signify either a strict revivalism or a brand of reformism that has revivalist undertones. However, the popular use of Salafiyya in the current post-Arab spring context confines it exclusively to the puritanical trends along Wahhabi lines. Nonetheless, many scholars engaged in the scholarly study of Islamic sciences use it to include the more rational reformist trends over the last two centuries as well.⁴ For instance, Abu Rabi' identifies five distinct stages of Salafiyya separated from each other by major critical junctures⁵: i) the classical

⁴ Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2011), 235. Here he characterizes the Afghani tradition as “the modernist *Salafiyya*.”

⁵ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2004), 65-72.

Salafiyya of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyya,⁶ ii) the pre-colonial Salafiyya of Wahhabism,⁷ iii) the colonial Salafiyya of Afghani and his contemporaries, iv) the post-colonial Salafiyya of Qutb and his generation, and, finally, v) the post-1967 Salafiyya of such later Islamists or neo-Islamists as Qaradawi, Fadlallah, Ghannushi, and Turabi.⁸ Although Abu Rabi's main focus is on Arab thought, these trends almost always find their equivalents in the other Muslim countries.

It must be noted that Abu Rabi's conceptualization seems to subsume Islamism under Salafiyya.⁹ If we view Islamism as a discourse that conceives of Islam as the foundation of the various sociopolitical principles and ethico-political actions that have developed with a revivalist and reformist fervor, I also agree that the two largely overlap. However, I still tend to leave room for a non-Islamist Salafiyya or a non-Salafi Islamism. Subscribing to a revivalist discourse of "going back to the Qur'an" does not necessarily translate into political action, which is an essential signifier of Islamism.¹⁰ Islamism's notion of Islam cannot be limited to a creed, morals, or rituals, for it is a whole way of life in which politics is deemed an inseparable aspect of religion. Likewise, the political

⁶ These are scholars from the ninth and thirteenth centuries, respectively.

⁷ This also covers the eighteenth-century reform movement in general.

⁸ *Neo-Islamism*, *post-Islamism*, *Wasatiyyah*, or many other terms have been deployed to name the latest trends; however, their exact meanings remain rather nebulous. Most of the figures mentioned in the final stage are now playing important roles in shaping the post-Arab Spring era.

⁹ Andrew March contributes to this conceptual debate by characterizing Qutb's project as "Salafi Reformism." In his understanding, *Salafism* refers to an interest in the first generations of Muslims' practices and beliefs. *Reformism*, on the other hand, broadly covers those modern Islamic political, legal, and theological trends that do not consider the collected scholarly tradition of pre-modern Islam as authoritative in a constraining way. Andrew March, "Taking People as They Are: Islam as a 'Realistic Utopia' in the Political Theory of Sayyid Qutb," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010): 191. His combination of the two terms is not something with which I would disagree, as far as the thinkers I cover in my project are concerned. However, as I will clarify later, strict revivalist and reformist impulses can signify quite opposite political positions.

¹⁰ The Wahhabi royalists in Saudi Arabia represent this stance, as their revivalism is, in most cases, sustained by an acquiescent political position.

activism involved might be accompanied by a religious perspective that is not necessarily Salafi in the wider sense of the term.¹¹

Considered from this angle, I prefer to keep Salafiyya and Islamism conceptually separate from each other.¹² I also keep Wahhabi-style Salafiyya, which I will mostly refer to as “strict revivalism,” distinct from the Rational Salafiyya movement, as represented by Afghani and the later *islah* tradition. *Islah* is often employed by Arabic-speaking scholars themselves to denote the post-Afghani reform project. Some might mistake it as the Islamic version of Europe’s Reformation. Indeed, Afghani’s contemporaries called him “the Luther of the new Reformation,”¹³ and he himself praised Luther for bringing Christians from barbarism into civilization.¹⁴ Yet despite the resemblance and comparability, *islah*¹⁵ is an indigenous and historically recurrent reform movement within Islam, one that is distinct from any European-inspired modern development. I will also prefer this term in most cases as part of my normative commitment to emphasize *islah*’s indigenous character, in defiance of views that equate reformism with Westernist modernism.

¹¹ As an example, I might refer to some traditionalist or Sufi Islamists in Turkey, including late Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan (d. 2011).

¹² Nonetheless, one can largely identify Islamism as an intellectual tradition with the Afghani-led Rational Salafiyya movement, although it has contained a fluctuating measure of strict revivalism through its history.

¹³ Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “Al-Afghani”: A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 359.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 391-92.

¹⁵ Another close term is *tajdid* (renewal), but I do not want to spread too many new terms around just to make some fine distinctions. Afghani, Qutb, Rahman, and most Islamists can be regarded as advocates of *islah* with differing overtones of *ihya*. Some other thinkers might call their own projects only *ihya*, as opposed to *islah*, to denote their more traditionalist stance. Thus these thinkers would not consider themselves as introducing new ideas, but rather as reviving old ideas that have precedence in Islamic scholarship. For a well-written overview of those terms that served as an important corrective to the commonplace notions of Islamic resurgence in the 1970s, see John Voll, “Renewal and Reform in Islamic History,” in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Other terms that draw more on Western vocabulary have also been suggested, among them “Islamic modernism.” This term, a favorite of Fazlur Rahman, is frequently found in the literature.¹⁶ However, it can equally refer to those who take more reconciliatory attitudes toward colonialism or Western domination, as in the case of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), a fervent opponent of Afghani.¹⁷ Other terms used are “Liberal Age” (Hourani) as well as “Modernist Islam” and “Liberal Islam” (Kurzman).¹⁸ Many of the thinkers studied in these surveys would probably not embrace a liberal ideology. Islamic modernism, however and despite its academic popularity, has become a pejorative word among some Muslims and is often used to discredit a reformist thinker because of his “sell-out” to modernism. And those who use it for such a reason sometimes share the same fate in the eyes of even more conservative persons.¹⁹

All things considered, I have come to embrace *islah* as the proper term for covering the post-Afghani reform movement because it is both a more appropriate and an indigenous term. Moreover, it has been embraced by proponents of this reform agenda and carries no ideological baggage, as do *liberal* and *modernist*. This word choice also helps distinguish the qualitative difference between, for instance, Afghani’s Islamic reform agenda and the secular modernist projects that he criticizes.

¹⁶ Rahman, “Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives,” 318. Here, Rahman dubs Afghani the “real father of this modernism.” He uses *Islamic modernism* in an affirmative sense and includes himself as belonging to that long line. He opined that this reformist fervor was overtaken by Islamic neo-revivalism, the neo-fundamentalism of Abu’l Ala Mawdudi (1903-79), or Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 136.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Islamic Intellectual History: A Theoretical Perspective* (Singapore: Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, 2006).

¹⁸ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), iv. He admits his reluctance to use this term because, at least for him, the agenda of that age was not limited only to such liberal themes as individual rights and democratic institutions. Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Also see Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). He includes Afghani in the latter volume.

¹⁹ This turns *modernist* into a relativistic description, which denotes that the speaker is simply more conservative than the interlocutor she calls modernist.

Vicegerent (Khalifah) as the New Agent of Reform

Due to its recurrence among almost all of the thinkers presented in my dissertation, the concept of vicegerent is worth special attention in any work on the *islah* movement.

Defining a human being as God's vicegerent on Earth is based on several Qur'anic verses, with "I [God] am going to create a *khalifah* on earth" (2/30) being the one most often cited.²⁰ While Sunni Muslims used this word for the religio-political rulers who succeeded Muhammad, namely, caliph (*khalifah*), no reports state that the latter use was introduced on the basis of the verse. Some scholars, however, have interpreted this verse as entrusting only the Muslim ruler with this responsibility.²¹ As a common trait of contemporary *islahi* thinking, most figures in my project formulate a notion of a vicegerency (*khilafah*)²² that generally includes all Muslims and non-Muslims, for humanity as a whole is entrusted with specific tasks on Earth, most specifically developing it, taking care of creation, and establishing justice. This is among their most important moves to empower the individual as a responsible, active agent in matters of religion as well as social and political life vis-à-vis religious or political authorities.

Stimmungen and Transformations in Contemporary Muslim Political Thought

My narration of the contemporary Muslim self-government discourse will involve analyses of various thinkers from different times who, in a sense, reflect the unique

²⁰ The verse continues with a dialogue between the angels and God: "They said, 'Will you place on it such as will spread corruption thereon and shed blood – whereas it is we who extol your limitless glory, and praise you, and hallow your name?' [God] answered, 'Verily, I know that which you do not know'" (Qur'an 2:30).

²¹ For instance, Abu Yusuf (d. 798) believed that the source of political authority was God's choice, by which the caliph became God's vicegerent. He then inferred that the subjects were duty-bound to obey their caliph (imam) because he was like a shepherd of his people. Muhammad Khalid Masud, "The Changing Concepts of Caliphate: Social Construction of Shari'a and the Question of Ethics," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, ed. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 190. The other verse that uses the term entrusts King David with vicegerency. However, it is not employed to restrict this responsibility to the rulers alone, as it just refers to the duty to carry out justice, as well as the intrinsic pitfall of fallibility in discharging this duty: "O David. Behold, We have made you a vicegerent on Earth: judge, then, between men with justice, and do not follow vain desire, lest it lead you astray from the path of God" (Qur'an 38:26).

²² In Arabic, the task of vicegerency is expressed as *khilafah*, whereas the individual vicegerent is *khalifah*.

moments of their respective time periods. I am not interested in attempting a periodization from which I can select a period's most representative figures. Paralleling my post-foundational sensibilities, as elaborated in the first part of my thesis, I refrain from positing any essential and definitive figures or ideas that would provide the essential features of a predefined era.²³ In their stead, I use Heidegger's concept of *Stimmung* to identify the amorphous, protean, and shifting character of the "mood" at a particular historical moment.²⁴ Accordingly, just as we cannot take the Enlightenment in general or the *philosophes* in particular to characterize the entirety of the late-seventeenth- to the eighteenth-century intellectual world as the Age of Enlightenment, we cannot possibly lump together the diverse Muslim political ideas in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century as part of a Liberal Age.

This does not eschew the necessity of noting certain constellations of ideas at particular times in recent Muslim intellectual history. In that sense, we can conceive of changing tempers and sensibilities toward certain ideas or phenomena that are common enough to allow us to discern the mood of a certain time. Thus, we can notice a *Stimmung* of reform in the theological and sociopolitical spheres among a good number of Muslim thinkers starting around the 1830s with Tahtawi (1801-73).²⁵ This reformist mood is characterized by its more informed, receptive, and reconciliatory attitude toward modern Western ideas.²⁶ Thus, we can note a cultural translation as well as an intellectual

²³ In my view, that attitude would go better along with metaphysics of presence and identity.

²⁴ See page 43, footnote 33 of this dissertation for further information on my appropriation of *Stimmung*.

²⁵ Albert Hourani, "The First Generation: Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din, and Bustani," in *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁶ It differs from the eighteenth-century reform, which was little touched by Western influences, by virtue of its acquaintance with Western science and philosophy. It should also be distinguished from the mid-twentieth-century's revival-reform movement, for it had a more reconciliatory attitude toward Western ideas. For a very good overview of the eighteenth-century reform, see Nehemia Levtzion and John Obert Voll, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and*

appropriation of Enlightenment ideas, as in the example of *patrie* and *liberté* introduced into the Arabic-speaking world by Tahtawi.²⁷

Such fledgling trends of partial and eclectic cultural borrowing had arguably reached their full maturity as an integrated Islamic reform program by the time Afghani began writing. Although he was open to Western ideas, he renounced the more secularizing and Westernizing reform in favor of his own program, which granted Islam a foundational role within a civilizing mission. In the theological sphere, his program advised that many Islamic terms be rethought, such as *predestination* and *human dignity* and, most significantly, the status of human reason. Its political dimension was characterized by a *shura* government, which was tantamount to a defense of republicanism, constitutionalism, or, at the very least, a demand for consultative government akin to the enlightened despotism of Europe. In many major centers of the Muslim world during this stage of *islah*, a substantial number of Muslim intellectuals or scholars were arguing for an integrated theological and sociopolitical reform project that would call for recognizing a distinct *Stimmung*. I will deploy the term *Rational Salafi*

Reform in Islam (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987); John Obert Voll, "Hadith Scholars and Tariqahs: An Ulama Group in the 18th Century Haramayu and Their Impact in the Islamic World," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 15, no. 3/4 (1980); Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad Al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). For a dissenting opinion on Voll's argument that disputes the existence of these reformist scholars' transnational network, see Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993) and Ahmad Dallal, "Appropriating the Past: Twentieth-Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought," *Islamic Law and Society* 7, no. 3 (2000).

²⁷For an account of Tahtawi's important role in appropriating these concepts, see Roxanne Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). For an English translation of his work on his stay in France, *Takhliṣ al-Ibriz fi Talkhīṣ Bariz*, see, R. R. Tahtawi and Daniel L. Newman, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), especially, p 196 (on *liberté*'s translation as *hurriyah* for the first time).

Stimmung for this trend, a trend that would join Istanbul's constitutionalist Islamists²⁸ with reformists as far away as Southeast Asia.²⁹

My ontological narrative will start off with Jamaladdin al-Afghani, arguably its most influential representative. His *islah* project will enable me to discuss how political ontology can be deployed as a useful analytical device to unearth several dimensions of his thought, dimensions that have largely been inaccessible due to certain hurdles posed by Orientalist scholarship. Despite this type of scholarship's contributions, its legacy has forestalled mainstreaming Afghani into political theory where he could be analyzed as just another political thinker. As chapter 4 will clarify, Afghani's political reform of anti-imperialism and anti-despotism is undergirded by a notion of an avaricious but infinitely perfectible, dignified human being whose progress is Afghani's utmost concern.

As my narrative approaches the inter-war period, during which hardly any country could steer clear of Western political and cultural predominance, an increasing rejectionism takes over the Islamist followers of the *islahi* trend. The lineage that connects Afghani to Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935), would finally include the contemporaries of Sayyid Qutb. However, by this time Afghani's legacy of anti-imperialist and Qur'an-centric sensibilities would outweigh his rationalist and reconciliatory sensibilities. In a sense, the political anti-imperialism of *islah* would then be extended to intellectual anti-imperialism so as to question the Western modes of scientific and intellectual production and to attain an Islamic

²⁸ For the pioneering works on their ideas and reform program, see Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *İslamcılık Cereyanı: İkinci Meşrutiyetin Siyasi Hayatı Boyunca Gelişmesi ve Bugüne Bıraktığı Meseleler* [the Islamist Current: Its Development throughout the Political Life of the Second Constitutional Era and the Issues It Left Behind], (Istanbul: Baha Matbaası, 1962); İsmail Kara, *İslâmcılar'ın Siyasî Görüşleri* [Political Views of Islamists] (Istanbul: İz, 1994).

²⁹ Kurzman's anthology, which covers reformers from throughout the Muslim world, testifies to this trend's extensiveness. See Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*.

authenticity. This would be directed not just against the Orientalist discourse's politically debilitating effect but, more importantly, to its secular rationalistic foundations. On a similar note, Qutb's charge that democratic legislatures had usurped God's legislative power³⁰ should be viewed as a critique at the foundational, paradigmatic level. After all, he proposed a theory of *shura*, although it shunned deliberation on a wide array of topics. This leads me to recognize that the opposing moods of a *Fundamentalist Islamism* and *Emancipatory Islamism* at this moment stand side by side in Muslim political thought.

Sayyid Qutb, the subject of chapter 5, is both an heir and a corrective, in his own way, to the Rational Salafi reformist path opened up by Afghani. While the two can rightfully be considered important figures of Islamism due to their integrated view of Islam's creed, ethics, and politics, their differences must not escape our attention. Afghani's unique ontological configuration of God, reason, and revelation had allowed the eventual emergence of many divergent paths, among them Arab nationalism, socialism, secularism – sometimes with “Islamic” attached to them. Against this background, Qutbian reform is essentially an ontological clearance operation. In the first place, he secured the ontological primacy of revelation vis-à-vis reason contra Afghani's bifurcated and somewhat ambiguous foundationalism. As a result, he articulated Islam's sociopolitical dimensions as a unique and distinct ideology that stands in stark contrast with socialism, capitalism, and nationalism. Thus, he solidified the strong and linear link among ontology, ethics, and politics based on the strong foundational principle of *tawhid*

³⁰ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2002), 82.

(God's absolute unity). In short, Qutb reenchanting the cosmological as well as the sociopolitical world that Afghani had helped to disenchant through his rationalistic Islam.

In my interpretation, post-1950 Muslim political thought is characterized by the Qutbian paradigm³¹ that reigned in the minds of several generations of politically conscious Muslims. Yet, later Muslim reformers who conceived the political through the Qutbian paradigm had to wrestle with his legacy, including its antinomy of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance/barbarity) and *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty). This occurred when they sought to reconcile themselves with Western political conceptions, especially democracy. In another vein, some Salafi jihadis who have quite preoccupied the Western security apparatuses for the last several decades have also drawn from and deployed various Qutbian concepts and categories in their violent political projects. As chapter 5 will show, superficial efforts to locate Osama bin Laden's "intellectual godfather" may actually have caught certain parallels and possible influences of the Qutbian discourse on later-day violent jihadis in Egypt or elsewhere. But while they have borrowed some of their vocabulary from Qutb, portraying bin Laden's project as a realization of Qutb's discourse is an utter mischaracterization.

In any case, as later Islamist intellectuals had to grapple with the quandaries that the Qutbian paradigm posed for their desire to articulate a more liberal and democratic

³¹ My reading of contemporary Muslim political thought might differ somewhat from others as regards the relative influence and weight of Qutb and Mawdudi's thoughts. Some might view Mawdudi as having more influence on the formulation of Islamism or as having priority in the study on Islamism, given that he is known to be the primary influence behind Qutb's concepts of *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah*. I have no objections to alternative readings. However, if one wants to see an example of a more coherent and clear political ontology, Qutb provides a better case. Thus in my view, Qutbian thought offers a more paradigmatic example fundamentalist and emancipatory Islamism's different moments. Additionally, since Mawdudi became a practical politician once he moved to Pakistan, pragmatism shaped his views more than it did in the case of Qutb. Mawdudi's opposition to women's leadership in the face of Ms. Jinnah's candidacy is well-known, as is his opposition to land reform, both of which are in stark contrast with Qutb's social justice ideas. Overall, I am inclined to see Mawdudi as more of a revivalist than a reformist with quite conservative overtones.

version of Islam, the occasional intellectual interventions of such scholars and thinkers as Fazlur Rahman were of fundamental significance. In fact, Rahman's thought paved the way for transitioning to a new ontopolitical constellation. Although he is not considered to be one of the major political thinkers or as well-known as the former figures, in chapter 6 he will appear as a critical figure who facilitated the transition from Qutb's fundamentalist Islamism to the emerging *Stimmung* of Liberal Islam of our times.

In my view, his significance lies in his insistence on formulating an Islamic worldview on the basis of Qur'anic ethics. His own proposal toward this end is a Qur'anic hermeneutics that reconceived the relationship between God, the human being (God's vicegerent) and the revealed text (the Qur'an) primarily at the ethical level. He then proposed an alternative ontopolitical constellation on an ethical axis that contrasted with Qutb's ontologically driven project. These ontological and ethical gestures would culminate in a proposal for the Muslim community to undertake a constant deliberative activity vis-à-vis Islam's legal-political aspects, namely, his *shura* theory. Thus, Muslims could continue to work out an ethicopolitical project based on the Qur'an's ontological precepts in a non-Qutbian manner and avoid falling into secularism.

In Chapter 7 I will take up the specific gestation and offshoot of Rahman's project in the form of the current liberal mood as it has developed especially among the diasporic Muslims in the Euro-American world. In their ambition to overcome the Qutbian legacy – or encumbrance, as many would maintain – some liberal Muslims have drifted toward an often uncritical embrace of certain elements of secular liberalism. My account of Islamic democratic theories, particularly those of El-Affendi, Abou el Fadl, An-Na'im, and Hashemi, will seek to decipher this new ontopolitical constellation. I will attempt to

situate their arguments within the nexus of the radical vs. liberal democrat debate, to which they do not seem to pay enough attention. At that point, I will introduce a different and in some ways opposing set of emancipatory sensibilities, one that is more comparable to the Islamic liberation theology represented by scholars such as Hamid Dabashi and Farid Esack. This will lead me to my eventual task – suggesting how to tackle questions of justice, emancipation, difference, and self-government from within a Muslim perspective.

In conclusion, my ontological narrative is developed basically around the *islah* movement within contemporary Muslim political thought. This does not mean that this particular movement exhausts the totality of modern Muslim political thought but it does cover most of the prominent political thinkers.³² In this sense, although they may have adopted starkly opposite political positions toward democracy, a single line of reformist thought that connects Afghani, Qutb, Rahman, and liberal Muslims can be delineated. I will now embark on an ontological narrative of the reformist Muslim views on self-government with these considerations in mind.

³² Apart from the *islahi* trend, some royalists, traditionalist scholars, and Sufi thinkers can be noted among the groups who have adopted alternatives to Islamism, either in the form of conservative or authoritarian political theologies. It is interesting to note that they direct their critiques against reformists or Islamists not just on political grounds (for being subversive of the social order) but, in many instances, primarily on theological grounds by declaring the reformists to be heretical or, at best, heterodox. In turn, those reformist Islamists who struggled for political reform against despotism or imperialism had to deal with the acquiescent or submissive political doctrines of the dominant Shiite or Sunni theologies in their respective countries. Therefore, from Afghani onward, Muslim political reformist thinkers were deeply enmeshed in theological reform, which led to frequent accusations of heresy.

CHAPTER 4

AFGHANI'S REFORM: HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY AND CIVILIZATIONAL PROGRESS

In the nineteenth century, many parts of the Muslim world had their fair share of thinkers who advocated some sort of religious or political reform.¹ This was an urgent task, given that colonialism had already made the European powers' scientific and military superiority quite clear throughout most of the Muslim world. As large swathes of the Muslims' lands and natural resources became targets of Western incursions, the indigenous intellectual elites preoccupied themselves with accounting for the Muslim decline (*inhitat*) as well as finding intellectual and political means of resistance. This could take place either under the patronage of or against the political elite, since they were often collaborating with the foreign powers. For the most part, Islam remained the nineteenth-century Muslims' principal normative framework while they diagnosed their decline and devised prognoses for revival. Since most Muslim intellectuals had drawn from Islam, since its inception, a promise of worldly ascendance, religious reasons had to be provided for its followers' worldly decadence and the promise's non-fulfillment.

Afghani emerged as a scholar-turned-writer and political activist during the 1860s in this context of foreign domination, amidst the widespread sense of Muslim decline and defeat. Even though Muslims had yet to formulate a systematic ideology of anti-imperialist resistance and civilizational awakening, as we would observe in later-day

¹ Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983) are only two of several anthologies and surveys that attest to this trend's extensiveness.

Islamism, the time was ripe for a more coherent reform agenda than the partial and eclectic reform efforts of earlier decades.

Afghani comes into my ontological narrative as a cornerstone figure for contemporary Muslim political thought for quite a few reasons. For one thing, his physical presence in the Muslim world's major cultural centers (viz., Cairo, Tehran, and Istanbul) left behind an extensive network of thinkers and currents. Added to the other centers that his influence reached later on, it is hard to name a reformist current in any part of the Muslim world that did not feel his legacy or any of his contemporaries whose influence could rival his.² Beyond standing above all others with a similar scope of influence, he clearly saw the connection between the Muslims' political decadence and theological beliefs. His revival project, in turn, set out from his ontological gestures that conceived of the human being as an avaricious but infinitely perfectible entity. This conception is crystallized in one's relationship with nature, God, and other human beings, as well as his pursuit of progress and civilization, in which religion played a very particular mediating role. Here, I argue that in a manner quite comparable to that of the Enlightenment *philosophes*³ and Mill,⁴ Afghani's overall project is, at its root,

² Hourani thus characterized him as a strange personality "whose life touched and deeply affected the whole Islamic world in the last quarter of the nineteenth century." Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 108. In spite of her self-styled iconoclasm against many of Afghani's "exaggerated" traits, Keddie concludes her book by affirming the same view: "As a pioneering political writer, speaker, and activist whose influence was felt in many different Muslim countries he has no rival in his own period." Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "Al-Afghani": A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 423.

³ I am drawing on Dante Germino's characterization of French Enlightenment thinkers to make this comparison: "The French *philosophes* (who were scarcely philosophers in the traditional sense) were fierce polemicists and partisans of change who were determined to use the power of the pen to bring about a new social order." Dante Germino, "The Enlightenment in Modern Political Thought," in *Modern Western Political Thought: Machiavelli to Marx* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 152. I will try to clarify the case for Afghani's comparability to the *philosophes* later in this chapter.

⁴ Here I mean Mill's defense of liberty, which he justifies with reference to "permanent interests of mankind as a progressive being." John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14. Pitting Mill, the colonial officer, against Afghani, the anti-colonial activist, as regards their similar commitments to human progress would make for an interesting comparative analysis. A good case in this regard

undergirded by his unswerving commitment to human perfection and progress in order to ensure civilization. The intellectual, theological, moral, and most, importantly, political dimensions of his reform project are motivated by this fundamental commitment to human perfection. Hence, his anti-clerical position, his claim that Islam needed to be purified from superstitions, his striving to reopen the gates of *ijtihad* (independent religious reasoning), and finally his fight against despotism and imperialism can be analyzed in a new light – as nothing but the means for the infinitely perfectible human nature to unfold freely and flourish toward perfection on its path of civilizational progress.

In this chapter, my effort to present a coherent intellectual portrait of Afghani based on his writings will have to be preceded by clearing the ground of the Orientalist-devised controversies and obscurities surrounding him. Thus I will analyze his reform according the following outline. In 4.1, I will touch on the scarce but important treatment of this thinker in the earlier comparative political theory. This effort will reveal the major challenges to mainstreaming him into political theory. In section 4.2, I will engage with his biography which raises severe problems for researchers. Indeed, one can imagine only a few other thinkers whose biography, including the actual place of birth, has been so full of unresolved issues for over a hundred years. It is not just an intellectual historian's interest to tease out a coherent biography of this figure, because in many cases these obscurities have prevented a proper understanding of his ideas by forestalling an effective

is Afghani's discussion on truth and majority in the section "The Truth is sometimes not with the Majority." Here, in striking resemblance to Mill, he discusses how the persecution of Jesus and Muhammad, or the suppression of the calls for liberty in France, could not prevent the spread of those views. He asserts, "No teaching which is in fact true, even though it goes against the tradition and has few supporters, should be despised just because of the few numbers of its supporters or the numerical superiority of its opponents." Muhammad Mahzumi [Makhzumi], *Cemaleddin Afgani'nin Hatıraları* [Turkish Translation of Khatirat Jamaladdin al-Husayni al-Afghani] (Istanbul: Klasik, 2006), 168-70.

use of the available primary sources. At the risk of some diversion, I will undertake a critical analysis of this biographical debate and question the standard Orientalist scholarship's very assumptions and convictions. This is the only way one can approach Afghani's corpus as a coherent whole. On this account, at times my analysis will differ greatly from that of the comparative political theory literature, as it has largely taken the earlier assumptions for granted.

Thereafter, in section 4.3 I will undertake my real reconstructive work: subjecting Afghani's major original pieces⁵ to an ontopolitical analysis in order to situate his corpus' key concepts and themes in a reasonably consistent whole. I believe that this thinker can be better understood as a (proto)-Islamist ideologue and activist, and that his intellectual reform involved crucial ontological and theological underpinnings with a clear view of their ethicopolitical implications. In more concrete terms, his ideal political form of republican or consultative government (*al-hukumah al-shuriyyah*) is undergirded by his conception of an avaricious but rational and infinitely perfectible human nature. Divine intervention brings religion into this picture as the best mechanism to direct human perfection so as to cultivate fundamental moral virtues and group solidarity (*taassub/asabiyyah*). The end result is the materialization of the ethico-political goals of human progress and civilization.

Following this use of political ontology as an analytical device to illumine many otherwise obscure dimensions, in section 4.4 I will critically evaluate the merits of his

⁵ My analysis of Afghani is based on the Turkish- and English-language translations of his major works, which I covered via a cross-reading with their Arabic-language originals. Thanks to the availability of *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa* and *Memoirs of Afghani*, as related by Makhzumi Pasha (1868-1930) in Turkish, I was able to use a significantly larger primary source of material to study his political philosophy as compared to earlier pieces on him that can be found in the political theory literature.

arguments. There, I will scrutinize how well the different dimensions of this ontopolitical edifice hold together. Among my concerns here is how sound these ontopolitical gestures turn out to be when the central questions of post-foundational debates covered in the last part are taken into consideration. Afghani will, hopefully, emerge from my analysis as a less complicated figure of a rational Salafi *islah* movement with far more legible concerns and arguments that led the future generation of Muslim reformers into a certain path of *islah*. More significantly, this legacy constitutes the background against which Qutb would have to take up his own project of ontopolitical reform, as we will see in the next chapter.

4.1 Afghani amidst Orientalism:

Mainstreaming a Muslim Thinker into Political Theory

Afghani, in his capacity of a leading transnational nineteenth-century Muslim political activist, has attracted the attention of comparative political theory scholars. For instance, Roxanne Euben introduces him into her work as a representative figure of “Islamic modernism.” Her concern is rather to juxtapose this rationalist trend in contemporary Muslim thought with Sayyid Qutb’s later critique of the Western rationalist epistemology itself. This was the root of Qutb’s Islamic challenge to the West.⁶ Margaret Kohn takes this interest further by incorporating Afghani, along with some other key non-Western figures, into her book on “political theories of decolonization.”⁷ In another piece, she

⁶ Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 94-95.

⁷ Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

seeks to resolve the apparent contradiction between some of Afghani's views by resorting to his theory of civilization.⁸

The major drawback of these attempts is the relative absence of renegotiating the earlier Orientalist scholarship's basic assumption regarding Afghani: that each of his views is only a function of his particular political interests at the time of his writing, and thus does not constitute a consistent framework with the rest of his views. For instance Kohn, taking Afghani's letter to Renan at face value, tries to reconcile it with the rest of his writings. She concludes by confirming the standard literature's assumption that "his defense of religion is distinctly political."⁹ Thus, a thinker with a rich host of sensibilities is analyzed primarily through a political lens.

This assumption of Afghani as solely a political pragmatist lagged, in some ways, even behind the earlier alternative interpretations. For instance Albert Hourani, whose work predates that of Nikki Keddie and Elie Kedourie, Afghani's main biographers, contends that "the greater part of his life was given up to a defense of the Islamic countries threatened by the danger of European expansion, but his thought was not exclusively political."¹⁰ Perhaps if it had questioned the common assumptions, Kohn's analysis would bring Afghani's theory of civilization into a much clearer light. Thus she

⁸ One could encounter the concept of civilization in Arab-Islamic terminology in three different forms: *umran*, the classical term introduced by Ibn Khaldun, as well as *madaniyya* and *hadhara*. Afghani uses *madaniyya* more frequently. As will become clear later on, his conception of civilization rests on a notion of scientific accomplishments that benefits humanity as a whole. He therefore challenges the European's self-conceit that they are "civilized," since their destructiveness far exceeds their scientific accomplishments. Accordingly, he calls the rivalry among the nations of his time not as a struggle for survival, but as a "struggle for annihilation." Being civilized, then, does not mean becoming urbanized (as the Arabic word *tamaddun* could suggest), but attaining true knowledge that bears a value proportionate to how much it benefits humanity. If the European warmongers would take Newton, Darwin, and Pasteur as their role models, then these wars would not break out and they would be considered civilized. Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 122.

⁹ Kohn and McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization*, 39.

¹⁰ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 113.

might have pursued a more civilization-centered analysis in a far more definitive way than providing “a conjectural solution to an interpretive problem.”¹¹

My reinterpretation of Afghani’s corpus via the analytical devices that political ontology makes available is geared toward mainstreaming Afghani into the field of political theory as just another political philosopher. However, there is a major drawback: the standard Orientalist scholarship takes great pains to portray him as a double-talker who is forever skewing his discourse according to which audience he is addressing.¹² In effect, such a portrayal conditions the reader to approach his writings as an incomprehensible set of conflicting ideas, each of which should be interpreted only as a convenient reflection of his interest at the time of its expression. This is clearly problematical, for this claimed inconsistency disappears if one focuses only on his corpus

¹¹ Margaret Kohn, “Afghānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization,” *Political Theory* 37, no. 3 (2009): 416. Here, she rightly acknowledges that Afghani’s central concerns were civilization and progress; however this is overshadowed by Keddie’s assumptions when Afghani appears as a pragmatist again. Alternatively, instead of defining Afghani essentially with reference to his *Muslimness*, which Orientalist scholarship generally does for Muslim thinkers, one could approach him as a philosopher whose religious beliefs figure in his philosophical views. Hence we would not have to take great pains, as do Keddie, Kedourie, and others, to pigeonhole him along a spectrum of Islamic heterodox sects. This latter method seems to point to the assumption that if a philosopher is Muslim, his philosophy can be deciphered only with reference to where he stands along a religiously drawn line. If we leave this assumption aside, then Afghani comes out as a committed believer in civilization and progress who gives religion, properly understood, a fundamental role in humanity’s civilizing mission.

¹² For instance, numerous instances can be cited in which he extolled republican and constitutional government. Moreover, he championed consultative government throughout his life. However, the allegation that he did not advocate constitutional government could easily find its way to Wikipedia via the assertion of Nikki Keddie, his primary biographer, that “in the volumes of the newspaper he published in Paris, there is no word in the paper’s theoretical articles favoring political democracy or parliamentarianism.” *Wikipedia*, “Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamal_al-Din_al-Afghani (accessed April 24, 2012). It might not be surprising to run into this bizarre claim in an open-source piece that also makes Afghani, a life-long anti-British activist, a British agent. Keddie seems to omit all of his other works to make a point that does not hold even for his newspaper, *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*, supposedly from which she reaches the above-mentioned conclusion. Note that in this work Afghani says, for instance: “Islamic principles are not only about calling people to the Truth [God]. It has established its influence over the souls. As it has secured these principles, it also has set limits on the dealings between the servants of God. Responsibilities and limits of jurisdiction of the state officials who are in charge of implementing the Islamic law are defined and all general and private rights of individuals are specified. This is such that the person who is to undertake political affairs of Muslims is the first to obey the Islamic legal rules that he is going to implement. *In order to assume the governance of the state, neither progeny, nor race, tribe, physical or financial power is relevant. In order to be a ruler, the requirement is the ability to execute these rules and winning the consent of the ummah.*” Cemaleddin Afgai ve Muhammed Abduh “İrkçılık ve İslam” [Racism and Islam] in *El-Urvetu’l Vuska* [Turkish Translation of *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*], (Istanbul: Bir Yayıncılık, 1987), 83 (emphasis added). Besides, the book contains no contrary evidence that might imply his preference for autocratic governments over consultative ones. Instead, the necessity of consultative government is a recurring theme throughout his work.

and disregards these historians' accounts of his alleged secret intentions and political interests. Moreover, it imposes standards that are not demanded of any other mainstream political theorist. After all, Mill's colonial involvement via the East India Company does not reduce his defense of liberty to solely a convenient instrument to further his own political goals at the time of his writing.¹³ We also do not tend to dismiss Locke's case for consensual government and inalienable rights in the Second Treatise by claiming that he was merely a hypocrite who engaged in the slave trade under the Royal African Company and espoused illiberal ideas in his *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*. The discursive effect created by the standard scholarship relegates Afghani's philosophical work to an incoherent, inconsistent set of pragmatically driven ideas that are useless for a standard political theoretical analysis.

In short, before delving into my political ontological analysis, I will first have to make up for the shortcomings of earlier scholarship.¹⁴ Toward that end, I will present key facts of Afghani's biography with the intent of overcoming the misinterpretations I have mentioned. After clearing the way, my political ontological analysis of his political thought will be in order.

4.2 The Use and Abuse of Afghani's Biography

What we definitely know of Afghani consists of the following facts. He calls himself Jamaladdin al-Afghani or Husayni, attributing himself to Afghanistan as well as to the

¹³ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3-8.

¹⁴ My approach to Orientalism should not be mistaken as just another condescending move that dismisses a whole body of scholarship in such a way as to forbid any statement on one's cross-cultural "other." I am well aware of how trite Orientalist-bashing in Middle Eastern scholarship can get, and my intention is not to take the easy way here. I just want to point out that a thinker's corpus has to be studied in its entirety, which is just as true for Afghani as it is for any other thinker.

descendants of the Prophet. Born in 1838,¹⁵ he received a solid religious education, became a scholar (*alim*), and acquired a strong background in philosophy. He travelled a great deal, spending considerable part of his life in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, India, Egypt, Turkey, France, Britain, and Russia. He was involved in court politics and foreign affairs wherever he lived, with a remarkable aptitude to gain access to the close circles of the ruling elite. It was almost a consistent fate for him to receive high honors in whichever country he settled in, only to end up being confined or expelled several years later. Yet, in many of them, he would leave behind an influential group of intellectuals and political activists who would play an important role in their countries' political and intellectual life in the coming decades.

His archenemy was British colonialism, although at times he would seek to awaken Easterners to the danger of other European powers' colonial excursions. During his associations with several statesmen and diplomats, he was involved in numerous – but mostly unsuccessful – political maneuvers. To his credit, he was one of the figures behind the decisive anti-imperialist victory of Iran's Tobacco Protest (1891-92) that forced the cancellation of the tobacco concession granted to a British company.¹⁶ Perhaps Iran's earliest modern, organized popular protest, it featured rallies and pamphlets against a despotic government. It might also be considered the first instance of clerical politicization, a movement that would propel the long string of events leading up to the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) and culminating in the Islamic Revolution (1979).

¹⁵ Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 4. This brief account of his life will be based on biographies penned by Makhzumi, Keddie, and Abdulhamid.

¹⁶ Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 355. While Keddie uses “exaggeration” quite often to characterize the common perceptions of Afghani's role in several political events of his time, she does give him credit in this particular instance.

Afghani was too busy rushing around the East and the West to publicize his views, train intellectuals, and engage in political activities to be a prolific philosopher. He wrote his only relatively long treatise *The Truth about the Neicheri Sect and an Explanation of the Neicheris*¹⁷ (1880-81), while in India to curb the pro-British influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, an Indian Muslim modernist. Another major source of his written works is *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*, the international Arabic-language journal of eighteen issues that he and his closest disciple Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) published in Paris during 1884. Thus, he arguably invented “radical Islamist journalism in Arabic.”¹⁸ All in all, he left behind a number of newspapers, magazines, and clandestine organizations or societies led by his disciples wherever he lived. In many cases, especially in Egypt, these efforts were pioneers of modern means of political expression. In Turkey *Sırat-ı Mustakim* (1908-1925), the first influential journal that offered a systematic formulation of Islamism, actively disseminated his Islamic reform agenda.¹⁹

Abduh was his closest disciple in Egypt, and Mehmed Akif (d.1936) was his foremost follower in Turkey. Abu'l Kalam Azad (d. 1958), a close associate of Gandhi and defender of Hindu-Muslim unity, was greatly influenced by him. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) in India and Ali Shariati²⁰ (d. 1977) in Iran can be named among other influential figures involved in a later drive for Islamic reform who expressed their

¹⁷ In Nikki Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “Al-Afghani”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 130-74. It must be noted that Afghani uses *Neicheri*, originally the Farsi translation of *Naturalist*, as a blanket term for materialists, positivists, Darwinists, and nihilists belonging to both the East and the West.

¹⁸ Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh, Makers of the Muslim World* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2010). Cited by Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2011), 239.

¹⁹ Mehmed Akif, the leading pioneer of Turkish Islamism during the Second Constitutional Era (after 1908), regularly published Turkish translations of Afghani’s writings in his Islamist journals. For a collection of these writings, see Mehmet Akif Ersoy, *Modernleşmek mi İslâmlaşmak mı?* (Istanbul: İhya Yayınları, 1983).

²⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 131.

indebtedness to him. Although Afghani provided no fully systematized Islamist ideology,²¹ his reform agenda, intellectual and political ventures, and publishing activities make him the first and archetypical figure of an activist who would be emulated by those who came after him. In this sense, although a number of differing trajectories could be delineated from Afghani,²² Islamism can best be traced back to him as its founding father before it gained its full-fledged form.²³

Notwithstanding the foregoing points, the standard Western scholarship produced during the heyday of Orientalism fails to provide a clear picture of Afghani.²⁴ The difficulties start right with the most basic biographical information. Keddie, after oscillating between Asadabad of Afghanistan as his lifetime followers maintain, and Asadabad of Iran as his opponents and many academic biographers²⁵ contend, finally seems to have settled the issue by her absolute conviction that Afghani was born and

²¹ Perhaps the first systematic ideologues of Islamism would be writers and activists such as Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (Egypt), Said Halim Pasha (1865-assassinated in 1921) and Mehmed Akif (Turkey), Ali Shariati (Iran), and Abul Hasan Nadwi (1913-1999) and Abu'l Ala Mawdudi (the Indian subcontinent).

²² The more secular modernist trends of Taha Hussein, as well as the brothers Ali and Mustafa Abdurrazik, in Egypt, not to mention Turkish nationalism as advanced by Mehmed Emin Yurdakul, are also referred to as being influenced by Afghani's legacy.

²³ Tariq Ramadan, a grandson of Hasan al-Banna, notes that the standard accounts of Islamism developed by Carré, Kepel, Roy, and Burgat fail to trace Islamism's genealogy back to Afghani, even though he is the main figure. Tariq Ramadan [Tariq Ramadan], *İslâmi Yenilenmenin Kökenleri: Afgani'den El-Benna'ya Kadar İslâm İslahatçılığı* [Turkish Translation of *Aux Sources Du Renouveau Musulman*] (Istanbul: Anka Yayınları, 2005), 13. He goes on to say that his particular narrative of Islamic reform tries to show how the Muslim Brotherhood has sought to embody the ideals of this early period of Islamism.

²⁴ This may account for the later oblivion that Tariq Ramadan points out in footnote 23.

²⁵ Keddie relates her own alternation between Afghanistan and Iran, which eventually ended with her strong conviction that Afghani was born and raised in Iran. This was after Kedourie's assertions as well as her own personal exchanges with Homa Pakdaman and Albert Hourani. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, viii. See, also, Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 108; Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 7. Keddie notes that most accounts of Afghani admirers go back to Abduh's and Jurji Zaidan's biographies, which she would later call "standard biography." Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 5. Makhzumi Pasha also dedicates a few pages to Afghani's biography in his *Memoirs of Afghani*. Its source is more likely to be Zaidan's biography, which appeared in the first issue of *Al-Hilal* magazine (1897). Muhammad al-Makhzumi, *Khatirat Jamaladdin al-Husayni al-Afghani* [Memoirs of Jamaladdin al-Husayni al-Afghani], ed. Hadi Khusrawshahi (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shuruq al-Dawliyah, 2002). It must be emphasized, though, that Kedourie's assertion that Afghani regarded himself as a Shi'ite divine cannot possibly be deduced from the evidence that she presented. In the original sources, Afghani's statements most obviously mean that he is a well-known figure in Iran and a *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet). Ibid., 7fn. This is only one of a series of blatant misinterpretations that make these products of Orientalism's heyday largely useless for any post-Orientalist attempt to mainstream Islamic political thought and incorporate Afghani into political theory literature.

raised in Iran. My work does not set out to resolve this controversy, which may still concern intellectual historians or biographers.²⁶ However, it must be pointed out that the discursive effect of these works is to produce an image of a supposedly disingenuous thinker whose writings cannot be approached as one would approach the writings of any other thinker.²⁷

What complicates the situation now is the presence a large body of works in many languages that dispute the credibility of Keddie and Kedourie's sources.²⁸ As a result, their efforts to dispel the legend of Afghani have just created more confusion. For instance, they dismiss his disciples' accounts out of hand on the ground that their admiration of him makes them inherently biased, but they do not subject the evidently

²⁶ Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 8. It is worth noting that these interventions, especially those by Kedourie and Keddie, have become a major part of the intra-Muslim controversy about Afghani's uprightness and credibility, not to mention the sincerity of his ideas and activities. Keddie's own statement, in fact, insinuates no such intentions per se: "To say that Jamal ad-Din did not always tell the truth about himself is not to state that he was morally reprehensible, but only that his statements about his life are not an accurate guide for the biographer." Notwithstanding her detached stance, the Turkish translation of her work – marred by many mistranslations – creates an even more negative picture of Afghani. Unfortunately, it has served as the primary source for generations of Afghani's Turkish adversaries to establish that he was a disingenuous liar whom no sincere Muslim should follow. See especially Nikki Keddie, *Cemaleddin Efgani: Siyasi Hayatı*, trans. Aleaddin Yalçınkaya (Istanbul: Bedir Yayınları, 1997). Bedir Publications is the foremost publishing house leading the campaign to discredit Afghani, along with the reformist tradition, in Turkey. For a comprehensive review of the literature in Turkish, English, French, and Arabic regarding Afghani's life and work, see Dücane Cündioğlu, "Ernest Renan ve 'Reddiyeler' Bağlamında İslam-Bilim Tartışmalarına Bibliyografik Bir Katkı" [A Bibliographical Contribution to the Debate on Islam and Science within the Context of Ernest Renan and The "Rebuttal" Literature], *Divan* 1, no. 2 (1996): 1-94.

²⁷ In this regard my position accords with that of Tariq Ramadan, who views this controversy as fruitless, as one that does not affect or cast any doubt on Afghani's significance. Ramazan, *İslâmî Yenilenmenin Kökenleri*, 62.

²⁸ Muhsin Abdulhamid, for instance, scrutinizes some of the primary materials used by Keddie to evince her points. Although his book is primarily an Afghani apology against Orientalist and Arab critiques, it reveals serious inconsistencies in Lutfullah Asadabadi's biography, one of Keddie's major sources. See Muhsin Abdulhamid [Abd al-Hamid], *Cemaleddin Afgâni: Hayatı ve Etrafındaki Şüpheler* [Turkish Translation of Jamaladdin al-Afghani: al-Muslih al-Muftara alayh], trans. İbrahim Sarıms (Ankara: Fecr 1991), 71-95. For a Turkish scholar's critique of Keddie's selective use of primary sources, especially *Lutfullah* and *Documents*, see Muammer Esen, *Afgani: Kelâmî ve Felsefî Görüşleri* [Afghani: His Theological and Philosophical Views] (Ankara: Araştırma Yayınları, 2006), 58-75. Here he gives several examples of their internal inconsistency. For another rebuttal against one of Keddie's major sources, *Documents* by Afshar and Mahdavi, see Khusrawshahi, "Introduction" in Afghani, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 52-56. Khusrawshahi attributes the publication of this government-sponsored work in 1963 to Iran's internal controversies, namely, as part of Tehran's effort to discredit Afghani in order to curtail Afghani-inspired oppositional movements against the shah. As a more recent development on Afghani's biography, Halil Ege Özen, a Binghamton-based Turkish historian, claims that he is the grandson of Afghani, who was actually married a Turkish woman. This detail, however, goes against all biographical information available on this matter. See Halil Ege Özen, "Hangi İslam Birliği?" [Which Unity of Islam?], *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 155 (November 2006). My point here is that for us, students of comparative political theory, this endless controversy over Afghani's life does not leave much ground to subscribe to Keddie and Kedourie's assumption that only his political pragmatism and hidden heterodox agenda can explain his views. This again leaves us with only his original writings, upon which I will focus in this chapter to the exclusion of all others.

hostile accounts of ill-informed local informants or British Foreign Service

employees,²⁹ or even of Muslim adversaries, to the same test of doubt and skepticism.³⁰

This does not seem to produce significant gains toward filling in the details of his life.³¹

In sum, regardless of where Afghani was born, his tireless efforts to spread his particular reform agenda among the Muslim elites made him part of the political and intellectual history and memory of those countries in which he lived. In this sense he may be right to claim a sense of belonging to any of them, as many Arabs, Iranians, Afghans, Turks, and Indians embraced him during his lifetime and claimed his legacy after his passing.

The same goes for other suggestions by Keddie and Kedourie in their search for evidence regarding Afghani's unbelief or duplicity. To this end, they refer to his

²⁹ A good current case that could help us understand the dubiousness and faulty intelligence gathering is what the Wikileaks case has revealed about the credibility of intelligence, despite the enormous technological advance of the Internet age that has immensely expanded our information gathering capabilities. For exemplary passages on Afghani from British intelligence documents, which blatantly give conflicting or false information about the most basic facts, among them his name, see Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 42-51, 116-17.

³⁰ A very good example is Keddie's interpretation of Afghani's famous Dar-ul Funun (Istanbul University) lecture, which caused his expulsion from the country in 1870. She readily dismisses his own defense, that Shaykh ul-Islam Hasan Fehmi distorted his words, and then goes to great lengths to find traces of heterodoxy, including the Shayhi tradition, in his lecture – he had compared prophethood and philosophy. Interestingly enough, she prefers to rely on the transcript provided by Halil Fevzi, one of his adversaries. At the time, Fevzi was writing *Suyuf al-Qawati* [Sharp Swords] (Istanbul: 1872), in which he accused Afghani of apostasy and claimed that such people's repentance must not be accepted; rather, they must be killed (Ibid., 117-22). Cited by Esen, *Afgani*, 89. Even more interesting is Keddie's misleading inference from Afghani's remarks that obviously assigns superiority to prophethood over philosophy: "Afghani's talk, despite its statement that the prophets are infallible, points to the intellectual superiority of the philosophers, whose statements have universal validity, over the prophets, whose statements are colored by the circumstances of an epoch." Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 69. Note that Afghani, even in the account of his enemy who issued a fatwa against him, says that "the teachings of the philosopher are universal, and do not take into account the particularities of a given epoch, whereas those of a prophet are conditioned by the latter" (Ibid.). While it is a long shot to assert that the variability of a prophet's teachings implies an inferiority rather than a flexibility vis-à-vis philosophy, this interpretation becomes even more objectionable if one considers his exact words: "[W]hile the prophet cannot commit errors, the philosopher can." Afghani's analogy between prophethood and philosophy infuriated the clergy because it viewed both as different crafts. This does not sound as heterodox in Islam as Keddie would like to see; however, her position toward a philosophically grounded scholar of Islam in the face of fierce attacks and threats by apparently fanatical clergy begs some kind of explanation. Add to this her allegation that Afghani's lecture echoed heterodox Shaikhi ideas, since he argued for an ideal guide in each epoch. This interpretation is hardly defensible, given that Afghani was simply stating the well-known orthodox Sunni idea that each religious era will have a *mujaddid* (an agent of religious renewal) (Ibid., 20-21).

³¹ For her methodological remarks, see Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 3. Keddie and Kedourie's works seem to resemble, in terms of their methodological problem, another major work from the heyday of American Orientalism, namely, *Hagarism* (1977). In this latter work, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook dismiss the Islamic tradition's internal sources and rely on the anthropological and textual evidence related by non-Islamic sources at the time of Islam's inception. Although an interesting thesis, there is little reason to buy into their methodological assumption that, as regards a historical figure's life, giving preponderant credence to the accounts of non-adherents or even adversaries at the expense of those of disciples or adherents will provide a more reliable picture.

allegedly occasional drinking³² and even his sexual life (or lack thereof).³³ Kohn rightly responds to such celebrity material by first asking how many theorists in general can meet the high standards that Kedourie sets in regard to living up to theoretical commitments. She also asks why Afghani would actively defend and promote religious orthodoxy if he felt that it was antithetical to his long-term goals.³⁴ Maybe a certain level of heterodoxy in his reformist beliefs can be granted.³⁵ Yet it is still the case that he consistently give the impression of being a pious Muslim to generations of followers, many of whom would become publicly known as pious Muslim activists or community leaders.³⁶ As a result, without ignoring any of these critics' contributions as regards unearthing several resources on and by Afghani that would otherwise remain

³² Salim Anhuri, a Christian disciple of Afghani and the major source of this allegation, rescinded both it and his claim concerning Afghani's disbelief after a warning by Afghani's foremost disciple: Muhammad Abduh. However, for Keddie this only confirms that Anhuri changed his words to conceal their secret agenda. She does not hesitate to give credence to this withdrawn allegation, even though she says "Anhuri's biography does have several factual errors, but they do not necessarily invalidate what he says of Jamal ad-Din's ideas" Ibid., 30. One then wonders why she accepts numerous documents on Afghani that contain an enormous number of conflicting accounts, other than what fits into the underlying assumption of her narrative: Despite being one of the contemporary Islamic movement's most revered figures, Afghani is, in fact, an inflated figure, an unbeliever, and a lifelong hypocrite.

³³ One of the most egregious aspects of Keddie and Kedourie's work is their discussion of Afghani's sexuality. Despite Kedourie's assertions, there is not the slightest suggestion in Makhzumi Pasha's account that Afghani said "he did not have the capacity for sexual intercourse." Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 9. Afghani's original words never refer to this alleged impotency, but only states that he could not possibly be fair enough to his potential wife. Al-Makhzumi, *Khatirat*, 99. It is even harder to see how Keddie reaches the conclusion that he was "probably" a latent homosexual (Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 34), while at the same time she relates Afghani's "illicit affair with Kathi the German" Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*. After all of this, there is no option but to conclude that it is Keddie and Kedourie themselves, and not Afghani, who pose a conundrum by oscillating among several opposite medical and psychological diagnoses about him, including paranoid personality disorder. To observe how she assumes the role of a psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, see Nikki Keddie, "Culture, Traits, Fantasy, and Reality in the Life of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani," *Iranian Studies* 9, no. 2-3 (1976).

³⁴ Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire" 407.

³⁵ As I have argued above, the standard scholarship's unrelenting attempts to place Afghani along a scale of religious orthodoxy-heterodoxy needs to be explained. Discussing whether Afghani had Babi, Baha'i, or other affiliations is utterly pointless. Instead, I argue that he be considered a philosopher in his own right, one who might have deployed several themes and elements from different religious traditions within Islamic history to develop a unique theological and philosophical approach.

³⁶ Is it, then, a case of an international clandestine network of unbelievers conspiring in the name of reform to deceive millions of Muslims for over a century? Or, rather, is it just that some of Keddie and Kedourie's allegations are simply too far-fetched to provide a coherent picture of Afghani for any serious work on contemporary Islam and reform movement?

inaccessible, I would argue that their scholarship nonetheless dooms a key figure of contemporary Islam to insincerity.³⁷

Indeed it is not too far-fetched to suggest that especially Kedourie's reconstruction of Afghani and Abduh was marred too much by his Orientalist suppositions that were so prominent during the heyday of this type of scholarship.

We see writers expending their ingenuity in an attempt to find a system in Afghani's involved and *mediocre journalism*, or to discover reasons why Abduh's *superficial theology* should be admired. This tendency to assume that speech is a pointer to action is understandable, since in the *modern West, with its open and vigorous public life*, there is usually some kind of connexion between what is said and what is done. *But when dealing with men like Afghani and 'Abduh who had to live and act under oriental despotisms*, had we not better assume that what is done has no necessary connection with what is said, and that what is said in public, may be quite different from what is believed in private?³⁸

While delving into the intellectual historian's controversy might have looked like a diversion, it was necessary because the Orientalist legacy has to be overcome in order for Afghani's political philosophy to be mainstreamed into political theory.³⁹ Thus the best way forward seems to be concentrating on his work and putting the unnecessary

³⁷ This might sound too dismissive of their efforts, for they should be credited with presenting many complexities of Afghani's legacy that would otherwise remain unknown amidst his disciples' idealized accounts. However, their insistence on constructing a narrative around the assumption that his life's intricacies and novel views can best be understood via an alleged hidden agenda or secret disbelief is at least equally, if not more, problematic when trying to construct a coherently realistic picture of Afghani. Their assumptions might be undergirded by a desire to fit him into a certain category of Muslim prototypes, although surely no single prototype can capture his complex personality. Thus, while Keddie makes a big deal of how the "standard biography" exaggerates his role, she herself exaggerates certain discrepancies, many of which can easily be accounted for by current scholars of Islam. Of course his emphasis varied according to his audiences; however, this quite natural fact is unnecessarily exaggerated to create a sense of double-talk. Indeed it is understandable to promote an all-Indian nationalism for Muslims and Hindus in India to resist British imperialism while promoting pan-Islamism from Paris for the Arabic-reading Muslim audience without falling into any contradiction, opposed to what Keddie thinks. Even a common reader would clearly understand that neither in *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa* nor at any later point in his writings does Afghani repudiate (what we now take as) nationalist concepts and feelings (e.g., love of country, language, or nation). During his time, these terms were not deployed as elements of a systematic nationalist ideology. After all, he never embraced the divisive ethnic nationalism that would demonize the ethnic "other"; rather, he consistently valued *taassub* (communal feeling), whether it was religious or national. His nationalism, if you will, was more civic than ethnic. My position on "Letter to Renan" regarding this issue of double-talk will be clarified later in this chapter.

³⁸ Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh*, 2 (emphases added).

³⁹ My lengthy accounts of Keddie and Kedourie would not be necessary if such political theorists as Euben and Kohn did not take many of their conclusions as given.

biographic controversies aside.⁴⁰ Accordingly, this chapter's Afghani, namely, Afghani the political thinker, will be constructed from his writings, rather than these accounts of his life.

4.3 Afghani's Islamic Reform (*Islah*) and Political Ontology

Afghani is not known to be a prolific writer or to have provided a systematic rendition of his reform project.⁴¹ Nor did he introduce such political concepts as fatherland, nation, liberty, civilization into Muslim political philosophy for the first time.⁴² While there were

⁴⁰ It must be granted that there may still be some unresolved issues resulting from his own behavior.

⁴¹ Adib Ishaq, one of his closest Christian disciples, relates how Afghani preferred a life of action to a life of writing and likened him to Socrates. Ishaq hoped that his disciples would complete his mission, just like the Socratic philosophers disseminated Socratic philosophy via their prolific writing. Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 54.

⁴² Some historians have made their case for Afghani's unoriginality and inflatedness by alluding to the fact that many of his views had been defended by earlier reformers. Indeed, fatherland (*watan*), nation (*millah* or *ummah*), and liberty (*hurriyyah*) had been in circulation since Tahtawi's times, as may be inferred from Afghani's generous use of them. The Young Ottomans of Istanbul were defending civilization (*madaniyya*). Mümtaz'er Türköne, a Turkish scholar who wrote his master's thesis on Afghani, even suggested that if Islamism was looking for a founding father, the Young Ottomans would probably a more likely candidate. He calls Afghani an adventurer and his influence a myth. Mümtaz'er Türköne, *Siyasî İdeoloji Olarak İslamcılığın Doğuşu* [The Advent of Islamism as a Political Ideology] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991), 34-37. Dietrich Jung also maintained that during his 1870 stay in Istanbul, Afghani may have become acquainted with the Young Ottomans – a claim that has yet to be substantiated by any definite evidence. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 60. Cited by Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 238. Even if this supposed Young Ottoman influence were a confirmed fact, their contribution to *islah* would be better characterized as belonging to the earlier stage of the *Nahda* movement, given their eclecticism and lack of integration among their reform program's theological and sociopolitical dimensions. For the seminal work on the modernization of Turkish political ideas and the political thought of Young Ottoman thinkers (viz., Şinasi, Mustafa Fazıl Paşa, Namık Kemal, Ziya Paşa, Ali Suavi, and Hayreddin Pasha), see Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962). In another essay, Mardin contests the centrality given to Arab-Salafi Islam in the contemporary Islam and modernity literature by arguing for a Turkish-Islamic exceptionalism. Şerif Mardin, "Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes," *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005). In this piece, he argues that "the specifics of Turkish history have endowed the Ottomans and the Turkish Republic with characteristics that have worked cumulatively to create a special setting for Islam, a setting where secularism and Islam interpenetrate, which of course is quite different from saying that Islam and secularism have fused" (p.148). Thus according to him, their discourse only partially overlaps the discourse of *ijtihad* vs. *taqlid* antinomy that, in his view, is foundational to Islamic modernization studies. Instead, the Ottomans inherited a sophisticated political culture from the pre-Ottomans, one that amounted to an Islamic dispensation that focused on the political and made political organization the fulcrum of society (p. 147). I tend to agree with the main point of this essay – the "political" had the primacy for Ottomans compared to the "Islamic" – an understandable point given that the survival of the Ottoman Empire's colossal state was always at stake. This seems to have led to a far more pragmatic relationship with Islam, something about which the Arabs, for instance, did not have to worry. Therefore, they could develop a more religion-centered or people-centered framework, rather than a state-centric one. This is yet another justification for those who analyze the Islamist reform movement to trace it back to Afghani, instead of to the more unique case of Turkish *political* reformers. Nonetheless, the argument for Turkish exceptionalism has serious limitations that might blind one to the interactions among the *islah* figures across different cultural centers. After all, Afghani was in Istanbul twice and at least his own activities would have linked some Turkish reformers to the rest of *islah* movement, especially in Egypt. An interesting point that shows the limitations of exceptionalism is Mardin's minimization of Arab reformist thinking's influence on Turkish Islamism

certainly predecessors to his reformist ideas, especially those involved in the eighteenth-century reform movement⁴³ and the early-nineteenth-century *nahdah*,⁴⁴ he is renowned for synthesizing and publicizing a cluster of these novel ideas in the nineteenth-century Islamic intellectual scene as part of an integrated and vibrant reform agenda. Among these ideas are: 1) opening the doors of *ijtihad* (independent religious reasoning) to meet contemporary challenges; 2) reactivating the reasoning faculty to break the dormant condition of Islamic thought and prepare the ground for scientific progress; 3) returning to “original” Islam by purifying it from its many inauthentic religious accretions (*bid'ah*) and superstitions; 4) defending consultative and constitutional rule against despotism to enable good government; 5) promoting Muslim unity to resist colonial incursions; 6) overcoming sectarian fanaticism between the Shiite and Sunni branches of Islam for mutual cooperation and common defense; 7) promoting pan-Eastern cooperation against Western imperialism; and 8) proposing Islam as a civilizing project in order to attain inter-religious peace, which would, in turn, secure the common goal of human progress in a competitive but solidaristic world order.

through the likes of Qutb; he calls such influences “short-lived sources of inspiration” (p. 149). However, Mehmed Akif, whom Mardin sees as the archetypical agent of Turkish exceptionalism (p. 152) was, in fact, Afghani’s foremost disciple and an ardent defender as regards his Istanbulite adversaries, as is clear in his Islamist journals *Sirat-ı Mustakim* and *Sebilurreşad*. This person was also the first one to translate those of Afghani’s writings that appeared in *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*. While the Turkish role in the nineteenth-century Islamic *islah* movement might at first seem to be a diversion from my text’s focus, it deserves attention in order to locate Afghani within the Islamic reform movement vis-à-vis other reformers.

⁴³ For an interesting debate on tracing nineteenth-century reform to its eighteenth-century predecessors, see Nehemia Levtzion and John Obert Voll, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987) and Ahmad Dallal, “The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850,” *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993). Keddie, for instance, points to the possibility that Shah Wali Allah of Delhi’s views on reopening the doors of *ijtihad* was the major influence on Afghani. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 26.

⁴⁴ Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*. For a recent translation of a Tunisian thinker’s treatise on the virtues of consultative government, see Ahmad ibn Abi al-Diyaf and L. Carl Brown, *Consult Them in the Matter: A Nineteenth-Century Islamic Argument for Constitutional Government: The Muqaddima (Introduction) to Ithaf Ahl al-Zaman bi Akhbar Muluk Tunis wa Ahd al-Aman (Presenting Contemporaries the History of the Rulers of Tunis and the Fundamental Pact)* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005).

Although not comparable to the work of other figures in my dissertation, Afghani still penned a considerable number of essays that were dispersed through several print-media outlets over a couple of decades in several countries. On the basis of the primary material I consulted, I contend that all dimensions of his thought are well integrated in an ontopolitical constellation, except his “Answer to Renan.” Attempts to reconcile this letter with the rest of his corpus have been made, most recently by Kohn.⁴⁵ However, I will leave it out of Afghani’s corpus because I have concluded that, at least in the form that Renan published it, it does not seem to belong to his work.⁴⁶

The picture of Afghani that I have derived from my reading of his works is that of a thinker whose overarching concern was neither pan-Islamic unity nor a reformed religion; these are best seen as means to his real end. He was first and foremost a firm believer in the infinite perfectibility of human beings living in a solidaristic, cooperative social environment that would continuously foster civilizational progress. In order for this human perfection to be set into motion, our faculty of reasoning, the prime means to

⁴⁵ Kohn, “Afghānī on Empire.” See also, Esen, *Afgani*, 184-206. Such attempts generally explain away the discrepancy by pointing to a distinction Afghani made between the normative, ideal Islam that promotes progress and the established Islam that stifles it. Yet even this cannot account for his purported wish, as expressed in this letter, for Muslims to get rid of religion’s tutelage and his belief in an interminable conflict between religion and philosophy. Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 183, 87.

⁴⁶ It does not seem very reasonable for Afghani, who would soon publish a pan-Islamist journal in Paris, to bash Islam for stifling philosophy and progress. This is especially the case when his motives and views were always under the spotlight. The ideas presented in it are the exact opposite of the thesis he laid out in “The Truth about the Neicheri Sect.” Muhammed Hamidullah believes that the letter’s text belongs rather to Renan. Not only has no Arabic original ever been found, the Arabic original was translated into French in a style, as Massignon contends, that sounds a lot like Renan’s. Namik Kemal (1840-88), a Young Ottoman who had lived in Paris a decade earlier and was involved in the clandestine anti-sultan oppositional activities, expressed his doubt about this letter’s veracity in his rebuttal against Renan, *Renan Müdafaaası*. Muhammad Hamidullah, “Ernest Renan and Jamal al-Din Afghani,” *Islamic Review*, May-June (1958): 33-34; Esen, *Afgani*, 201. Although Afghani refers to his past writings and activities in Makhzumi Pasha’s memoirs, there is no mention of Renan despite some allusions to the *Journal des Debats*, in which this letter was published. Moreover, there is no reason to accept Keddie and Kedourie’s view that only this letter, as opposed to all the rest of his writings, reflects his true beliefs. Indeed, given their conviction of Afghani’s duplicity, why not conclude that this aberrant letter was written just to appease the Western scholars and audience to forestall further anti-Muslim campaigns? (I thank Ercüment Asil from the University of Chicago for making the last comment.) For a comprehensive account about the qualms of the letter’s authenticity, see Cündioğlu, “Ernest Renan.” In any case, as there is no original it seems more reasonable not to include an aberrant text of questionable authenticity in my analysis.

accomplish this goal, must be freed from the tutelage of superstition, the clergy, despotism, and imperialism. This characterization puts him on the same plane as Enlightenment *philosophes*.⁴⁷ The critical difference stems from his strong belief that a correctly understood religion is the best impulse and moral ground for civilization.⁴⁸ Moreover, his overall project should be read as a rebuttal of colonialism's "civilizing mission." Here, he differs from the major European thinkers by asserting colonialism's debilitating effects on civilization and human progress.

Accordingly, my account will start off by presenting his conception of a human being as greedy, but rational and perfectible in her relations with nature, God, and fellow human beings. The full implications of this ontological and theological foundation will unfold at the ethical, and especially at the political, levels as he expounds upon group solidarity and good government. I will take this up in the section on "The Virtuous City."

A Treacherous but Dignified and Infinitely Perfectible Human Being

God created each human being with certain faculties and powers and then endowed them with certain skills and arts. The human being is like an artisan in this world, for he needs to work on nature as the artisan needs his tools. However, he himself is by nature a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*.⁴⁹ Innate factors exert an insignificant influence on him; but when they do, it is mostly related to his abilities. That is to say, most of his characteristics and qualities are caused by his environment.⁵⁰ "Ideas flourish, things get more rational,

⁴⁷ Indeed, Germino's account of the *philosophes* sounds very much like a description of Afghani's intellectual portrait. As practical political reformers rather than theorists, they aimed for "a society in which ignorance, superstition, privilege would be eliminated or at least vastly reduced." Germino, "Enlightenment in Modern Political Thought," 153. They wanted the consent of the governed, although their form of government was not necessarily democratic. In fact, their version fitted more into that of a top-down reform (Ibid., 154). They were also anticlerical.

⁴⁸ This view is best exposed in *The Truth about the Neicheri Sect*.

⁴⁹ Afghani, "Islam and Christianity" in Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 101-03.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 102.

overall quality increases, descendants outdo ancestors; and some suppose that all this comes from nature; not nurture.”⁵¹ In fact, every piece of fruit produced by a tree, every outcome of human work is a piece of art and a result of an accomplishment that depends on its artist. The human being himself is a world of art due to his reason and capacities. The product of our bodily labor is an offshoot of our internal capacities and faculties, while our soul has absolute authority over our body.⁵² Religion, which teaches the soul how to rule the body,⁵³ is a divine admonition received by reason-bearing individuals via prophets. They differ from the rest of people as being the ones who keep them alert, bring good news from God, and advise them to follow the right path.

As “man is very cruel and ignorant, ... to this treacherous, greedy, bloodthirsty creature beliefs and skills were availed in the earliest period by means of religions.”⁵⁴ The aim here is to curb people’s bestial features so that their true human quality, namely, the love of privilege and distinction, will develop.⁵⁵ Indeed, what distinguishes them from animals is their progressive quality,⁵⁶ which manifests itself in their human virtues. The most significant virtues for Afghani are those that elevate human beings out of their bestiality: shame (humbleness), trustworthiness, truthfulness, steadfastness, honor, hopefulness, and especially the virtues of the will to distinctiveness and to leadership, and

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Note the parallels with Platonic moral psychology.

⁵³ Afgani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 103. According to this firm believer in religion’s nurturing role, scholars (viz., the heirs of the prophets, according to Islam) bear a critical responsibility. Their negligence will weaken the faith in Muslims’ hearts, which, in turn, will lead to ignorance of Islam’s creedal requirements. People then will live a life of bestiality, possessed by animal desires and overtaken by the sole concern of survival (Ibid., 163).

⁵⁴ Afghani, “The Truth about the Neicheri Sect” in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 140.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 150. Bestiality is a vice against which Afghani repeatedly warns his readers. Most of his moral theory is based on this basic antinomy between humanity and bestiality that, in turn, guides his political theory, especially in his radical stance against despotism and imperialism.

⁵⁶ Afghani, “Virtue and Vice” in Afgani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 156.

the love of praise.⁵⁷ The vices against which he repeatedly warns his audience are fear, apprehension, and delusion. To accentuate the central significance of virtues and vices for his political project, Afghani sometimes dedicates a whole article in *Urwa* to just one of them.⁵⁸ Our human progress demands that we cultivate these virtues and overcome the vices, for only in this way can we live up to our human dignity.⁵⁹

The basic elements of his theologically informed ontology are clearly visible in this picture. In a Hobbesian⁶⁰ world of treacherous but rational, malleable, and perfectible creatures, religion is the only method available for shaping a soul so that it can dominate one's physical body and thus cultivate the necessary virtues that promote human perfection. Hence, while they compete to gain distinction, leadership, and honors, the end result will be human progress.

That Afghani upholds a common human dignity to which each soul has to aspire is fairly obvious. But he also articulates a morality of nobility that values distinction. This

⁵⁷ The hierarchy of virtues in Afghani's success ideology, which is in some ways reminiscent of Nietzsche's moral theory, must not escape our attention. His moral theory, although a religious one, stands in stark contrast to what Nietzsche would call a "slave morality," one that feeds on fear, humility, weakness, and pessimism. Afghani takes up the challenge to turn Muslims into strong-willed, courageous, and optimistic people who would fight imperialism and despotism to awaken the *ummah* and restore it nobility and dignity. It goes without saying that he takes issue with the anti-foundationalist aspects of the Nietzschean mode of thinking in his treatise against *Neicheris*, a concept that also includes nihilists. Accordingly, Afghani's thought is a more restrained version of a success ideology, one that is tamed by the religious values of humility and God-consciousness (*taqwa*). These values play a critical role by preventing the virtues of nobility from being perverted into oppression and servitude. They also figure into his sympathies for socialism and the indigent class, although he opposes a radical egalitarianism that would produce weaklings.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, "Hopefulness and Will to Leadership," "Honor," "Delusion," "Fearfulness" in Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*.

⁵⁹ This path toward progress is fraught with difficulties, sometimes blood and tears: "The one who desires this elevation and progress may encounter fearsome and terrifying scenes. The lowest of these will lead you to dangers while the most exalted one is an honorable death. For this reason, sometimes his fortitude weakens, his determination is debilitated and he does not make any progress on this path. Eventually he reverts back to an inferior life; regressing to the position of animals grazing in a pasture." Ibid., 204-05. Note his antinomy of humanity and bestiality in this passage. Afghani's utmost concern with humanity's dignity also provokes his animosity against the *Neicheris* (naturalists), since they "facilitate for the soul the way of bestiality." Afghani, "The Truth" in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 148. Of course it might be argued that his real problem with Ahmad Khan of India (a.k.a. the *Neicheris*) was political, due to their collaboration with the British colonialists. This is not an incorrect characterization. But as I maintain throughout this chapter, Afghani's anti-imperialism is grounded in his view that imperialism/occupation is as devastating hindrance as regards human dignity and perfection.

⁶⁰ Kohn also points to the similarity of Afghani's concept of human nature to Hobbes' view. Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire," 399.

would necessarily clash with the radical egalitarianism of communism, which he would later label as a *Neicheri* (naturalist) sect. If such an absolutely equal world is imagined, every person would refuse to perform the hard and menial tasks and economic life would be disrupted. Finally,

This weak species [humanity] will be brought to the vale of perdition and will disappear completely. ... All external and internal perfections, all material and moral progress, and science, knowledge and the arts would be destroyed. Man's throne of glory and nobility would be overturned and he would dwell in the desert of savagery like the other animals...When privilege and distinction are removed, souls are stopped from the movement toward eminence and minds neglect to penetrate the truth of things.⁶¹

Obviously, Afghani is hardly an egalitarian thinker.⁶² A structural-functionalist vision of society paralleling that of some of his European contemporaries is also fairly clear.⁶³ It may be asked, then, why this love for distinction and privilege would not result in fierce antagonism and domination. Here, his organic view of society and understanding of group solidarity (*taassub*) have to be introduced.

⁶¹ Afghani, "The Truth," in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 150.

⁶² Although Afghani opposes communism on the ground that it would completely level society, he is not so hostile to socialist ideas. Makhzumi Pasha relates that he defended "Islamic socialism," but that his conception of socialism was limited to cooperative ethics and redistributive justice as Islamic ethics. Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 149-63. In his conversation with Makhzumi Pasha, he reiterated some of his reservations about socialism but still brought up Islam's redistributive mechanisms, primarily *zakat* (poor-tax/relief), as proof that Islamic ethics contain an intrinsic socialist element. He also related stories of some of the Prophet's Companions, most notably Abu Dharr, who waged a vigorous campaign against deep social stratifications due to the increasing wealth gaps that appeared during the 640s and 650s.

⁶³ Afghani's organismic view of the ideal society, one in which distinctions and social hierarchy would be preserved to ensure competition and social progress, mirrors what Robert Nisbet skillfully explains in his elaboration of the unacknowledged conservative imaginary in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social theory as represented in the works of such unlikely theorists as Condorcet, Bentham, and Comte. Robert Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology," *The American Journal of Sociology* 58, no. 2 (1952). Note, for instance, "the revolutionary and rationalist emphasis upon equality must lead quickly, it was argued, to a leveling of social differences which will obliterate the natural channels of transmission of human values" (p. 172). But Afghani should not be taken as a pro-aristocrat who cares about titles and status. In contrast, superiority could only come through one's own work and accomplishments, not through empty titles. He is pretty critical of the predominance of vain titles in Muslim societies and the pompousness and corruption they spread. Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 550. His qualified egalitarianism is quite evident when he predicts that "the call to socialism some day will reign in the world, although its adherents are a few today. That day the true knowledge will spread to the world and everybody will understand that he and his brother is from the same stuff of mud and from a single being; and the superiority only comes from providing useful services to the society, and that it has nothing to do with crown or office, with the wealth he accumulates or with the abundance of the servants he exploits like his slaves, or with the armies he mobilizes, or with a transient fame he enjoys; in short not with a life that will stain him like a spot until the end of the world." Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 170.

Afghani's social theory is clearly indebted to Ibn Khaldun's theories on *asabiyah* and the rise and decline of nations.⁶⁴ He prefers, however, the term *taassub*,⁶⁵ which is from the same root but is normally translated as "fanaticism." In his view, it takes the form of a double-edged sword. His ideal society is perfectly cooperative and solidaristic, for one's love of superiority and leadership finds its expression in a virtuous social milieu comprised of everyone working for a fundamental goal: the common good.⁶⁶ The perfection of qualities and the entrenchment of virtues depend, in turn, upon the level of *asabiyah* (solidarity) among individuals.⁶⁷ This group feeling can be nurtured by either ethnic or religious ties.⁶⁸ However, religiously rooted *asabiyah* is superior because it is

⁶⁴ Kohn also points out this link. Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire," 399. For Afghani's praise of Ibn Khaldun as the indisputable founder of the philosophy of history and the best mind of the *ummah*, see, Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 139.

⁶⁵ In Afghani's conception, "*taassub* comes from *asabiyah*; which in turn comes from *usbah*. What strengthens a man's power and protects him from oppression and transgression is his community [*qawm*]. For that reason, *taassub* is characteristic of humans. One's striving to protect what relates to him and to defend its rights is always fostered by this characteristic. Forms of commitment to *taassub* vary across one's own qualities, education and knowledge." Afghani, "Taassub" in Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 124 (132 in the original).

⁶⁶ Afghani, "Virtue and Vice," in *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁷ Afghani, "Taassub" in *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶⁸ The relative status of ethnic and religious *taassub* is a puzzling dimension of Afghani's thought. Keddie also capitalized on this to make her case for his duplicity. This puzzle does not necessarily point to any inconsistency on Afghani's part, though. His primary concern here is the virtue of *taassub* as a bond between community members that would nurture a cooperative ethics among treacherous human beings. To a certain extent, he is fine with ethnic *taassub* as long as it does not succumb to the temptation of injustice, something of which he is well aware: "Taassub also has limits... its excess leads one to transgress; to defend one of his kind whether he is right or wrong... His view towards the outsider would not be fair. He would not care that they also have humanly rights; and thus the benefit expected of *taassub* would pervert into harm. The honor of the *ummah* is undermined; its foundation is shattered as the foundation that human communities rest on is justice... Such excesses of *taassub* were already prohibited by the Prophet with the words: 'that who calls to racism is not one among us.'" *Ibid.* This condemnation of national *taassub* also extends to religious *taassub*, as it may also feed hostilities toward the believers of other religions, as in the examples of Crusades and the Inquisition. Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 129. Nevertheless, he would prefer a *nation* that has attained solidarity based on linguistic ties over one that suffers from discord in the absence of *taassub* and thus falls prey to imperialism. *Ibid.*, 126. As for the difference between national *taassub* (*al-taassub al-jinsi*) and religious *taassub* (*al-taassub al-dini*), the latter "is more sacred, purer, and its benefits are more extensive... On which principle of reason they rely when they take pride only in national *taassub*? How can then they one believe that national *taassub*, or as they call 'love of country' is the most honorable virtue? Which social rule do they follow when they are bashing a balanced religious *taassub*, to give it up and supplant it only by a national *taassub*?" *Ibid.*, 131 (p. 136 in the original). In conclusion, at a more pragmatic level, although Afghani would condone both religious and ethnic *taassub* to foster unity and solidarity against internal discord and imperialism, at the end of the day he would definitely prefer the religious one. Nonetheless, he is clearly against extremist *taassub* in both forms of racism and religious fanaticism. This nuanced position lets him favor all-Indian nationalism against British colonialism, rather than Muslim communalism against Hindus, which would defeat the purpose of solidarity that *taassub* is expected to nourish. His account of *taassub* among Arabs attests to this interpretation. He narrates Arab history as a case of failed national *taassub*, since they could not benefit from the positive elements of racial *taassub* to overcome their tribal hostilities. With the advent of Islam, national *taassub* was supplanted by a religious *taassub* that opened the path toward world

one of the most sacred bonds that erases conflict among individuals and motivates them toward the same goal.⁶⁹ Thus in a world of diverse communities, each of which is united by *taassub*, the end result will be progress and civilization for all:

The unity formed henceforth will lead to a contest between different communities [*ummah*] and tribes. As the diverse communities contend to win over one another, sources of welfare and sustenance will increase...Their contest is like a contest between persons. It is the greatest incentive to reach the highest degree of perfection in all necessities of life within its reach.⁷⁰

Afghani is not totally unaware of how things would actually work out despite this idealized view of an *asabiyah*-based corporatist, solidaristic society. He cites Qur'anic verses that call for perfect justice even if it is against one's parents and relatives (4/135) to underline its superiority to solidarity. Likewise, he characterizes extremity in both ethnic and religious *taassub* as a violation of justice. Consequently, while he urges his readers not to weaken their *asabiyah* as the Westerners want them to do, he also urges them not to deviate from the demands of justice.⁷¹

His ethical theory, then, is thoroughly imbued by religion, for religion operates at both the personal-psychological and the various social levels to check the excesses of humanity's inherent avaricious features. At the individual-psychological level, God-consciousness inclines a person toward balance, for instance, in his quest for distinction with humility and truthfulness. This personal-level effect is paralleled at the social level by cultivating a communal feeling that supersedes the nationalistic bond and thereby

domination. Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 204-05. In short, Keddie's conclusion that there is a change of discourse from the *Neicheri* book to *Urwah* hardly makes sense, given my lengthy quotations from the latter. Insofar as *taassub* fosters friendly competition and, in turn, civilizational progress, Afghani views it as a virtue. Religious *taassub* represents a higher form of human feeling, which even could turn into the vice of fanaticism if it violates the principles of justice. This is the gist of his argument.

⁶⁹ Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 127.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 124-25 (p. 132 in the original).

⁷¹ Ibid., 136.

checks its excesses of injustice. Still, the definite mechanisms by which religion cultivates moral virtues have yet to be elaborated.⁷²

Afghani thinks that human impulses could be restrained in four ways: self-protection (the state of nature), the nobility of soul, the government, and the belief in a wise Creator and afterlife. The bloodbath that would result from the Hobbesian world of the first option goes without saying. The second option is also readily dismissed, given the all-too-familiar relativism and self-righteousness of human soul in regard to nobility. On the other hand, government can suppress external oppression but is of little use when it comes to preventing secret transgressions and the unchecked passions of the rulers themselves.⁷³ Thus there is only one remedy: belief in the Creator and a fixed recompense in the afterlife for what one experiences during this life.⁷⁴ Apart from this restraining function that checks one's passions, religion also plays a positive role by cultivating three basic virtues: humbleness (*haya*), trustworthiness, and truthfulness-honesty.

There is little doubt that Afghani's ontological picture would pass as that of a typical Enlightenment or nineteenth-century European philosopher if it were not for the mediation of religious factors.⁷⁵ The last views presented above portray him as a fairly strong ontologist who envisions a secure and direct link between faith and morals that are denied to non-religious – especially materialist (*Neicheri*) – ontologies. But Afghani still

⁷² He also needs to show detail how the religious outlook's superiority fosters progress, while the materialist and nihilist views are supposed to corrupt morals and stifle human progress by creating an anomic situation.

⁷³ This argument against the Hobbesian solution only means that he does not think that mere government sanctions will restrain transgressors. Otherwise, his case for religion is complemented by the necessity for government. However, certain moral virtues have to be secured for a just government to survive, a job that religion will do well. Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 145-46.

⁷⁴ Afghani, "The Truth," in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 163-67.

⁷⁵ Compare, for instance, with Condorcet when he says "[The] result [of this work] will be to show by appeal to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us." Germino, "Enlightenment in Modern Political Thought," 162.

has to decide whether any religion can play this role. More importantly, it remains to be seen how he would explain Muslim civilization's decline and its people's moral atrophy if religion were to make such a progressive impact.

At first sight it seems that any religion, not just Islam, can fulfill this civilizing mission. This is evident from his praise for Luther's role in transforming Christianity into a religion that is amenable to human progress and civilization.⁷⁶ But Islam has a special advantage because "it censures belief without proof... reproves blind submission; seeks to show proof of things to its followers; everywhere addresses itself to reason."⁷⁷ Besides, its first pillar, *tawhid* (God's absolute unity), purifies and removes the rust of superstition⁷⁸ and thus strengthens the right of each soul to achieve every *excellence* and *perfection*.⁷⁹ He concludes by stating his strong belief in the superior potential of Islam's civilizing function: "The virtuous city for which philosophers have died hoping will only be achieved by man with the Islamic religion."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 171-72. Parallels with Guizot's theory of civilization are evident here.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷⁸ As this would be a recurring theme of the *islah* school, Afghani employs *tawhid* as a principle to purify religious belief from any baseless attribution of God's qualities to lower objects or beings. Muslims regard such a practice as *shirk* (idolatry).

⁷⁹ Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 170.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 173. Nonetheless, one should not assume that Afghani disdained other religions. To the contrary, he thinks that true religion is to be sought not by the name, but by the substance: "Islam is only a name [signifier]; the truth is what it signifies... The superiority of Islam is by virtue of the right and the truth; not for the abstract adjective of Islam. The decline that you observe among Muslims is not because of the reality of Islam but because Muslims do not know the truth of the Religion ... Religions constitute the 'whole' altogether. Its parts are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Whoever is on the right path in line with these religions, he is the one to attain supremacy and victory. The religion to which God promised supremacy is, as we said, 'The True Religion.' Insofar as they remain nominal, it is neither Islam nor Christianity or Judaism; but whichever is in accordance with the Truth and Right, it is there we find the pure religion." Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 174-75. On another occasion, he describes the true religion: "[It is] a religion that has the right principles and secure foundations, which covers all forms of rule, which encourages sincere relations and calls to love, which purifies the souls and cleanses the hearts from the impurity of envy, which enlightens the minds with the light of truth, which provides the human being with all what he would need in human social structures, which would preserve the existence of the community, and finally which guides the believers to all branches of civilization." *Ibid.*, 274. Based on these statements, it is only natural to expect that his utopian vision would consist of a world peace through the alliance of three religions: "After all sorts of research, examination and reflection, I have come to see that the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism are in complete unity in their principles and aims... Then a lightening of hope sparked in my mind. As the three religions are in cohesion in their essence, roots and aims; their adherents could also unite around the same principles. Thanks to this alliance humanity in its short life could take a big

The Virtuous City

Afghani is not too far removed from his medieval Muslim predecessors when it comes to his ideal political order, although it does bear some strong imprints of contemporary ideas on human perfection and civilizational progress. In a fine balance of medieval and modern ideas, the citizens of his virtuous city (*al-madinah al-fadilah*, as al-Farabi puts it), live under a republican government:

Those governed by it enjoy a higher state and loftier position than the other members of the human race. Indeed, they are the only ones who deserve to be thus designated, for “man” in the true sense is the one who is ruled only by the true law founded upon the principles of justice, [a law] *which he has enacted for himself* and by which he regulates all his activities and dealings with others in such a fashion as to raise him to the pinnacle of true happiness.”⁸¹

One can only conclude from these lines that Afghani would ideally prefer a republican government. Along with this “loftiest” type, he goes on to say that constitutional government (*al-hukumah al-muqayyadah*)⁸² would also arouse human nature’s original dignity and stimulate the citizens to emerge from “the lowly estate of animality to ascend to the highest degree of perfection.” They will deliberate along with their leaders and “curb the voracity of the greedy ones who seek to monopolize happiness for themselves alone to the exclusion of others.”⁸³

Afghani’s concern in this article is to show just how far away the Muslims’ current state of affairs is from his envisaged ideal state. He says that despotic government negates these virtues: the cruel government (*al-hukumah al-qasiyah*), the oppressive government (*al-hukumah al-zalimah*), and the compassionate government (*al-hukumah*

step towards peace.” Ibid., 57-58. Its own limitations and exclusions aside, Afghani’s embracing vision is striking. It also constitutes the ideal endpoint of his vision of progressive world civilization and world peace.

⁸¹ L. M. Kenny, “Al-Afghani on Types of Despotic Government,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 86, no. 1 (1966): 21 (emphases added).

⁸² Its literal translation is “limited government.”

⁸³ Kenny, “Al-Afghani,” 21-22. Echoes of a Rousseauan radical democracy can be clearly discerned in these lines.

al-rahimah). While the first two categories transfer citizens from the virtue of rationality to the level of bestiality, the enlightened government of *al-hukumah al-mutanattisah* (under the third type) can be tolerated under non-ideal circumstances. Afghani advocates the people's right to overthrow tyranny at the end of this particular essay, unless the last type of system reigns.⁸⁴

Afghani was a firm believer in republican government as the highest form of rule, because it promotes human dignity as well as the dignity of civilized people. However, it is equally true that in terms of practical politics he was not so radical as to pursue revolutionary republicanism against Muslim autocrats, although he clearly demanded a constitutional government whenever he had the occasion to do so.⁸⁵ In his close relationships with various Muslim rulers, which sometimes took the form of serving as an advisor, he worked to thwart imperialist designs and initiate top-down reforms,⁸⁶ one of which was a proposal for what he called "consultative government" (*al-hukumah al-shuriyyah*). This term poses another puzzle.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁵ This is evident from his call for constitutional government delivered in a speech he gave in Alexandria during 1879. Ibid., 20. He made the same call in his counsel to Iran's Nasiruddin Shah, as he later reiterated in his dialogue with Tsar Alexander III. Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 35. Here, Makhzumi also relates that Afghani's political activities in Europe following his expulsion from Iran centered on helping the freedom fighters back home struggle for a constitutional government by forming a favorable public opinion and forestalling any potential British opposition to the imminent constitutional revolution. He refers to Afghani's call for constitutional rule in his dialogues with Khedive Tawfiq (p. 22) and Sultan Abdulhamid II (p. 41). In these instances, according to Makhzumi's narration, "constitutional government" is used synonymously with "consultative government." This will be taken up below. Based on his stance in these cases, contra the conclusions of earlier scholarship, Afghani can rightfully be called a committed constitutionalist.

⁸⁶ Toward the end of his life, Afghani expressed his regret in a letter concerning his life-long effort to work with the political elite to initiate reform: "Would that I had sown all the seed of my ideas in the receptive ground of the people's thoughts! ... During all this time of my well-intentioned counsels sank in the ears of the rulers of the East, whose selfishness and ignorance prevented them from accepting my words ... The stream of renovation flows quickly toward the East. The edifice of despotic government totters to its fall. Strive so far as you can to destroy the foundations of this despotism, not to pluck up and cast out individual agents." Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 40. Based on this, it may be argued that if Afghani had the chance to start his reform program once again, he might have chosen to engage in grassroots political activism. Arguably, among his few significant actions that brought about tangible results was the Tobacco Protest in Iran, which was of this sort.

Afghani must have derived the concept of consultative government from the Qur'anic verse that *islahi* thinkers often used to support their case for constitutionalism and democracy: "they conduct their affairs among them by consultation [*shura*]" (42/38).⁸⁷ His contrast of this term with *istibdad* (despotism) suggests that consultative government is a more generic term that can be applied to constitutional, republican, and democratic rules. While he does not see all countries as ready for the final aim of republican rule, he definitely campaigns for the appropriate form of consultative government, which, in most cases, is constitutional rule:

The easiest aim and the closest stage is the replacement of the absolutist rule with consultation-based representative rule ... [If] the prince would opt for it and share his rule with his subjects ... he would see that solidarity will emerge to ensure his welfare as well as the security of his position... This is the form of rule that behooves Egypt and the Islamic states and emirates in the East... As for the republican government, it is not fitting for the current day East or Easterners.⁸⁸

Afghani provides several justifications for the final point that Easterners, at least for the time being, were unprepared for republican rule. First, he mentions the long duration of despotism that has altered its subjects' true nature and character. Second, he brings up their prolonged wallowing in superstition, which has debased them to the animal level. Finally, he ascribes it to the Easterners' generations-long persistence of opposing the true sciences.⁸⁹ One might use these statements to assert that he was not a

⁸⁷ Makhzumi relates that Afghani alluded to this verse when recalling his encounter with Abdulhamid II: "When I mentioned the Sultan about the virtues of the constitutional government, i.e., the consultative government that is an implementation of the verse "their affairs among them are through *shura*," I found him readily in agreement." Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 41. Apart from Kenny's reference, we mostly come across this phrase in Makhzumi's memoirs. If this is an accurate transmission of Afghani's original use, it can be applied to Western and Eastern governments as Afghani used it when he characterized European and Japanese rulers, specifically the Mikado (the emperor of Japan). Ibid., 277. As his description goes, "Europeans, by virtue of the consultative rule have become both rulers and the ruled." Ibid., 68.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

⁸⁹ Kenny, "Al-Afghani," 21. Afghani's argument concerning the Easterners' unprepared state might resemble those whom he criticized in "The True Reason for Man's Happiness," published in 1870 in *Misr*. After arguing that people owe obeisance only to those rulers who safeguard them and observe just laws, as opposed to those who are greedy and oppressive, he notes that the latter often justify their actions by exploiting a discourse of justice. He then criticizes those

true believer in democracy; however, it is also arguable that he wants to take a gradualist approach to shifting the Eastern countries' orientation toward self-government.

Afghani's exposition of the ideal and non-ideal forms of government is a further testimony of his call for urgent reform, for Muslim societies could not be any further removed from even enlightened despotism than they already were. He is fully aware that with worst forms of despotic governments in power, the ongoing decline of science and knowledge, and a superstitious populace incapacitated by a corrupted form of belief in predestination,⁹⁰ chances for an Eastern awakening would be slim. Thus, the best way to understand his non-ideal political theory of the worst-case scenario is as a provisional preference for an enlightened despotism that, according to him, is a subtype of compassionate despotism. This, in turn, would bring about the much needed reforms at the infrastructural level (e.g., promoting economic life, commerce, science, education, human rights, fair taxation, and a balanced budget) to prepare the ground for the endpoint of republican government.⁹¹

In Afghani's view, bad government was a major cause of Muslim civilization's decline (*inhitat*). Therefore, the best way to reverse this trend would be to reawaken

poor and patriotic people who, once they rise to important ranks, start talking about the people's unpreparedness for liberty. His response to this is that "man cannot be free of misfortune except by referring to *reason* in all his affairs, and emerging from the noose of enslavement to egotistical sultans and rejecting their orders." Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 105-06. In these pages, Keddie provides major pieces of evidence to show that Afghani explicates traditional philosophical categories in order to call for patriotism, liberty, and opposition to autocratic rulers.

⁹⁰ Predestination is another major area in which Afghani's theological and political views are deeply connected. He actually rejects the European view that belief in predestination prevents Muslims to progress by arguing that it actually energizes them, as they think they will not die unless God wills them to die and therefore take bolder actions. This accounts for the progress of Muslim civilization in its heyday. However, he admits that the presence of the corrupt beliefs of *jabriyyah* (fatalism) has seriously incapacitated them and is partly responsible for their decline. Afghani, "Fate and Predestination," in Afgani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 150.

⁹¹ Another reading of this essay might suggest that he insults them for their subservience and lowly life in order to provoke his readers to stand up for their dignity, thereby proving that they deserve the lofty rule of republican or constitutional government. Afghani's tone sounds like "I have given up on you, people; I now just urge the despotic rulers to institute at least an Enlightened despotism." Kenny, "Al-Afghani," 27.

Muslims and put them back on the track of civilizational progress, which necessarily includes political reform. But this is only part of a sweeping reform agenda that is contingent on the eternal law that God chose for nature and history. He would ask himself why Muslims were in such a sad condition if Islam has the best resources for civilization and human progress. In reply, he would cite the *islah* movement's favorite Qur'anic verse: "Verily, God does not change the state of a people until they change themselves inwardly" (13/11). In other words, Islam can regain its civilizing function again only by returning to its original form and being liberated from the various debilitating hurdles that have weighed it down for centuries.

This revivalist and reformist goal would require that the long-shunned practice of *ijtihad* should be reactivated and reason must be freely used; the *ulama* must reform their schools, assume their social responsibilities,⁹² and engage in modern science and knowledge.⁹³ Last but not least, Muslims must overcome their ethnic and sectarian divisions in order to unite into a collective sense of *taassub*. Such efforts will go hand in hand with a political reform designed to replace despotism with a constitutional and consultative government and with the ongoing fight against Western imperialism.⁹⁴ Once

⁹² "Yet you spend no thought on this question of great importance, incumbent on every intelligent man, which is: what is the cause of the poverty, indigence, helplessness, and distress of the Muslims, and is there a cure for this important phenomenon and great misfortune, or not?" Afghani, "The Benefits of Philosophy," in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 120.

⁹³ "Reform will never be achieved by the Muslims except if the leaders of our religion first reform themselves and gather the fruits of their science and knowledge." Afghani, "Lecture on Teaching and Learning," in *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹⁴ For an important testament that indicates that his real problem with imperialism/colonialism is grounded in his assertion that it causes so much damage to human progress that it actually causes human beings subjected to it to revert to their bestiality, see "Unity and Sovereignty or Concord and Victory," Cited by Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire," 410. Here Afghani, challenging colonialism's purported civilizing mission, argues that "foreign domination turns native people into beasts of burden, who lose their higher human capacities of imagination and wisdom." Imperialism does not just transform the colonized into beasts, but also relegates the colonizers to a level below animals. After making a cost benefit analysis of Western countries' scientific accomplishments alongside their destructiveness in wars, he concludes: "Therefore in this fashion and given these consequences, progress, science and civilization is nothing more than the abyss of barbarism and savagery. To me, today's human is below the level of the age of ignorance [*jahiliyyah*], and even below the level of braying animals." Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 118.

these goals are achieved, the Muslim individual will flourish as a free, rational, virtuous, cooperating, and progressive being living under a republican government.⁹⁵

It can be imagined that the societies inhabiting his ideal world would organize themselves based on a moderate *taassub* of either religion or nation. Having curbed their avariciousness, racism, and fanaticism, their inhabitants would engage in a peaceful contest for good works in order to achieve humanity's overall betterment and welfare so that progress and civilization can be attained.⁹⁶ Of course any analysis of this idealized picture will be incomplete if one does not take account of the gaps in his conception of being and his "will to identity," both of which violate several forms of difference. I will now take up these gaps and rifts.

4.4 Afghani as a Muslim *Philosophe*? The Limitations of his Theory of Civilization

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, I have little interest in reading Afghani as an essentially pragmatic political tactician whose career was characterized by shifting intellectual positions and political alliances. In my portrayal, Afghani emerges as a Muslim philosopher who is equally modern and classical and as much Western as Eastern. He argued for consultative government while employing the vocabulary of civilization and progress. Once the prejudicial readings that look for the supposed chaotic mindset, secret agenda, and duplicity in his writings, as dictated by "Oriental despotism," are put aside, he sounds more like a philosopher along the lines of al-Farabi, Ibn

⁹⁵ Kenny, "Al-Afghani," 21.

⁹⁶ In this sense, his philosophical imaginary seems to embrace a religious vision that sounds a lot like what is enjoined in the Qur'anic verse: "To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but that (He) may test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ" (Qur'an 5:48).

Khaldun, Condorcet, or Mill. Having presented Afghani as offering answers to the problems of Eastern people, I now seek to evaluate his political ontology with reference to the questions and sensibilities raised in the first part of the dissertation. More specifically, if we take him as being on par with any other nineteenth-century philosopher responding to his unique circumstances, as well as to shared predicaments with any other Western philosopher, what kind of a critique would be warranted? For instance, would it be a well-placed point to reprove Afghani for his absolute faith in progress and civilization?

Indeed, his commitment to these two goals is comparable to that held by many of his European contemporaries. Inspired by both Guizot⁹⁷ and Ibn Khaldun⁹⁸ in his theory of civilization, he was probably the first scholar to formulate Islamic civilization in a way that would subvert the unitary conceptions of civilization. This understanding would eventually become an essential trait of the goal held by almost the entire *islah* movement and Islamism: to revive Islam as an Islamic civilization. However, Afghani retained the Western dichotomy between civilization and barbarity, only to exclude certain Easterners from the category of “barbarians.” Thus he did not question the central categories of the

⁹⁷ As Hourani pointed out, French historian and conservative statesman François Guizot’s (1787-1874) *History of Civilization* was argued to have made a definitive impression on Afghani. Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 114. In parallel to Afghani’s discourse against the *Neicheri* sect, in which he also rebuts positivists and nihilists, Guizot played an important role in the apologetic fight against French positivism. A believer in civilization as a total way of life, he narrated European history as a continuous process of social progress. Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 240. His *Cours d’histoire moderne* also impacted Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, and Marx (Ibid., 231). Afghani and his closest disciple Abduh read Guizot in its Arabic translation in 1877 and became rather fond of it. Afghani even inspired the latter to write an article welcoming its translation and expounding upon its doctrine. Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 114. Guizot’s argument that the Reformation was the major force that enabled European civilization to arise must have been quite appealing to Afghani. Also, his holistic conception of civilization amidst European diversity might have accounted for Afghani’s idea of proposing Islam, the religion of numerous politically fragmented countries, as “Islamic civilization” probably for the first time. Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 241.

⁹⁸ Kohn, “Afghānī on Empire”

discourse of civilization but only reclaimed them for the Easterners in a counter-narrative. In a remarkable passage, Afghani, posing as an Indian, says:

What has brought us to poverty and need, with our wealth exhausted, our riches ended, and many of us dead, consumed by hunger? And if you claim that that is due to a defect in our nature, and narrowness in our mental power, it is surprising from the sons of Brutus, who suffered for long ages and wandered in wild and barbaric valleys, that they should believe in the deficiency and unpreparedness of the sons of Brahma and Mahadiv, the founders of human *shari'as* and the establishers of civilized laws.⁹⁹

Afghani's challenge, then, does not target the binary opposition of civilized and barbarian that is used primarily as a discursive weapon to legitimize colonial domination. Rather, his point is to prove that some of the civilized Easterners are misrecognized as barbarians and thus do not need this supposed civilizing mission. Rather, it is the colonizers themselves who represent barbarity, not the colonized. After giving an account of the costs and benefits of Western civilization by juxtaposing their scientific accomplishments with their destructiveness in wars, he claims to see nothing but barbarism and savagery: "[T]herefore in this fashion and given these consequences, progress, science and civilization is nothing more than the abyss of barbarism and savagery. To me, today's human is below the level of the age of ignorance [*jahiliyyah*],¹⁰⁰ and even below the level of braying animals."¹⁰¹ His major objection to foreign

⁹⁹ "The True Reason of Man's Happiness," cited by Keddî, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*, 105. The same sentiments are also found when Afghani relates Abduh's encounter with Lord Harrington, the British defense minister. According to this story, when Harrington asserted that Egyptians would prefer British to Ottoman rule, Abduh reproached him by arguing that Egyptian patriots would never want a foreign rule. This time, Harrington claimed that Egypt's level of ignorance disallows such a differentiation between native and foreign rule in the minds of the populace; which applies only to the "civilized countries." After relating this story and Abduh's response to it, Afghani calls the readers' attention to how the British people see Egyptians and Easterners – as having descended to the level of pets and horses that are led by nothing but their instincts. Thus the solution is to stick together and save their dignity and humanity. "Here is the British and Their Views!" in Afgani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 546-49.

¹⁰⁰ This term will frequently appear in my account of Qutb's theory of *jahiliyyah*. Note how it functions here as a rhetorical tool to invert the categories of "civilized" and "barbarian."

¹⁰¹ Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 118.

domination was likewise based on its dehumanizing effects, as it “turns native people into beasts of burden, who lose their higher human capacities of imagination and wisdom.”¹⁰²

Imperialism, therefore, corrupts and dehumanizes both the colonized and the colonizer by removing both from the civilized level of humanity and returning them to bestiality. Although Afghani never adopts a self-righteous stance of blaming the “other” for the East’s long-standing ills, he boldly diagnoses what colonialism costs both sides. Far from civilizing the East, he contends, it produces systematic poverty and political decline.¹⁰³ But a number of limitations immediately come to mind here. First, by adopting the discourse of civilization as a rhetorical tool, he only excludes Easterners (e.g., Muslims, Indians, and Chinese, more specifically) from the category of barbarians. For instance, he refers to Zulus as a savage people while relating an argument between Abduh and Harrington.¹⁰⁴

On a related point, Afghani showed a perceptive understanding of the global world economy in his theory of imperialism: the colonial governments plundered the local economies’ natural resources and curtailed their productive capacities. This system also required despotic but Western-friendly rulers who would grant commercial concessions to Western companies. The debilitating and impoverishing effects of this global economic system on domestic Eastern economies were quite clear in Afghani’s

¹⁰² “Unity and Sovereignty or Concord and Victory,” cited by Kohn, “Afghānī on Empire,” 410.

¹⁰³ Afghani provides several illustrations of how British imperialism structurally and systematically produces poverty in India. For instance, see Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu’l Vuska*, 449.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 547. While Abduh was arguing with Harrington about whether patriotism was an innate feeling, Abduh reproduced the very same antinomy by calling the Zulus a very savage but still patriotic people. According to his concept of an infinitely perfectible human nature, it can be inferred that Afghani does not see this as a permanent condition. But given his objection to imperialism, one wonders what, in his opinion, would serve as the channels for the “savages” to progress and attain civilization.

mind. However, his theory does not seem to pay enough attention to those economies' internal systemic defects. It is true that he calls upon scholars to be socially concerned and says that they are wise only if they look for the cause and cure of poverty.¹⁰⁵ His redistributive ethics, which goes along with his sympathy for socialism, is also well-established.

But apart from his objection to harsh stratifications, his organic view of society leaves little room for questioning the established configuration of the division of labor between forces of production at his time. Humanity's survival, he maintains, "is dependent on some art and trades that differ in nobility and baseness."¹⁰⁶ Privilege and distinction, he acknowledges, do not come from any notion of noble birth but from one's own merit. However, as he was oblivious to the structural and systemic causes of division of labor, his redistributive ethics can only provide a moderated version of a class society.

In another sense, Afghani's theory of distributive justice operates on a relatively conservative framework that disregards the inherent conflictual dimension of the social. In his ideal theory, an "ontology of harmony" that radical democrats and some critical political theologians would readily reprove, creeps into his sociopolitical imaginary. Conflict, then, is not an interminable aspect of the social, for it will be fixed once the moderating influences of religion in both the psychological (cultivating moral virtues) and social dimensions (*asabiyah*) become operational. We would then live in a harmonious world where different communities would take the form of organic, solidaristic wholes and would compete with each other for the common good.

¹⁰⁵ Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 120; as also cited in footnote 92.

¹⁰⁶ "The Truth about the Neicheri Sect," in *Ibid.*, 149.

Therefore, having removed the obstacles to progress by overcoming the dehumanizing effects of imperialism and economic poverty that goes with it, Afghani would happily join in with the mission of civilization. Introducing too much religion into civilization does not seem to cause much of a problem here, as Afghani is very clear in his opposition to religious fanaticism. This is also quite obvious when he condemns the British plans to turn their campaign against Sudan's Mahdi (1881-99) into a religious war, which he readily calls a "barbaric war."¹⁰⁷ However, his inter-communal peace idea that would promote civilizational progress worldwide remains confined to the three Abrahamic religions, with few references to Hinduism. This immediately brings to mind the position of non-believers and other religions in his envisaged harmonious universe.

Afghani would possibly not find it too hard to expand his circle of "the civilized" to other religions. His notion of religion is already famously inclusive, at times so much so that his Muslim adversaries called him "heterodox." This inclusiveness will face limitations, though, when irreligious people are taken into consideration. Here, his political theodicy with its central category of *Neicheris* (naturalists) poses the hardest case.

Indeed, his political theodicy of *Neicheris* is the strongest aspect of his ontology. This is also a case of his holding a clear political ontological perspective in which one's ontology has very definite ethico-political consequences. A society that is not based on religion is described by the concept of *Neicheri* which functions for Afghani as a broad category of evil. He gives this evil an ahistorical and transnational sense in order to

¹⁰⁷ "Our good opinion of such a civilized country was keeping us from confirming that Britain would wage a barbaric war" Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 383.

include Greek materialists (e.g., Democritus, Epicurus, and the Cynics); Darwin, Voltaire, and Rousseau's socialists, communists, and nihilists; Mazdak the Iranian and the *batiniyyah* (esotericists) of classical Islam; and finally Sayyid Ahmad Khan of India. Aside from such sweeping generalizations, his categories and interpretations are not always accurate or justified. Yet his main concern is not to make a theological or philosophical point in order to undermine the naturalist or materialist point of view, but to simply demonstrate how a certain ontological position plays out on the ethico-political level in a determinate way to corrupt morals and the social order as well as to "shake the pillars of civilization."¹⁰⁸ What he primarily wants to preserve is the foundation of those morals that would be undermined by these naturalist ontologies.

We have seen how, for Afghani, religion provides the basis for cultivating those virtues that elevate humans from the level of bestiality, thereby sustaining a group feeling and social solidarity and finally a push toward civilization. Naturalism, which venerates bestial desires, turns this process upside down and spreads *communism* and *license*, cancels distinctions, stops human perfection, and eventually breaks the bond of fusion and interdependence – all of which would eventually annihilate the "unity of [the human] species."¹⁰⁹ Afghani makes his case by referring to historical examples and providing causal mechanisms among beliefs, morals, and political outcomes. To him, quite a number of historical cases from the East and the West prove that materialists, armed with their rejection of divinity, have always undermined the great nations of the past.

¹⁰⁸ "The Neicheri Sect," in Keddie, *Islamic Response*, 162.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 151. It is interesting to see how Afghani in some ways presents an inverted version of Marx's critique of capitalism for its dehumanizing and alienating effects.

Afghani's ruthless criticism of naturalists does the most to reveal, in Connolly's terms, the "Augustinian" dimension of his ontopolitical reform. He not only proposes religion as the foundation of civilization, but also leaves no room for non-divine ontologies to either contest his ontopolitical edifice or create any alternative path of ethical cultivation, political cooperation, or civilizational progress. For him any religion would serve as a civilizing force, even the falsest and basest one, as long as it inculcated the belief in the Creator and the afterlife with a structure of rewards and punishments.¹¹⁰

His ontopolitical reform also lends itself to a fruitful reading through the onto-story of disenchantment deployed by Bennett in the context of political ontology. This will constitute another thread of my narrative as I move along the subsequent moments of Muslim political thought. On this ground Afghani's *islah* project, by proposing Islam as a rational religion, sets up a novel relationship among a Muslim self, God, religion, his fate, and history.

As it would be a recurring theme throughout the *islah* movement's intellectual trajectory, Afghani reconceives the Muslim self as God's *vicegerent* (*khalifah*) on Earth. God, who created each human being in his own image and made him his vicegerent, gave him a part from his divinity (viz., reason) so that he could use the inferior creatures placed at his service and reach the superior truths. God also set each person's fate and predetermination.¹¹¹ As mentioned earlier, Afghani is quite critical of the Western critiques of predestination as an incapacitating force; however, he avows that the belief of

¹¹⁰ "[It is better] in the realm of civilization, the social order, and the organization of relationships; indeed in all human societies and all progress of mankind in this world." Ibid., 168.

¹¹¹ Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 301.

jabriyyah (fatalism) has caused apathy and laziness among Muslims.¹¹² Over time, along with their internal rifts and negligence of the West's scientific life and discoveries, Muslims started to perceive every interesting thing as a miracle and every discovery as a result of magic.¹¹³ The Muslim person forgot that in his capacity as human being, the most important miracle in the universe, he would definitely discover all of nature's secret properties by virtue of his reason. He would see that, "thanks to knowledge and freely used reason, one day he will make all his imagination happen, he will observe how what the fanatic would call 'dream,' in utter eclipse of reason, will come true."¹¹⁴ This would be the case because Allah the all-wise had created everything for a reason.¹¹⁵ As the "laws of God" [*sunnatullah*]¹¹⁶ would always be in force, scientific discoveries would necessarily be consistent with the Qur'an.¹¹⁷

By these disenchanting moves, Afghani makes religion or the Qur'an subject to reason. One can easily recognize his overall concerns via his ontological gestures. He sets a new mode of relationship between God and his free and rational vicegerents, as well as between a rationally conceivable religion and the universe. Therefore Muslims, given their role as God's vicegerents and liberated thereby from predestination's debilitating conceptions, can fulfill their mission of civilization and progress as owners of the world and their history. This, in my view, is the gist of Afghani's ontopolitical reform project.

¹¹² "Islam and Christianity," in Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 108-09. He is especially concerned about how this belief undermined steadfastness and zeal of Muslims and led them to laziness.

¹¹³ "Delusion," in *Ibid.*, 264.

¹¹⁴ Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 167.

¹¹⁵ "Fear" Afghani and Abduh, *El-Urvetu'l Vuska*, 108-09.

¹¹⁶ Afghani frequently uses this Qur'anic term to portray the universe and history as a rational whole. In an epigraph to one of his articles, he cites Qur'an 33:62: "[This is] the established way of Allah [*sunnatullah*] with those who passed on before; and you will not find in the way of Allah [*sunnatullah*] any change." "Ummah's Past, Present and Remedy," in *Ibid.*, 87. The laws of nature are subsumed under this Qur'anic term.

¹¹⁷ "Therefore, if we see that evident truths and general rules are not referred to in the Qur'an as they are, we should refer to insinuations and interpretations to make the two compatible." Mahzumi, *Cemaleddin*, 127.

Such a subjection of religion and the universe to reason would later become the main target of the anti-rationalist and anti-hermeneutic moves of the Qutbian reform, as will be explained in the next chapter. In his endeavor to set up a distinctly Qur'anic ontopolitical whole, Qutb would have to reclaim the primacy of *revelation* vis-à-vis reason in a strong foundationalist sense. Indeed, even from a post-foundationalist and post-modernist perspective one might find some of Afghani's views akin to some modern strong ontologies of a rationalist kind.

Concluding Remarks

Afghani spent almost his entire life traveling throughout the Muslim world to call upon Easterners to undertake an urgent reform. He never stopped trying to recruit the Muslim masses and the ruling elites for his cause and proclaiming his plans for a civilizational revival. While he was largely unable to defeat the colonialist powers' political schemes, he fully realized the grave internal problems that had made such exploitation possible in the first place. Armed by Guizot's theory of civilization, which made a case for the role of Christianity and the Reformation in modern civilization, he devised a comprehensive reform project that offered an Islamic solution to the Muslims' decline. His solution differed from that of Westernist modernizers who argued for a comprehensive borrowing of diagnosis, prognosis, and culture while relegating Islam to an ineffectual position, a model that would be best embodied later on by Turkey's Kemalist modernization.¹¹⁸ He also opposed all Muslim attempts that went to one extreme or another in an attempt to rationalize religion or, more seriously, those Muslims who cooperated with the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 263-72. Here he criticizes radical Westernist projects for their blind imitation of Western lifestyles in an ostentatious manner without any serious engagement with the real causes of their progress. He also rebukes them for disdaining their own cultures.

colonialists (e.g., Sayyid Ahmad Khan).¹¹⁹ His project postulated what his foremost Turkish disciple and the poet Mehmed Akif expressed in the following terms: “Having received our inspiration from the Qur’an, we have to make Islam speak to the contemporary mind.”¹²⁰

Afghani has already been the subject of enormous controversy and polemics due to his writings and activities. My aim here has not been to present a truthful biography of a historical figure, but rather to derive a coherent picture of his political philosophy by abandoning all of the fruitless questions about his biography. Nor has my aim been to demand that all of his written pieces undergo some sort of “sincerity test.” Rather, I have tried to deal with and then discard the obscurities inherited from early Orientalist scholarship. Indeed, as I have sought to show throughout this chapter, this important Muslim political thinker can best be mainstreamed into political theory by simply focusing on his corpus as a coherent whole.

This position poses a sharp contrast to Kedourie’s view, which applies different standards of analysis to Muslim thinkers because they lived under “Oriental despotisms.” In this respect, I argue that Afghani and any other non-Western thinkers should be approached like any other Western political thinker. This is also part of the larger post-Orientalist goal of comparative political theory. In my attempt to mainstream Afghani into political theory, I employed the political ontological approach as an analytical tool.

¹¹⁹ Apart from “The Truth about the Neicheri Sect,” Afghani also published “Materialists in India” in *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa* to curb Ahmad Khan’s influence. It is worth mentioning that Afghani’s polemic against both Western Neicheris (nihilists, materialists, communists, Darwinists) and Sayyid Ahmad Khan might be weak or misplaced at many points. However, my concern is to show how this work enables us to tease out a clear ontopolitical reform project from al-Afghani via the strong links he makes among his ontology, ethics, and politics.

¹²⁰ The Turkish original is “Alarak Kur’an’dan ilhamı, asrın idrakine söyletmeliyiz İslâm’ı,” *Safahat*. I have found this famous verse of Akif to be a very eloquent summation of Afghani’s project.

Unlike the “standard biography,” which tends to reduce his philosophical pieces to fragmented rhetorical devices in order to draw masses to his shifting political course, I have attempted to show how these dispersed pieces may be brought into a coherent whole.

In this structure, Afghani’s notion of a rational, dignified, and infinitely perfectible human being functions as the point of departure. Accordingly, his anti-imperialism and anti-despotism emerge only as the upshots of his ideal of human perfection and human progress in a civilizational framework. Along these lines, I sought to reveal that his political thought manifested itself as a close-knit ontopolitical whole, at a point where ontological, ethical, and political levels were entangled.

This is also true for his contention that common ontological and theological views on predestination had positive or negative effects on ethicopolitical action. Afghani rebuffed the Muslims’ fatalist interpretation of predestination on the ground that it incapacitated their agency and vicegerency and thus caused Muslim civilization’s widespread moral atrophy and decline. His ontopolitical perspective is also clear in his assertion that naturalism corrupts morals and curtails civilization. Perhaps the first Muslim thinker to posit Islam as Islamic civilization contra the Europeans’ universal claims for Western civilization, he was arguably the first one to contend that Islam is the foundation of Muslim civilization. This latter view, which served as the central premise of a century-long Islamic apologist discourse on civilization, is now mostly outdated.¹²¹

¹²¹ For an interesting view on the demise of the discourse of civilization, see Hamid Dabashi, “For the Last Time: Civilizations,” *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001).

Regardless of his repeated failures in court politics, Afghani left his mark on the development of a modern mass Muslim politics that involved a vigorous intellectual and political activism and set the prototype of an Islamist activist. Even more importantly, he initiated a politically oriented *islah* movement characterized by a comprehensive and integrated reform agenda vis-à-vis theological, economic, and political issues. On this account alone, one would be justified by any standard to place him at the beginning of a long line of Muslim reformist political thinkers and activists in almost all of the major centers of the Islamic world. It is this legacy that Qutb would also inherit. But Qutb, in his turn, would uphold, appropriate, and subvert the reform movement for his unique Qur'an-centric, anti-hermeneutical, ontopolitical constellation. I will now turn to Qutb's strong foundationalist project, which would ultimately accuse, and therefore completely reject, the very concept of democracy on its ontological grounds for usurping God's role as the only legitimate legislator.

CHAPTER 5

SAYYID QUTB: MILESTONES FOR AN ENCHANTED LIBERATION

Execution [of Western civilization] is not an option, even if we bring this verdict against it on the ground of the atrociousness of its crimes against the rights of humanity!!! If for once we assume that we are able to carry out this sentence, or suppose that new Mongolians appear on this Earth to stamp out its civilization ...or a bunch of demented human beings who possess atomic bombs, or hydrogen bombs, or missiles, or the like, get hysterical and wreak havoc on the centers of this civilization...Any [such] scenario [off] destruction will not do any good to humanity... Then, what is the salvation? Sayyid Qutb¹

"He spoke very calmly, steadily... He was truly impressive. Even if you knew nothing about his background, or that he had a religious background, he would have made an impression on you." Fouad Allam²

In the arresting mood of shock and dread following the events of 9/11, no one could be serve the role of Osama bin Laden's ideological godfather better than Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) for the horror-struck US public. In March 2003, Paul Berman had already proclaimed Qutb the "philosopher of Islamic terror" in the pages of the *New York Times*.³ The ensuing result has been the steady flow of articles and opinion pieces ever since on how the jihadi Salafi violence could be traced back to Qutb's massive corpus. Even the time he spent in Greeley, CO, in the late 1940s was scrutinized. In a PBS report by

¹ Sayyid Qutb, *al-Islam wa Mushkilat al-Hadharah* [Islam and Problems of the Civilization] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), 168 (Emphases added).

² Former general and the infamous interrogator of Muslim Brothers during wave of arrests and torture of the 1960s, speaking of Sayyid Qutb. Sanna Negus, *Hold on to Your Veil, Fatima! And Other Snapshots of Life in Contemporary Egypt* (Reading: Garnet, 2010).

³ Paul Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 23, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/23GURU.html> (accessed 19 June 2012).

Robert Siegel, Qutb's observations on American material civilization and spiritual life were covered and he was dubbed "Al Qaeda's Inspiration."⁴ What emerges from such accounts is the portrait of a radical Islamist thinker who would give up on his life for the sake of his extremist views. His heavenly goal in a world dipped in utter savagery (*jahiliyyah*), this view maintained, was to resurrect the caliphate and theocracy by means of a revolutionary vanguard that would impose *shariah* on the whole world, by force if necessary.⁵

Sayyid Qutb is by far the most influential thinker of Islamism in the Arab world,⁶ and his transnational impact can be rivaled perhaps only by Mawdudi (1903-79) and Ali Shariati (1933-77). I introduce his Islamist personage into my ontological narrative to draw an archetype of a strong theistic political ontology in which the basic idea seems to be to elucidate the full implications of believing in God for the sociopolitical sphere. To put it in White's terms, Qutb seeks to provide a "strong ontology" *par excellence*.⁷ His strenuous and lifelong ontological and ethical reflections on the respective roles of God and human beings culminate in a political position that denounces democracy as perversion in which men "established legislatures to usurp the supreme sovereignty

⁴ Robert Siegel, "Sayyid Qutb's America: Al Qaeda Inspiration Denounced U.S. Greed, Sexuality," *NPR* (2003), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1253796>. (accessed 19 June 2012)

⁵ As Berman puts it, "Qutb and the Islamists, ... , pictured the resurrected caliphate as a theocracy, strictly enforcing shariah, the legal code of the Koran." Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror." It will be demonstrated below that Qutb neither desired a resurrected caliphate nor condoned theocracy, which he condemned as much as democracy.

⁶ Sayed Khatab, "Arabism and Islamism in Sayyid Qutb's Thought on Nationalism," *The Muslim World* 94, no. 2 (2004): 217. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 93.

⁷ From a normative political ontological perspective, then, Qutb should be challenged on the ground that his strong ontology will lead to consequences that he may not condone. He would probably think that the political ontology he tries so hard to build would still leave enough space for such outsiders as non-Muslims or irreligious people to lead a decent life. In that case, he could be rebutted far more effectively if one were to show how this ontopolitical totality, this version of total reconciliation (the Hegelian *Aufhebung*), cannot possibly eliminate those unaccounted-for gaps or undertheorized human elements that make the divineness of any such project impossible. In another way, a weak ontologist would have to show why Qutb's envisaged strong ontology would undermine its own goal of human emancipation and justice for everybody, regardless of religion.

[*hakimiyyah*] that belongs to no one but God.”⁸ At first sight, this seems to signify a stark shift of political position from his reformist predecessors, such as Afghani, Abduh, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), and even Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949). One is indeed tempted to believe that he erects a full-scale theocracy to replace democracy, which arrogates to itself God’s role of making laws for humans.

In this chapter, I argue that although there is indeed a shift of position, or rather a shift of *Stimmung* from Afghani to Qutb, that can be understood only on the ontological level. As will be demonstrated below, insofar as the question of collective self-government is concerned, Qutb is not so different from his *islahi* predecessors. One finds quite clear instances where he resolutely defends individual liberty, against political tyranny, economic bondage, the lack of basic means of sustenance, and even against abusive religious scholars. Qutb rejects democracy when these emancipatory moves overstep the boundaries into God’s domain of giving the fundamental laws. In his “liberation theology,” if you will, defying God’s right will only move the human back to square one by causing him to be enslaved by his own desires. This is the baseline where my political ontological analysis will provide us with a more perceptive understanding of Qutb’s real concerns as well as the means for an immanent ontopolitical critique in his own terms.

Qutb will emerge as a literary critic in the 1930s and 1940s in an intellectual scene variegated by Afghani’s diverse legacies.⁹ Over time, he moves toward a singularly and lucidly Islamist direction. Ultimately, as a radical Islamist sociopolitical critic, he

⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* [Milestones] (Istanbul: Risale, 1986), 91.

⁹ This is not to say that Afghani’s legacy monopolized Egypt’s entire intellectual world. I am just taking a thread of intellectual tradition and tracing out how it was transformed over time. Still, there is no doubt his protégés were major figures on the intellectual scene.

will engage in an ontological clearance operation. At that point, Afghani and Abduh's rationalized formulation, and hence disenchanted version of Islam, will be reconceived of as *tawhid*- (absolute unity of God) and *wahy*- (revelation) centered, ontopolitical edifice in which the ontological, ethical, and political levels are strongly integrated. In a stark challenge to the basic premises of secularism, Qutb seeks to construct an organic whole that is perfectly harmonious, distinct, unique, and too complete to allow any infiltration by such "foreign" or mundane ideologies as nationalism, liberal capitalism, and communism. These constructs earn him a place in my ontological narrative, in which he both carries Afghani's *islah* project forward and subverts it for the sake of a more coherent ontopolitical constellation.

I will scrutinize his project of constructing an all-coherent and all-harmonious political ontology by disentangling its different levels and seeking to demonstrate his goal's eventual impossibility. Qutb, following the footsteps of Afghani, offers Islam to humanity as the best *foundation* of an ethico-political order as well as the best means of civilization and world peace. But in his quest for a purer, more authentic, more coherent, and more emancipatory formulation of Islam, his project delivers a lot less than he would like. That is to say, his supposedly all-harmonious, perfectly authentic, and radically liberating ideas are not just indisputably of mixed lineage or not as singularly built on a unitary foundation as he supposes, but rather are self-defeating in many ways and thus jeopardize human freedom in the end.

Ironically, it is these ideas' unacknowledged modern thrust and under-theorized rationality that seem to have secured his appeal for modern Muslims. In other words, Qutb's basic appeal lay in the fact that he "cleared things up" in his own way for modern

Muslims whose desire to live up to their ontological commitments was deeply challenged by a mental schizophrenia in a colonial and violently secularized environment. For the modern Muslim individual who needed a coherently Qur'anic but also modern framework, Qutb offers a consistent prescription for liberation, peace, reconciliation, and hope in a modern vocabulary.

In its attempt to give a political ontological account of the Qutbian intervention in contemporary Muslim political thought, this chapter is structured to first track down the unique intellectual trajectory of Afghani's legacy in the later liberal-colonial age with a particular focus on Egypt (Section 5.1). This historical and intellectual background will provide a sense, if you will, of the unique world-historical crossroads where Islamism stood in the 1950s vis-à-vis nationalism, liberal capitalism, and communism. Apart from the oft-mentioned decade-long prison and torture experience deployed to account for Qutb's further radicalization, I contend that his intellectual interventions gain their fuller sense against the background of this unique ideological crossroads. As his biography (Section 5.2) will clarify, he emerges against this background as the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) most powerful theoretician. He found himself in a position where the whole world seemed to be in *jahiliyyah*, defined as an utter disregard for God and His injunctions for humanity. This was the ultimate moment of his career as a lifelong critic, where he appeared to echo the Heideggerian sentiment of "only a God can save us!"¹⁰

¹⁰ Günther Neske and Emil Kettering, eds., "Der Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger," in *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~other1/Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf> (accessed June 27, 2012). As will be discussed below, Qutb shared the same sentimental mood as those interwar-post World War II period thinkers who were quite concerned about civilization's human (and sometimes spiritual) dimension being lost due to technology's overpowering of the world and humanity. Although his primary sources are Alexis Carrel and J. H. Denison, Heidegger and the Critical Theorists might as well pose comparable cases to his sentimental state about humanity's general state.

The only hope would be to train a vanguard, “a unique Qur’anic generation,”¹¹ to save humanity.

In section 5.3, I will disentangle the different dimensions of Qutb’s ontological edifice that he laid out in several works ranging from the late 1940s until his execution in 1966. Here I will first demonstrate, in the subsection entitled “Civilization and the Vanguard’s Vicegerency,” the continuous thread that runs between Afghani and Qutb, specifically in the context of the latter’s reaffirmation of the Islamist axiom via civilizational discourse. I use “Islamist axiom” to refer to Islamism’s signature view that Islam is not just about beliefs, rituals, and morality, but that it is a complete way of life that enjoins principles about ethics, economics, and, most significantly, politics.¹² Qutb’s embrace of this civilizational discourse will also be explicated through his related commitments to human progress, overcoming animality, and the ultimate attainment of world peace. As regards the common Salafi objective of purifying Islam from superstitions and inauthentic accretions, Qutb is definitely on board with Afghani. But later, when the other dimensions of his thought will be analyzed, the points of divergence will become clearer. As I will cover in the subsection entitled “The Limits of Qutb’s Rationality,” Qutb makes his crucial shift from the earlier rational Salafi mood by making

¹¹ *Milestones*’ second chapter is entitled “*Jil Qur’ani Farid*.” Qutb, *Ma’alim*, 11-19. Its specific reference is to the Prophet’s Companions, but this strong emphasis on them reflects the need to revive that particular Qur’anic generation in the form of a vanguard (*tali’ah*) that is facing the very same conditions of *jahiliyah*. See also footnote 74.

¹² For instance, Abduh puts the Islamist axiom into these words: “Islam is a religion of sovereignty, of authority, and of unity between this world and the hereafter. Islam is a spiritual, social, economic, political, civilian, and military system.” Muhammad Abduh, *Tafsir al-Manar*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Misriyyah li al-Kitab, 1972), 11. Cited by Sayed Khatab and Gary D. Bouma, *Democracy in Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 11. Said Halim Pasha (d. 1921), a grandson of Muhammad Ali, once Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire (1913-17), and an Islamist thinker, would formulate his version as follows: “Islam is a religion for humanity that possesses the ultimate perfection, i.e., it is the most perfect by virtue of its unique creed, its ethics based on that creed, a sociology that springs from that ethics, and, finally, a politics that is engendered by that sociology.” Said Halim Pasha, “Islamization.” Cited by Ismail Kara, *Türkiye’de İslâmcılık Düşüncesi: Metinler, Kişiler* [Islamist Thought in Turkey: Texts and Figures], 1st ed., Vol. I (Istanbul: Risale, 1986), xxxvi. As I discussed in the last chapter, Islamic civilizational discourse proposes Islam as a civilization (Islamic civilization) and Islam as the foundation of that civilization.

human rationality subordinate to revelation's primordial role.

The full implications of this shift will be presented in the subsequent subsection, "*Jahiliyyah* and *Hakimiyyah*: An Islamic Ontology of Harmony," in which I will seek to demonstrate how Qutb takes Afghani's Salafi, purificationist orientation to its logical conclusion via his ontological clearance operation. The most significant terms of this undertaking will be Qutb's doctrines of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance or barbarism), *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty), and *nizam-manhaj* (system-program). Thereafter, I will explicate his theory of liberation mainly through what I call the "dialectic of freedom" in the subsection entitled "Liberation under Servitude: Qutb's Dialectic of Freedom." His conception of vicegerency as the central agent for the progression of human civilization reemerges here as the vanguard to fight against all sorts of tyrannies and achieve liberation for humanity under God's absolute sovereignty. This emancipatory role of the vicegerent will find its clearest expression in the subsection, "The Qutbian Theory of Social Justice," where I will give an account of his most vivid emancipatory moments and show how his lifelong concerns for social justice emerge from his "liberation theology."

My analysis will then move to the sphere of political proper in the subsections of "*Shura* against Democracy and the Qutbian World Peace." There, I will first introduce Qutb's theory of self-government to show how his critique of democracy is directed against its ontological and foundationalist premises. In other words, his rejection does not denote his embrace of theocracy or his distrust of people vis-à-vis the ruling class or the ulama. It is, instead, the high point of his envisaged utopia (a total reconciliation), in

which harmony, peace, and reconciliation among humans is extended through the rest of the creation, and, finally, to God, the result being a re-enchanted universe.

The fourth and final section (section 5.4) will explore the internal rifts, gaps, and suppressed differences in this harmonious ontopolitical whole. I will seek to show how the will to such harmony undermines his own basic ethical goals, such as liberation, equality, social justice, and total human freedom. As a result, what sets out as a liberation theology, with a clear emphasis on human freedom under God's servitude, will be undermined by its own aspiration of will to harmony. My general conclusion will revolve around an interpretation of Qutb that oscillates between liberation theology and fundamentalism. The more one can reclaim his emancipatory moments, the less the subsequent Islamist generations need to see him as an encumbrance in their attempt to develop a contestable and pluralistic vision.

5.1 Afghani School's Later Trajectory: The Rational Salafism at the Crossroads

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the calls for a "return to the original Islam" made by the Rational Salafi thinkers had no major issue with Western political concepts such as liberty, fatherland, nation, civilization, or constitutional rule.¹³ Afghani's significance in this respect lay in his skillful integration of the various reformist ideas of the *Nahda* with

¹³ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 44. Tahtawi (1801-73) translated many of them into Arabic in an affirmative manner to build the modern Arabic idiom of social and political sciences. As he was referring to Montesquieu's separation of three powers in order to make a case for the desired restraints on the monarch's absolute power on behalf of a higher Shariah law, he also gave a clear definition of "limited monarchy" and "republic." Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi (1810-99) also suggested reforming and developing Muslim society through borrowing from the developed nations, which would be of fundamental importance for the uprightness of religion. Further, he called for ministerial accountability before an elected Parliament. Perhaps he was among the first to liken parliaments to *shura* councils.

the eighteenth-century reform movement into a coherent reform project, including a call for consultative government.

Afghani left behind a group of disciples of various ethnic and religious backgrounds in many of the countries in which he lived. This was especially true in Egypt, where they would play important roles as the leading intellectuals, scholars, activists, and politicians subsequent to his departure. His once-closest comrade, Abduh, apart from assuming the position of Grand Mufti of Egypt, also adamantly carried the reformist trend forward and continued with Afghani's elite-training mission. Indeed, with some overlaps with Afghani's disciples, his protégés included such prominent personages as Rashid Rida,¹⁴ Qasim Amin (d. 1908, pioneer of the women's movement in Egypt), the Abd al-Raziq brothers Mustafa and Ali (d. 1947, d. 1966, respectively),¹⁵ the renowned blind man of letters Taha Hussein (d. 1973),¹⁶ and Lutfi al-Sayyid (d. 1963).

Abduh, following Afghani, is known to have undertaken the task of showing that Islam was fully consistent with "the claims of the human intellect and the discoveries of modern science" and that it could easily be reconciled with modern thought.¹⁷ After all,

¹⁴ His conversion story to the reformist path adds a somewhat epic character to the reformist tradition. He hears some of *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa*'s articles read by Egyptian exiles at his father's place around 1884-85 in Tripoli. He also met with Abduh when the latter visited his hometown. But when he finds the complete set of *Urwa al-Wuthqa* in his father's library, shock and thrill would follow: "[E]very number was like an electric current striking me, giving my soul a shock, or setting it in a blaze.... My own experience and that of others, and history have taught me that no other Arabic discourse in this age or the centuries which preceded it has done what it did in the way of touching the seat of emotion in the heart and persuasion in the mind" Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 226. Although he could not join Afghani in Istanbul, he later became Abduh's "liege man" and undertook a comparable journalistic activity by publishing *Manar* for some 37 years until his death. Hence his deep desire to perpetuate the *Urwa* tradition (Ibid.).

¹⁵ While the former was al-Azhar's rector between 1945-47, the latter is the famous author of *al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (1925), an oft-cited book largely interpreted as repudiating "Islamic government" and the proclaiming the caliphate's necessity. Ibid., 184-92. Rida would declare the book to be "an attempt of the enemies of Islam to weaken and divide it from within." Ibid., 189. The Abd-al Raziq brothers' father was a close friend of Abduh.

¹⁶ We later find Qutb entering into a polemic in 1939 with Hussein (a.k.a. "the prince of Arabic literature") on the latter's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), wherein Hussein suggested that Egypt belonged in the West. Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 74. That Mustafa Abd-al Raziq and Hussayn were graduates of Sorbonne, while Ali did his Ph.D. at Oxford, are noteworthy details that indicate their mastery of the Western social sciences at the time.

¹⁷ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 143-44.

the Qur'an was the first holy book in which "revelation and reason merge[d] through the messenger of God."¹⁸ This project of reconciliation and synthesis had some twists for the subsequent trajectory of the *islah* movement, even among Abduh's own disciples. As Albert Hourani maintained, Abduh's gesture would open the door of Islamic doctrine in the long run to the flood of all modern ideas and innovations in a temptation to prove that "Islam was everything the modern world approved."¹⁹ Consequently, Lutfi al-Sayyid, Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, and Taha Hussein would carry the reconciliatory ideas of Abduh's reform in the direction of complete secularism, in stark contrast to Abduh's intention to erect a wall against it.²⁰

Another line of thinking, however, was emerging, most notably due to the efforts of Rida, the foremost disseminator of Abduh's reform ideas throughout the Muslim world via his *Manar* journal.²¹ He would also make a critical intervention in the trajectory of Islamic reform by taking it closer to the strict revivalist branch of the Salafiyya (i.e., the formalistic and anti-rationalistic approach of the Wahhabis) movement.²² Still, his project maintained its reformist vigor and retained the basic gist of Afghani's project. He correctly observed the need for Muslim strength and the significance of economic power

¹⁸ Muhammad Abduh, *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Cairo: 1965), 8. Cited by Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists, and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2011), 242.

¹⁹ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 144, 62.

²⁰ Ibid., 144-45; Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 232.

²¹ Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 231. *Manar* was also the title of Abduh and Rida's 35-year-long project of Qur'anic exegesis, most of which was written by Rida after Abduh's death in 1905. Rida thus earned the status of "the leading mouthpiece of Abduh's ideas, the guardian of his name, and his biographer." Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 226.

²² His praise for the Wahhabis would strike his readers, who would see clear contrasts between the reconciliatory and rationalistic Afghani and Abduh and the formalist and purist Wahhabis. In Hourani's account, Rida's early Hanbalism, which is an easy segue into Wahhabism, might account for this later embrace. Indeed, Rida would welcome the Wahhabis' conquest of the Hejaz, defend them against the charges of heresy by declaring their teachings wholly orthodox, and commend their puritanical attitude toward saint veneration in folk religion. He would go as far as to praise Ibn Saud for defending Sunni Islam's essential principles better than almost anyone since the first four caliphs. Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 231.

for resisting Western capitalist imperialism.²³ Moreover, his Wahhabi sympathies did not lead him to renounce the reformist goal of seeking Sunni-Shi'i unity.²⁴ Committed to ending the dormancy of Islamic jurisprudence and its *taqlid* (blind imitation) by rigorously activating the use of *ijtihad*,²⁵ he would take "the spirit of the age" into consideration when renegotiating traditional rulings.²⁶ Overall, he wanted Muslims to be ruled by a system of law that was applicable in the modern world.²⁷ In sum, just like Afghani, he wanted a middle way between the Westernizers and the regressive traditional classes: an "Islamic progressive party."²⁸

Rida, like his predecessors, held regular circles and trained disciples. Among the regular attendees was a secularly-educated young man of special significance, Hasan al-Banna, who would establish the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In 1928, only four years after Mustafa Kemal abolished the caliphate, the MB was the twentieth century's first and ultimately largest transnational Muslim organization.²⁹ Although there are no records about the extent of his direct discipleship, it is significant that Banna not only frequented Rida's circles, but that he had also already immersed himself in *Manar*, which he would continue to publish after Rida passed away in 1935.³⁰ If we consider that this journal was

²³ Ibid., 238.

²⁴ Ibid., 230-31.

²⁵ Ibid., 233. He also made *maslaha* (the Muslims' general interests), which used to be a subordinate principle, a positive principle of decision (p. 234). More importantly, he regarded *ijma* (consensus) as a legislative principle, as opposed to a judicial principle, that has to be renewed every generation by some kind of parliamentary process (p. 234-35).

²⁶ Ibid., 237.

²⁷ Ibid., 239.

²⁸ "They had the independence of mind necessary to understand at the same time the laws of Islam and the essence of modern civilization, ... they would reconcile change with the preservation of the moral basis of the community." Ibid., 243.

²⁹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 249. The Muslim Brotherhood's official site mentions Rida's works as the most important reformist influence on Banna. See *Ikhwanweb*, "Hasan Al-Banna and His Political Thought of Islamic Brotherhood," May 13, 2008, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=17065> (accessed June 12, 2012).

replaced by *the Muslim Brotherhood* journal later on³¹ and that Sayyid Qutb would be the editor-in-chief of the organization's official publication after he joined it in 1953, we can draw a direct line from Afghani to Qutb via the Islamist journalistic tradition of *Urwa*.

Regardless of the extent of actual discipleship, Banna definitely carried on Afghani, Abduh, and Rida's work and built a mass organization that would, in a sense, embody the Rational Salafi reform movement.³² The MB's foundation is not only a momentous political event that continues to exert influence even now, and maybe even more in the post-Arab Spring era, for it also represents a critical juncture that distinguishes modern Muslim politics from the traditional era in at least two ways. First, as a secularly-educated Muslim, Banna represented a rupture in the Islamic leadership by breaking its ulama-centered character. From that time on, and more so in the case of Qutb, Muslims escaped the hierarchy of the religious class and openly expressed their views against those ulama who sought to assume intellectual leadership. Second, along with the MB's foundation and Banna's formulations of Islamic government, saving, perpetuating, or resuscitating the caliphate would cease to be a major concern for a certain segment of the new generation of Sunni Muslims, even though Banna was not an opponent of the institution. In other words, up until Rida preservation of the historical institution of caliphate was an important matter, as Rida had earlier denounced Ali Abd al-Raziq for calling the caliphate an unnecessary institution and even a "false idea."³³

³¹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 54. The Arabic title of the Muslim Brotherhood's official journal is *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*, the same as the name of the organization.

³² Hamid Algar, introduction to *Social Justice in Islam*, by Sayyid Qutb (Oneonta, NY: Islamic Publications International 2000), 4.

³³ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 188. The misunderstandings then and now that surround Abd al-Raziq's argument must be pointed out. As Khatab argues, this person never claims that Islam governs only the spiritual sphere and is limited to

But Rida's concerns were less doctrinal than political, as he thought this move away from the idea of a caliphate would have dire implications: it would make the Muslim world "a prey to the wild beasts of imperialism."³⁴ He would go on to develop a theory of an Islamic state based on a restored but genuine caliph, unlike the Ottoman caliphate that was not real.³⁵ One could argue, therefore, that Rida was the first person to offer the concept of an "Islamic state" and that Banna borrowed the idea from him but without the caliphate.³⁶ Surprisingly, al-Banna uses the term "president," as opposed to "caliph," for the elected leader of this Islamic "state," as opposed to "caliphate."³⁷

Banna's overall reform agenda was premised on the commonplace Islamist axiom that Islam, far from being a philosophical doctrine or cultural trend, was a social movement that sought social improvement in all aspects of life:³⁸ "Islam comprises and regulates all human affairs and does not shrink from new problems and necessary reforms... It is not restricted to religious and spiritual matters; ... it regulates all the affairs of this life and the next."³⁹ Since he was not very philosophically grounded or motivated, Banna was far less interested in the intellectual dimension of religious reform *per se* than his predecessors, He was focused on the plight of the downtrodden in Egypt.

rituals. as does the classical secular argument (A number of scholars including Kepel, Haddad, and Mortimer make this interpretation). He says: "They say that in my book I have suggested that Islam is only spiritual and has nothing to do with the affairs of life. This view in fact has no trace in my book and it never was [my] opinion. What I do believe and what I have suggested in my book is that Islam is a legislative religion (*din tashri'i*) and [that] the *Shariah* impacts on all spheres of life. They also say that I claim that the Caliphate is not and never was a valid Islamic system (*nizam shar'i*). However, what I am saying is that if Muslims agreed that their government should be [a] Caliphate and viewed the Caliphate as the foremost system for their common welfare, then the Caliphate is a lawful Islamic government (*hukumah shar'iyyah*) ... The application of shariah in all spheres of life depends on [the] government of any form and of any type, limited or unlimited, autocratic or republican, tyrannical or constitutional, consutative or democratic, socialistic or Bolshevik. Islam does not impose upon Muslims a particular type or form of government, but allows us to choose the form that is able to facilitate the application of the *Shari'ah*." Sayed Khatab, "*Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb*," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002): 148-49.

³⁴ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 241.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 240-41.

³⁶ Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists*, 249.

³⁷ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 63.

³⁸ Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence*, 70.

³⁹ From *Five Tracts of al-Banna*. Cited by *Ibid.*, 82.

He sought to turn the gains of the reformist school into a mosque-centered social movement that could achieve communal empowerment, resist secularization, socially uplift the underprivileged, and liberate the country from British rule. In short, he wanted to establish a just social order based on Islam in a deeply unequal and foreign-ruled country.⁴⁰

Toward these ends, he was willing to work within a truly democratic regime: “the Muslim Brethren believe that the system of Constitutional Rule is the nearest of all present ruling systems to Islam,”⁴¹ and,

[T]he foundations of the parliamentary system have ... [no] conflict with the foundations of government laid down by Islam... On this basis, we would also say with confidence that the fundamental principles upon which the Egyptian constitution is established [do not contradict] the foundations of Islam; and [they are] not far from the Islamic system.⁴²

In other words, Banna worked within the system not just for the sake of political expediency when he stood for election twice, but because he believed in it for Islamic reasons. His problem was not with the parliamentary regime and the Egyptian constitution, as he believed in the Islamic nature of both, but with their misapplication and failure to protect their own fundamental principles.⁴³ As Mitchell pointed out, Banna’s movement “never became a political party or advocated the overthrow of the

⁴⁰ Several traits of this communal revival and reform program are laid out in *Ibid.*, 75-82. There, one can find several recurring themes of the *islah* tradition, such as the return to original religion, anti-imperialism, antagonism toward ulema for shirking their social responsibility and even collaborating with imperialists (*Ibid.*, 75), asserting that the Qur’an provides the criteria for social reform, political unity, and the basis for political and moral regeneration (*Ibid.*, 79); distinguishing between colonialism, Western civilization, and Christianity (*Ibid.*, 79-80); and yet claiming the moral bankruptcy of Western civilization (*Ibid.*, 81-82). More novel in his strategy was his massive efforts and impressive success in winning the masses’ allegiance and support and appealing to the workers, peasants, students, and the underprivileged (*Ibid.*, 78).

⁴¹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 65.

⁴² Al-Banna, *Rasa’il al-Imam al-Shahid*, 321-22. Cited in *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70.

state by violent means... It maintained that the transformation of society was to come primarily through the transformation of the individuals within society.”⁴⁴

Thus, from Afghani onward, the Rational Salafi *islah* movement, as opposed to the royalists among the traditionalist ulama or some pro-colonialist Westernists, consistently called for and justified constitutional rule or democracy on Islamic grounds. Following Afghani, Abduh and Rida wrote several articles making the case that good government (i.e., consultative government) was a key to Muslim empowerment.⁴⁵ Even when formulating a caliph-led Islamic state, Rida was quite clear on this point:

“Authority belongs to the *ummah*, ... decision making is through *shura*, that government is a form of a republic, ... the ruler is not favored in a court of law to the layman.”⁴⁶

Not only did these predecessors of Sayyid Qutb approve of constitutional rule and democracy, they also continued to see the post-Tahtawi affirmation of *wataniyyah* (patriotism) and *qawmiyyah* (nationalism) on Islamic grounds as not contradicting Islamic principles.⁴⁷ In a nutshell, up until Qutb, Rational Salafi thinkers had no major issue with modern Western political concepts. In fact, these very thinkers vigorously affirmed the basic anti-secularist Islamist axiom that Islam is not limited to rituals and spirituality, but rather enjoins those principles necessary for a just social, economic, and political life. Therefore, Qutb can be credited with introducing the paradigm shift on democracy, or a *Stimmung* shift, among the Rational Salafis. This is despite the fact that

⁴⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁴⁵ For Abduh's views, see Muhammad Abduh, "Al-Shura wa al-Istibdad," in *Tarikh al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad Abduh*, ed. Muhammad Rashid Rida (Cairo: Al-Manar, 1931).

⁴⁶ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 56. Rida not only laid down these principles, but also clearly stated that the leader would be elected by the people as a contract: If he abused his power, the people would retain right to impeach and replace him. If this office were usurped, then the people had the right to overthrow the usurper. Following a long line of shura theorists, Rida would justify these views by modernizing the meanings of such traditional juridical concepts as *ijma* (consensus), *masalih mursalah* (public interest), *Sadd al-Dhara'i* (blocking the means [to evil]), and *al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar* (commanding the rights and forbidding the wrong) Ibid., 57.

⁴⁷ For Banna's position of this, see Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence*, 82.

each thinker in this unique line that connects Afghani to Qutb has his own views and that each of them may have suggested bits and pieces of the ideas that Qutb would inherit and then articulate in a far more coherent manner.

Qutb, who started his life the same year as Banna in 1906, in a village of Asyut Province in Upper Egypt, would change the course of contemporary Muslim political thought. The unique intellectual and political circumstances of that time formed a background to which Qutb's particular intellectual project of Islamism responded. As he converted to Islamism in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, he encountered the intellectual problems that earlier reform had come up against: the borrowed concepts and established secular ideologies of nationalism, liberalism, and communism. The intellectual dimension of this transformation went hand in hand with the formative influence of political events under Nasser, of which he was at the center due to his persecution and eventual execution by the secularist, nationalist, and socialist regime. His first-hand encounter with the brutal secularist regime established by Nasser, a man who had once been his friend and associate, made it personally clear to him that the Islamist political movement would have to make a complete mental break with secular ideologies and that the inherited modes of Islamic thought would be of little help to his envisaged task of purification and systematization.

5.2 An Intellectual Biography of Sayyid Qutb (1906-66)

Coming from a pious family background, Qutb memorized the Qur'an during his childhood, attended the local elementary school, and moved to Cairo later to continue his education in state-run secular schools. In 1933-34 he graduated from Dar al-Ulum, a

teacher's college for Arabic-language instructors that also featured Islamic classes in its curriculum.⁴⁸ By then he had published *The Task of the Poet and the Poetry of the Present Generation*⁴⁹ and belonged to the literary circles of Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, a famous literary critic, nationalist, and close friend of his uncle.⁵⁰ For the next decade he would write numerous articles on literary, social, and political criticism as well as three novels, including the love story *Ashwak (Thorns)*.⁵¹ The most religious works he published were analyses of the Qur'an from a literary perspective.⁵² He was also known for his polemic with Taha Hussein, Abduh's protégé who later became a liberal secularist, due to Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1939).⁵³ This was written from a more Egyptian nationalist perspective than from an Arab nationalist or Islamist one. This was the closest he came to secularism.⁵⁴ That is to say, although his perspective was not Islamist and was aesthetically committed to the separation of art and religion, he still showed no signs of true secularism, namely, confining religion to conscience, or at most to personal morality.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ William Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb as Reflected in Earlier and Later Editions of 'Social Justice in Islam,'" *Die Welt des Islams* 32, no. 2 (1992): 197.

⁴⁹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 74.

⁵⁰ Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (London: Routledge, 2006), 54.

⁵¹ Shepard, "Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 197. The novel's dedication reads as follows: "To the one who plunged with me into the thorns, bled as I bled, was wretched as I was wretched, then went her way as I went mine: both wounded after the battle." John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 108.

⁵² *Al-Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an* [Artistic Portrayal in the Qur'an] (1944); *Mashahid al-Qiyamah fi al-Qur'an* [Scenes of the Resurrection in the Qur'an]. Shepard takes these works as manifestations of Qutb's increasing interest in the Islamic viewpoint.

⁵³ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 74. Here he tried to rebuff Hussein's argument that Egypt belonged to the Mediterranean-Western civilization, not the Eastern civilization.

⁵⁴ Shepard also describes his ideological position at the time as nationalist and secularist. Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 197.

⁵⁵ Adnan Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 155. Musallam focuses on his conversion and the aspect of intellectual development in his thought. In fact, a considerable amount of literature (led by Shepherd and Musallam) shows an interest in his early secularism and eventual conversion to Islamism.

Around the same time he was the editor of the journal *The Arab World* and the *New Thought* until 1948. He was joined by the future Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz while editing the latter.⁵⁶ Here he boldly addressed poverty, oppression, colonialism, capitalism, and corruption and offered his own ideas of sociopolitical reform. But most significantly, he was approaching these issues from an increasingly Islamic perspective.⁵⁷ This would end after his harsh criticisms of the government. Along with the journal's closure, an order for his arrest was issued. Yet officials later decided to send him to the United States on an official mission for the Ministry of Education, in which he had been working since graduating from college.⁵⁸ He was to study Western methods of education; however, he mainly stayed in Colorado as a student at the Colorado State Teachers' College.⁵⁹ Despite the government's expectations that he would change while abroad, this experience (1948-50) only strengthened Qutb's future direction. While enamored by the achievements of the United States' material civilization, he returned to Egypt fully convinced of Western civilization's hopeless materialism and moral bankruptcy. On his way to the United States, he completed his first truly Islamist book: *Social Justice in Islam*. It was published in 1949 while he was still there.⁶⁰

The following sixteen years were full of dramatic events at a critical time for Egypt, which would also decisively shape transnational Islamism's trajectory for decades to come. Upon his return, he published a series of books detailing his critique of modern

⁵⁶ Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 138. Qutb also reviewed three of Mahfouz's novels in the 1940s and saluted their ethical, religious, and nationalist content. Later, Mahfouz argued that Qutb was one of the two critics responsible for rescuing him from obscurity. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 106.

⁵⁷ Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 139.

⁵⁸ The other view suggests that his trip to the US was arranged by friends in government in order to forestall his arrest. Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 198.

⁵⁹ Currently the University of Northern Colorado.

⁶⁰ He also published articles on his impressions from his stay, "The America I Have Seen," which was mentioned earlier in regards to the PBS report.

civilization and making his case for Islam's civilizing and liberating promise vis-à-vis humanity. Two of them came out in 1951: *The Battle between Islam and Capitalism* and *Islam and Universal Peace*. Around the same time he befriended MB members serving in the army, later known as the Free Officers, who frequently visited him at home and attended his lectures. One of these officers was Gamal Abd al-Nasser.⁶¹ A short time later, these same officers led the 1952 revolution and Qutb began advising the Revolutionary Command Council on educational and cultural reform. On one occasion, President Muhammad Naguib likened him to the French Revolution's Comte de Mirabeau and dubbed him "the thinker of the revolution" and the foremost thinker of Islam in [that] epoch.⁶² On Egyptian radio, Qutb personally explained the revolution's Islamic goals in a six-month series of talks.⁶³ As the MB and Free Officers started to drift apart, Qutb tried to play a mediating role.

He came up with a corporatist idea of a Liberation Rally (*Hay'at al-Tahrir*), during which he would bring youth, students, laborers, and the MB under one umbrella to pursue the Islamization of society and turn the revolution into a mass movement.⁶⁴ It would eventually take the form of an Islamic organization that would absorb the MB. Qutb noted that Nasser agreed to this plan and they organized an event in January 1953.

However, conflicts arose over Qutb's overall program: restoration of the constitutional

⁶¹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 75.

⁶² Ibid. Qutb's remarks at this reception, which he addressed to the audience including Nasser and Sadat, is ironic for the current reader, knowing the rest of the story: "Truly the revolution has begun. But we should not express our gratitude to it in this way, because it has not done anything yet. The king's departure is not the aim of the revolution. Its aim is to turn the country to Islam... As you all know, during the kingdom period I personally was prepared to be detained at any time. Even now in this age, detention or no detention is also not impossible." Nasser, who would hang this very same man would say in response, "I assure you brother, that they cannot reach you except over my dead body. You know the commitment of the men of the revolution that we would sacrifice our life for your safety." Salah al-Khalidi, *Sayyid Qutb min al-Milad ila al-Istishhad* [Sayyid Qutb from Birth to Martyrdom] (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1994), 304. Cited by Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 75.

⁶³ Khatab, "Arabism and Islamism in Sayyid Qutb's Thought," 231.

⁶⁴ Algar relates this as Qutb being invited to become the director of this newly established government party and to draw up its program and statutes, which he refused to do. Algar, "Introduction," 5.

rule within six months; the army's immediate return to its barracks; and a call for elections, land reform, and labor reform.⁶⁵ In February 1953, after admitting that his mediation efforts had failed, his attachment to the MB grew stronger. He soon resigned from his advising position and eventually joined the MB. Nasser at that time aligned himself with the Soviet camp.⁶⁶ During this period, Qutb published his *Dirasat Islamiyyah (Islamic Studies)*, a collection of articles he had written during the revolution.⁶⁷

Qutb's formal participation in the MB from March 1953 onward was the third and last stage in his political-intellectual development. During these years he would adopt an increasingly radical stance as the subsequent dramatic events leading to his long-term imprisonment, torture, and eventual execution unfolded. He held senior positions in the Guidance Council, led the Department of Propagation and Guidance, assumed the position of editor of the MB's newspaper, and served as the organization's chief spokesperson. All the while, the tension between Nasser and the MB turned into an official government campaign against the latter. After an attempt was made on his life, Nasser dissolved the MB on January 12, 1954, and ushered in a wave of political turmoil at the end of which Qutb found himself in prison. Except for a brief period of freedom between 1964 and 1965, Qutb would remain in prison until his execution.

The most characteristic element of this period is his deep immersion in the Qur'an as he undertook his multi-volume opus of exegesis, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of*

⁶⁵ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 76-77. While collectivist and corporatist inspiration of the Liberation Rally probably from the Italian, German or Soviet examples is fairly obvious, Qutb's commitment to transitioning to a social democracy must also be noted here. Algar notes the demands for a return to civilian rule or for a constitutional referendum as the Ikhwan's official demands of the Revolutionary Council. Algar, "Introduction," 5.

⁶⁶ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 77.

⁶⁷ Khatab, "Arabism and Islamism in Sayyid Qutb's Thought on Nationalism," 219.

the *Qur'an*) and his increasingly radical outlook toward society. In 1964, his famous ideological manifesto *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones)*⁶⁸ proclaimed that “all existing societies today are practically *jahili* societies,”⁶⁹ including those that call themselves “Muslim.”⁷⁰ Despite torture and chronic illness that caused him to spend long periods in the prison hospital, he managed to carry on his prolific writing. Interestingly, the court agreed with his publisher that Qutb could send his works out for publication based on his contractual obligation. However, the government appointed an official al-Azhar committee to review his publications’ appropriateness according to Islam. The committee approved all of his works, except his conception of *jahiliyyah* in *Ma'alim*. Since Nasser himself read and permitted its distribution, however, it was not censored. After its immediate popularity and a wave of successive reprints, the government and then al-Azhar banned it.⁷¹ As General Fouad Allam asserted much later in 1995, the regime commissioned a group of Azhari scholars to refute it. This publication, *Du'ah wa la Qudah (Preachers, Not Judges)* eventually came out under the name of the General Guide al-Hudaybi, who was also in prison.⁷²

⁶⁸ Four of *Milestones*’ 12 chapters were taken out of his *Zilal* with some revisions. Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 89. As will be detailed below, Qutb interpreted *jahiliyyah* as part of an antinomy akin to civilization and barbarism. Indeed, the closest translation would not be *ignorance*, but savagery or barbarism.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91. To clarify a common misunderstanding, this characterization refers only to societies and is directed at the level of norms and foundations. Qutb never condemned individual Muslim, for he never stated or implied that Muslims living in *jahili* societies were apostates: “We did not declare people *kafirs*, as this would be slanderous, but we say that they have become ignorant of the true meaning of the creed.” William Shepard, “Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of *Jāhiliyya*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003): 542. This nuance is critical for understanding his political ontology. See also Sayyid Qutb, *Li Madha A'damuni? [Why Did They Execute Me?]* (Cairo: Dar Nun, 2007), 86.

⁷¹ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 77.

⁷² Allam, whose words about Qutb was quoted in the epigraph, relates: “Brothers who were brought to jail in 1965 were of three groups, comprising followers of al-Banna, the followers of al-Hudaybi and the followers of Sayyid Qutb. There was no disagreement among them: they were [sic] all agreed that contemporary society was in a condition of *jahiliyyah* that must be changed to establish an Islamic state. Exactly when an Islamic state should be established varied amongst the three groups.” Khatab, “Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb,” 149.

Qutb was released in May 1964 due to the mediation attempts of Iraqi president Abd al-Salam Aref, who then invited him to Iraq to work in the field of education. Despite the encouragements of al-Talmasani, the third General Guide of the MB, Qutb decided to stay “to defend his convictions.”⁷³

He did not envisage the vanguard as merely an abstract group of “a unique Qur’anic generation.”⁷⁴ Beginning in 1962, both inside and outside the prison, a vanguard group had been formed under the guidance of Qutb and al-Hudaybi, the Second General Guide of the MB. They would undergo a thirteen-year⁷⁵ period of creedal training and education during which they would seek to enlist public support for an Islamic state. If at the end of this effort a majority of the people did not support them, they would train for another thirteen years.⁷⁶ The regime linked this vanguard group, also named *Tanzim*, with other circles that allegedly plotted a violent overthrow of Nasser’s rule.⁷⁷

During the trial led by the military tribunal, prosecutors cited many excerpts from the *Ma’alim*. Qutb clearly emphasized that only long-term moral training and educational

⁷³ Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 165.

⁷⁴ “It is necessary that there should be a vanguard which sets out with this determination and then keeps walking on this path, marching through the vast ocean of *Jahiliyyah* which has encompassed the entire world. During its course, it should keep itself somewhat aloof from this all-encompassing *Jahiliyyah* and should also keep some ties with it” Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2002), 12. Qutb, *Ma’alim*, 9.

⁷⁵ The significance of thirteen years comes from the Makkan period of the Prophet’s mission of propagating Islam.

⁷⁶ Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 168. Musallam records that this group supplied the pretext for the regime for Qutb’s second arrest on August 9, 1965.

⁷⁷ Algar, “Introduction,” 9. Qutb provides a detailed account of the formation of “new organization” among the ex-prisoners. In his account, he clearly rejects the use of violence to bring about *shariah*, which he sees as only the consequence of a long training period in the Islamic creed and ethics and the resulting societal transformation: “Founding an Islamic order is not be possible by a top-down change of power. It can come about only through a revolution in the minds and norms of the whole society, or the part of it that would direct the rest.” Seyyid Kutub, *Son Sözler: Beni Niçin İdam Ettiler?* [Turkish Translation of Li Madha A’damuni?] (Istanbul: Nehir, 1992), 56-57. Qutb, *Li Madha*, 90-92. “The first point is not to establish an Islamic system or rule of *shariah*, but the transformation of the societies themselves.” The use of defensive violence if the government were to attack the organization, as happened in 1954, was justified in Qutb’s view, though, only because they were sure that they would be persecuted and stood no chance of receiving fair trials when they were arrested. Even then, only those members who had grasped the creed properly and been ethically matured could be trained for the organization’s defense forces. Kutub, *Son Sözler*, 63. He also says: “Our agreement had been steering clear of the use of force either to change the regime or to establish an Islamic system. But at the same time, we decided that it would be used in the event of aggression against the organization (*Tanzim*), which operates on the method of creedal education, moral training, and building a basis for Islam in society.” Qutb, *Li Madha*, 93.

activities could initiate the radical societal change that would eventually bring about an Islamic state.⁷⁸ On August 21, 1966, he and two of his associates were sentenced to death for their alleged attempt to overthrow Nasser's regime by force. Despite numerous mediation attempts and widespread protests from international organizations, including Amnesty International, over the unfair trials, Qutb was hanged on August 29, 1966.⁷⁹ Hence, the ultimate archetype of an Islamist ideologue and *shahid* (martyr) was born for generations of Muslims who would be influenced not just by his powerful words, but also his readiness to sacrifice his life for those ideas.

Qutb left behind twenty-six books, three volumes of poetry, and more than 1,500 articles and essays in various Arabic periodicals.⁸⁰ *Milestones* has remained an immensely popular book. His works have been translated into probably every major Islamic language, and generations of politically active Muslims have been deeply touched by his life and death. While other Islamist ideologues can be found, such as Mawdudi and Shariati, in my particular narrative Qutb's intellectual transformations represent the trajectory of Islamism in a far clearer sense in its constant encounter with the political and intellectual milieu. It seemed to him that the reconciliatory position of the earlier Rational Salafi mood had not created enough safeguards to forestall the growth of multiple foundations and variegated political commitments, including secular options. He therefore sought to revise the age-old Islamic civilizational discourse in order to clarify and strengthen its unique and singular ontology as the foundation of civilization and the only hope for humanity, given Western civilization's spiritual bankruptcy.

⁷⁸ Algar, "Introduction," 9-10.

⁷⁹ Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 170-71.

⁸⁰ Khatab and Bouma, *Democracy in Islam*, 78.

Aside from straightening this intellectual legacy, in his later capacity as a radical sociopolitical critic, his dramatic encounters with the political system made at least two things obvious to him: Only a purely Islamic solution could provide social justice in that deeply unequal, despotic, and colonial society. Even after more populist forces (viz., Nasser) came to power, the pervasive persecution and torture they practiced convinced him that such oppressive policies were a sign of anti-Islamic barbarity (*jahiliyyah*).

As far as the trajectory of the Islamist view from Qutb's perspective is concerned, his foundational problem with the new kind of secularist regimes in the Muslim world was ultimately crystallized through his bitter experience with Nasserite oppression. During his earlier engagement with the Free Officers and the revolution, Qutb was probably hopeful that an Islamic state could be established rather quickly. As events took an unexpected turn, he could only conclude that something fundamentally wrong must have been going on in these regimes, and thus it would take a lot more effort than what the nationalists and their relatively anti-imperialist and egalitarian policies could achieve at that point in time.

This was the turning point for Qutb and the Muslim political thought in which his paradigm reigned. The problem with Muslim societies went much deeper than Afghani or Abduh ever anticipated. Traditional oppressive and modern secularist digression from Islam at the societal level was far more insidious than they recognized. Islam needed a literal revival from its extinct state. Only a complete mental break with existing social norms at the foundational level could save them. Since Islam's message, as contained in the Qur'an, was still intact, the solution was to take the revealed text as the foundational

source and create a whole new set of social values by deducing them from the Qur'an.

This foundational reform and its socialization through a dedicated vanguard would provide humanity with its much desired goals of freedom, equality, peace, and justice, for only Islam could remove humanity from the cul-de-sac of materialistic civilization and put it back on track toward acquiring these values. But how was this to be done?

5.3 Islam: A Civilization for Humanity's Harmony and Emancipation

Aside from his conversion from Egyptian nationalism to Islamism, Qutb's intellectual development during his Islamist phase has drawn much attention.⁸¹ This might seem to be a problem while trying to disentangle his political ontology, but as my holistic reading will seek to demonstrate, he never rescinded his earlier commitments to social justice, human liberty, and civilization, although there is a visibly increasing emphasis on the primacy of creed (*aqidah*)⁸² and a decreased flexibility as regards *shariah* and *ijtihad*.⁸³

⁸¹ See, Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb"; Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*; Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*; Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*. Shepard calls this conversion one from Muslim secularist to moderate radical Islamism in the late 1940s, and then to extreme radical Islamism during the last years of his life (Ibid., 200-01). Calvert, on the other hand, characterizes it as moving from "Egyptian nationalism" to (radical) Islamism. The most striking indicator of Qutb's evolution is, as Shepard aptly analyzed, the revisions he made through the first and third editions of *Social Justice* from 1949 to 1974 (posthumous edition). Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 196.

⁸² Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 204.

⁸³ Ibid., 215. The fact that Qutb kept the bulk of the contents of the first edition of *Social Justice* intact in later editions shows that these sensibilities, which sometimes took a very modern and at times Marxian fervor, continued to exert a definite influence on his thinking. Still, the most significant revisions were the increasing frequency of *hakimiyyah* and *jahiliyyah*, and more evident references to the primacy of creed (*aqidah*). Yet it is significant that he added some material to the original text to emphasize the importance of economic independence for the ability to criticize the ruler as a *sine qua non* for human liberty (Ibid., 215). In my general framework, I will show how his anti-hermeneutic fundamentalism eventually overpowered his liberation theology. That he restricts *ijtihad* only to circumstances where the *nass* (clear Qur'anic text) does not exist is a clear indication of this. The other revisions include an increased use of Islamic vocabulary (*imam* and *ummah* instead of *sultan* and *shah*, respectively) (Ibid., 211), the decrease of such apologetic suggestions as limiting *jihad* to defensive wars (Ibid., 209), and moderation of some of his earlier excoriating critique of the Companions, which is somewhat taboo for Sunni Muslims and would draw condemnations from conservative and Wahhabi circles.

These concerns, therefore, did not lose any weight in Qutb's later thought, but only became part of his decidedly more holistic and foundationalist Islamic worldview.⁸⁴

One chapter in his purist work, *Ma'alim*, is titled "*Al-Islam Huwa al-Hadarah*" ("Islam Is *the* Civilization").⁸⁵ This shows how it makes sense to locate his work within the civilization framework of post-Afghani reformism. Thus Qutb would emerge as yet another theorist of Islamic civilization, even though he makes very few references to Afghani.⁸⁶

Accordingly, I will start off with Qutb's conception of civilization and vicegerency, the more indicative aspects of the post-Afghani legacy in his thought. His views on reason vs. revelation, and *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah*, and the role they play in establishing an all-harmonious ontopolitical whole, will follow. Finally, I will explicate his theory of liberation at the ontological, ethical, and political levels. This will eventually include his theory of *shura* and world peace.

Civilization and Human Vicegerency

In his overall framework, Qutb carries on the Rational Salafi reformists' fundamental argument that Islam, properly understood, is the best means for humanity to overcome animality and achieve civilization and progress. In his view, each human being is a rational, progressive being who is in a particular relationship with other humans, other creatures in the universe, and, above all, God. Humanity's God-given purpose is to

⁸⁴ Even though he stated that he disowned much of his earlier work (Ibid., 201), this must be due to his heavy borrowings from Western authors. Yet it might be argued that they had already shaped his thought and were clearly visible even in his latest works.

⁸⁵ Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 105.

⁸⁶ In one of those infrequent references, he credits Afghani for his spiritual leadership in his efforts to overcome moral degradation and for his work on spiritual renewal to restore their civilization. Sayyid Qutb, "Qiyadatuna al-Ruhiyyah" [Our Spiritual Leadership], *Al-Risalah* 705 (January 1947): 27. Cited by Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 112.

improve and cultivate life and the world around it: “The human being spends all of his energy to nourish, modify, improve, and advance things on this Earth, and to undertake creations in the matter by God’s will.”⁸⁷ In this sense, he seems to continue on Afghani’s *islahi* path by embracing the goal of civilization and progress, as do their Western counterparts. He does not advocate total isolation from contemporary civilization: “We do not call for intellectual and mental social isolation from the rush of humanity. We are part of the caravan, partners in the human civilization.”⁸⁸ Given this sentiment, what is the problem with Western civilization?

Qutb thinks that both capitalism and communism, representing the two available paths in the Western world, have led humanity down the wrong path.⁸⁹ Speaking of capitalism as reflected by Egypt’s social conditions, Qutb says: “It is against the spirit of human civilization in any sense of the term, against the spirit of religion by any interpretation, and against the spirit of the age by any necessary standard.”⁹⁰ Having drained the principles of the French Revolution of their vitality, Europe and America

⁸⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Khasa'is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa Muqawwimatihi* [The Islamic Conception and Its Characteristics] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), 187. Thus, Islam’s ideal human being “participates fully in activities on this earth by researching, investigating, and inventing new things but always in accordance with high moral standards and lofty aims.” Sayyid Qutb, “The Islamic Concept and Its Characteristics,” <http://www.islambasics.com/view.php?bkID=156>.

⁸⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'rakat al-Islam wa al-Ra'simaliyyah* [The Battle between Islam and Capitalism] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006), 28.

⁸⁹ Qutb was not as well-grounded in Western philosophy as is Abduh. His sources on Western philosophers are almost always secondary works in Arabic. He has a particular interest in such inter-war thinkers as Julian Huxley, J. H. Denison, Leopold Weiss (Muhammad Asad), and particularly Alexis Carrel. Interestingly enough, his attraction for the Western civilization’s spiritualist and emotionalist self-critiques led him to the sway of eugenics like Carrel and Huxley. In his largely simplistic narrative of Western philosophy, we first find god-like humans and human-like gods competing with each other, both of whom are replaced by self-worshipping hedonist humans during Roman times. Christianity came to abnegate the human being and his natural dispositions and sexuality, to which the eighteenth-century Enlightenment responded by placing him and his freedom at the center of the universe and deifying human reason. This was replaced in the nineteenth century by the dominance of materialism and naturalism, represented by Marx, Darwin, and Freud. This process ended up relegating humans to the level of animals. Even if they seem to dominate the universe, Qutb cites Huxley, this is something like the domination of cats or rats. Seyyid Kutub, *İslam ve Medeniyetin Problemleri* [Turkish Translation of Al-Islam wa Mushkilat al-Hadharah], trans. Mustafa Varlı (Ankara: Hilal, 1967), 62-65.

⁹⁰ Qutb, *Ma'rakat*, 5. In another work, he says after the meaning of the French Revolution’s goals was worn out and drained of any new ideals, Euro-American civilization became fixated on material development and industry. They seem to live off of the revolution’s ideals, which turned into empty principles, but were preoccupied with industrial production. Sayyid Qutb, *Nahw Mujtama' Islami* [Toward an Islamic Society] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 18-19.

cannot satisfy humanity's need for new principles and ideas, for "humanity cannot live on industrial production alone. It is in constant need of new principles and ideas, ones that will give it stability, *change, progress, and development...*"⁹¹ Communism fares no better, even if it is far ahead of capitalism. Its universal dream for humanity covers a far wider set of principles and thus leads humanity to a far broader set of goals than, for instance, the narrow individualistic aspirations of French existentialism and American pragmatism.⁹² The real problem, then, is the lack of a creed to nourish one's heart.⁹³

Communism's appeal has much to do with its appearance as a transient compensation for the lack of a specific creed, for it is nothing but an extension of European materialist thought with an added ingredient: a dream (utopia). This is the true basis of its appeal.⁹⁴ True, it responds to the creedal need through its commitment to economic justice, but this can only go so far. Once imperialist capitalism's oppressive chain is broken and a certain level of material goals is attained, its dream will end and the human spirit, at that time faced with an even more obvious intrinsic lack, will look for a better option.⁹⁵ Humanity, therefore, is in need of a much more comprehensive reorientation.⁹⁶ Interestingly, Qutb almost situates Islam as the end point of a dialectical process:

Communism is the endpoint of the natural course of material civilization... If we didn't believe in the constant renewal and development of life, we would no doubt affirm it and commit to it. However, life never stops where the communists say it will stop. Thus a

⁹¹ Qutb, *Nahw Mujtama' Islami*, 18-19 (Emphases added). It is fairly obvious that at this point, Qutb criticizes the current civilization from within, as a modern man, for not living up to its Enlightenment ideals. He demands not the abandonment of such principles as liberty, equality, justice, and progress as "foreign" imports, but rather seems to embrace them as humanity's common ethical goals that Western civilization cannot deliver.

⁹² Ibid., 19.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 25.

new system and a new thought are needed, in the shade of which humanity will sustain itself, will not need to stop believing in it, and will always continue to realize it.⁹⁷

Even if human beings attained communism, they would see the truth and move on to a new source of inspiration: “an idea that would have a moderate view of life with a pure and genuine spirituality and a moderate material reality.”⁹⁸ The only system that could realize these goals is Islam and the principles it posits for life and humanity.⁹⁹ This is humanity’s inevitable endpoint, for even if there were no Islam the disillusionment with capitalism and communism would force humanity to mobilize its resources and devise a system like it.¹⁰⁰

Thus Qutb’s main problem with capitalism and communism, whether we take them as polar opposites or earlier stages of the dialectical process, lies with the creedal or spiritual gap in their conception of being. For Afghani, *Neicheriyye* (naturalism) was Islam’s archenemy. Similarly, Qutb’s critique of communism and capitalism boils them down to Afghani’s categories of “naturalism” and “materialism,” both of which have misunderstood the gist of the human being.

Qutb also poses another familiar theme, human dignity, and contrasts Islam with these two dehumanizing ideologies that enslave humans to either tools or matter. Quoting a relevant Qur’anic verse, he argues that “humanity has a dignity that cannot be degraded.”¹⁰¹ He draws his concept of absolute human equality and equal respect for all

⁹⁷ Ibid., 27. “It is an idea that will not stop when one class dominates another, and whose goal does not end at the limits of material sustenance, which always renews life and prepares the ground for constant progress, which is full of the spirit of social justice; an idea that possesses a divine creed, which links each person to a divine order that is full of social justice and, after that, to the Omnipotent.” Ibid., 25.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 28. In these contexts, Qutb uses *nizam* for system, thereby reflecting his endeavor to build a modern vocabulary in his rearticulation of Islam. More on this attempt will be presented later in this chapter.

¹⁰¹ Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah fi al-Islam* [Social Justice in Islam] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006), 51. He quotes a relevant verse to prove his point, which is also the Qur’anic basis for his whole point about the concept of a dignified human being working to cultivate human civilization: “And surely we have dignified the children of Adam,

human beings from this view of dignity.¹⁰² Although his principal targets are communism and, even more so, capitalism (what he would call the materialist school), he includes Darwin and Freud as among those whose theories demean human dignity.¹⁰³ Qutb situates humanity in its proper place vis-à-vis God, matter, and other beings through a series of passages that recap his overall idea:

But no, a human... is a human! He is not a god, but a human! He is the master of this Earth and always the servant of God. Everything on this Earth has been created to serve him... It is his duty to be God's vicegerent (*khalifah*) on this Earth and to modify, transform, develop, and progress. He is aided in his use of Earth's forces and resources by the skills and resources granted by God. ... At the same time he is enveloped by a sacred framework... He is banned from what God has banned. He can touch it only with God's permission; can operate in it only by God's method. He has been informed of just some of its secrets. He is not allowed to posit methods on his own or to adopt any deity but God... He was created for a specific purpose. There *is* a purpose behind his creation... He is not an animal, but a human. A unique being in this universe of beings, he is above and beyond the animal nature and animal characteristics, and is equipped with certain traits in order to fulfill a duty on Earth that animals cannot discharge ... For this reason he has a noble position that accords with a noble duty... He is a human, neither a tool nor a slave to a tool, not the artifact of matter or tools. To the contrary, he is a complex and sophisticated being who does not have the simplicity of matter or the resilience of a tool. We know only a little of his complexity. In the realm of human sciences, we are at the beginning... He is a human, not a number... He is part of humanity, every member of which is unique, and each individual entertains an independent existence without parallel.¹⁰⁴

The human being's noble and dignified place within the overall hierarchy of beings is best described as the vicegerent of God on Earth, another familiar term from Afghani's political theory. Indeed, the *islahi* tradition's rhetorical move to use the age-old term of *khalifah* (vicegerent), which became more popular in the sense of a Sunni ruler,

and We carry them in the land and the sea, and We have given them of the good things, and We have made them excel by an appropriate excellence over most of those whom We have created" (Qur'an 17:70). He believes that no person, race, or tribe is privileged. As all of them are Adam's [and Eve's] descendants, all of them are equal and equally dignified. This is the ontological basis of his egalitarianism.

¹⁰²Quoting the verses that enjoin asking permission before entering others' residences (Qur'an 24:27-28) and ban backbiting and fault-finding (Qur'an 49:12), he argues that each person is entitled to the same level of respect and that Islamic system guarantees dignity and respect for all. Ibid., 52.

¹⁰³ Qutb, *Mushkilat al-Hadharah*, 179. They subordinate humans to matter or attribute historical change only to instruments of production, thereby neglecting human necessities, or reduce humans to animal or sexual desires. Thus they all undermine humanity's humane qualities. Ibid., 179-80.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 175-76.

returned it to its original egalitarian and universal Qur'anic meaning that included each human being.

Vicegerency is one of the most critical elements in Qutb's theory of human agency. Islam, which appeals to logic and reason, is meant for rational individuals who do not base their faith on miracles or extraordinary events.¹⁰⁵ For Qutb, vicegerency means that each person, regardless of race, nationality, and even religion, must fulfill this duty due to the fact that he is a rational and honorable being. It requires "the cultivation and improvement of this world, the discovery of its secret treasures. In this mission, all people are brothers and sisters."¹⁰⁶

Included here is the ethical duty to eradicate injustice and make the world a just place. Qutb argues that Islam elevates the human vision above the parochial concerns of class or ethnicity and that people can be considered "God's vicegerents"¹⁰⁷ only when they work for humanity's overall good. Moving on to the ethical demands of this mission, Qutb specifically addresses Muslims, possibly as those who willingly take up this mission, although he places it in a cosmic framework: "God elevates their vision to a general cosmic reform... to enjoin the good and forbid the evil, to accomplish a comprehensive reform"¹⁰⁸ Quoting verses that obligate Muslims to struggle in His cause

¹⁰⁵ Seyyid Kutub, *Özlenen İslam Toplumu* [Turkish Translation of Nahw Mujtama' Islami], trans. Kemal Sandıkçı and Mehmet Süslü (Istanbul: Kültür Basın Yayın Birliği 1988), 98.

¹⁰⁶ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 80. This is how he interprets the relevant verse on vicegerency (2:30). While interpreting the same verse in another context, he says that apart from being necessary for her survival and progress, all human efforts in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and even outerspace activities, that is, "building civilization," is part of the mission of vicegerency and therefore a duty. The point is to subdue all other beings for a special purpose within the limits of God's order, and not to be enslaved by them, as observed in contemporary civilization. Kutub, *Medeniyetin Problemleri*, 120-21. Discharging this duty of vicegerency might assume various forms across time and space. That is why earlier people basically cultivated the land whereas contemporary people work on quantum mechanics or send satellites into space. Seyyid Kutub, *İslam Düşüncesi* [Turkish Translation of Khasa'is al-Tasawwur al-Islami ve Muqawwamatihi], trans. Akif Nuri (Istanbul: Çığır, 1973), 133-34.

¹⁰⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Salam al-'Alami wa al-Islam* [Universal Peace and Islam] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006), 108.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 109.

to protect the oppressed, he maintains that they are duty-bound to eradicate injustice and remove evil, either from the ruler or the ruled, an individual or a community.¹⁰⁹

Reclaiming this concept in an individualized and egalitarian manner was a critical move, for it enabled the reformist tradition to empower modern Muslim individuals vis-à-vis the traditional authorities (e.g., the ruler or the ulama). The fact that Qutb, a secular-educated intellectual without any official religious degree, sought to reformulate Islamic doctrine by, among other undertakings, writing a colossal Qur'anic exegesis constituted a serious threat to the traditional hierarchy. He goes even further by considering *any* committed Muslim who wants to take up the duty of *khilafah* as an active agent in her relationship with God and the revealed text and, most importantly, in the ethico-political project of struggling for justice and reviving Islam. On the flip side, however, this tremendously empowering move bears a certain notion of agency that is, in some ways, disabling for the vicegerent's deployment of her rational faculties vis-à-vis God's imperatives.

Qutb applauds humanity's material achievements as a fulfillment of their vicegerency and views them as part of the common walk of civilization. Yet he maintains that only Islam, in its leadership of humanity, can transform these sciences and discoveries into means of compassion, civilization, and peace.¹¹⁰ That new scientific work is done predominantly in the West poses no serious issue for his increasing demand that ideas be authentically Islamic, because he considers the experimental method, the gist of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 109-10. These parts of his work are a key to his understanding of *jihad*, which does not necessarily mean a violent struggle (although he is no Gandhi), but is any human activity that can be subsumed under the general struggle to eradicate injustice.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 167.

Western science, as being based on the Muslim method passed on to Europe through Andalusia.¹¹¹

Thus Qutb's problem has more to do with the fact that modern civilization dehumanizes, alienates, subjugates, and undermines individuality.¹¹² He is not raising these issues as his original critique; rather he draws largely on Alexis Carrel's *Man the Unknown*.¹¹³ In a certain sense, Carrel plays the role that Guizot played for Afghani. But the context is different, for as he is speaking after some eighty years and two world wars, he is speaking about the decline, not the rise, of Western civilization.¹¹⁴ Carrel's influence on Qutb's thought has been noted before,¹¹⁵ but it is in some ways deeper than generally recognized. Qutb credits this scholar as being one of those sincere, investigative Westerners who try their best to prevent humanity from going into irreversible decline.¹¹⁶

Qutb draws the major premise of his political ontology from Carrel's idea that despite our vast knowledge of the natural sciences, we have not made, and probably will never make, enough progress in the human sciences. That is to say, human being will

¹¹¹ Qutb, *Medeniyetin Problemleri*, 191. He quotes Robert Briffault and Dühring at length to show how European universities borrowed the Muslim world's scientific legacy.

¹¹² Ibid., 124-31. After quoting at length from Carrel's *Man the Unknown*, he concludes that this civilization is "an unfit civilization for human beings, for it destroys the 'humanness of human' as a species, ... and his individuality." Qutb, *Mushkilat al-Hadharah*.

¹¹³ Qutb uses the title of Carrel's book as a chapter title in his *Mushkilat al-Hadharah*.

¹¹⁴ The book's preface states that it was written for those who are bold enough to understand the necessity "to overthrow the industrial civilization and of the emergence of another conception of human progress." Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935). In a sense, Qutb takes up this task to offer another conception of human progress.

¹¹⁵ See, Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*; Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*; Andrew March, "Taking People as They Are": Islam as a "Realistic Utopia" in the Political Theory of Sayyid Qutb," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010); Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 2010).

¹¹⁶ Qutb, *Medeniyetin Problemleri*, 187. However, Qutb clearly states that he differs from Carrel in his approach to religion. He views it not a pure spirituality or an abstract spiritual peace, as Carrel maintains, but as such an intense engagement with life that it becomes the axis of life. In another place, he sees Carrel as confined to a mode of thought that he cannot escape despite all of his sincerity, openmindedness, and broad vision. Ibid., 131-32. Later I will explain how Qutb's theory of strategic action and vanguardism is far more like Carrel's than Lenin's.

probably always remain unknowable to us.¹¹⁷ Thus “we are in absolute ignorance about the human, as the great ‘scholar’ concluded.”¹¹⁸ As God’s vicegerent he can manage Earth’s affairs; however, the method (*manhaj*) of life is posited by God, who rules over this life. Humans can neither know nor control their own selves; they know or control only their material life.¹¹⁹

This concept of human agency remains a constant throughout his works. In fact, it will become even more consistent as Qutb restricts the scope of *ijtihad* to only those matters on which *shariah* is silent, whereas earlier he had allowed more room for utilizing common human experience as long as it was in accordance with Islam.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, his basic view on *ijtihad* revolves around a distinction between *shariah* and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) to enable the existence of fixed principles along with a dynamic view

¹¹⁷ Qutb relates Carrel’s argument that “Our knowledge about ourselves will never reach the simplicity, refinement, and abstraction of the science of matter. The factors that have delayed its development are permanent. We have to frankly realize that the science of humanity is the most difficult science.” Qutb, *Mushkilat al-Hadharah*, 24 (He does not cite page numbers).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ “The Islamic *shariah* can fulfill the demands, development, and renewal of modern life, as well as benefit from our experience, viz., from all human experience insofar as it agrees with the *shariah*’s supreme principles concerning life.” Qutb, *Ma’rakat*, 60. Also, “Islam does not forbid benefiting from any human experience that does not violate any *shariah* principles. One can utilize human experience to specify the new needs of life and adapt them via new research, and also using those experiences to realize Islamic principles. Islamic principles are constant and do not change; however, there are many ways to bring them to life.” Qutb, *Mujtama’ Islami*, 115. The *shariah*’s constants and variables will be of critical importance to assessing the extent of Qutb’s reformist view of *shariah*. As Qutb guides his overall project toward a more consistent whole, he seems to tilt increasingly toward a more resilient conception of human in relation to revelation: “If there is a clear text available from the Qur’an or from [Muhammad], then that will be decisive and there will be no room for *ijtihad* ... If no such clear judgement is available, then the time comes for *ijtihad*—and that according to well-defined principles which are consistent with God’s religion and not merely following opinions or desires.” Qutb, *Milestones*, 85. This is not to say that Qutb would disown the earlier ideas mentioned above, for they all might be easily rendered consistent. However, common human experience does not carry as much weight as before, which might suggest that in this hermeneutical circle the scope of *human* interpretation is narrowed and he is more conceived of as being on the receiving end of the orders. Shepard observes the same shift of emphasis from the *shariah*’s flexibility through *ijtihad* toward its firmness (*thabat*), as best exemplified by the deletion of certain statements on flexibility in the last revised edition of *Social Justice*. It is also telling that Qutb replaced “circumstances of the age” with “practical circumstances” later on. Shepard, “*The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb*,” 207-08. We can conclude that later in his life he wanted to emphasize that Islam’s potential to change the norms of the age had more priority to its adaptation to the age.

of Islam. *Shariah* is more in the form holistic principles and general rules, out of which various social systems can emanate.¹²¹

Shariah is God-made, whereas *fiqh* is human-made, legislated in accordance with the demands of the age.¹²² No matter how wise the jurists are, their rules are bound by the logic of their age and are unavoidably the outcome of the existing overarching social relations. He stated that this was also true of the Companions.¹²³ No time-bound application of *shariah* can be considered part of the *shariah*, which consists of only God's Word and the Prophet's practice. Everything else is part of *fiqh*,¹²⁴ no more than guideposts meant to direct future generations and inform them of past human experiences. In other words, Islam was revealed to build a civilization for a certain society and show its people how to live within it.¹²⁵

Limits of Qutb's Rationality: God's Monopoly on the "Method" of Life

Qutb's particular combination of fixed principles and changing implementations based on the needs of the age puts him on a par with the Afghani school's dynamic *shariah*, which suggests a more active use of reason. Nevertheless, his later emphasis on fixity might suggest an increasing approximation toward Wahhabi-style Salafism. By that time, his prime concern had become the *foundations*, the very basic principles or premises that would guide the thrust of *shariah*, provide a firm and non-negotiable basis. That is to say, he believed that human inquiry about human self-knowledge could not be extended to the

¹²¹ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 41.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²³ Later, he says that Abu Bakr, Omar, Ali, Ibn Abbas, and Ibn Omar (note the exclusion of Othman) had the deepest perception of the *spirit of shariah* and its best application; however, this does not change the fact that they were bound by a practical logic conditioned by the needs of their age. Their best service consisted of guiding the new generations by referring similar cases to earlier precedents. *Ibid.*, 44.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

foundational principles, as only the all-knowing God can provide these through the Qur'an.¹²⁶

In order to fix the excesses of the earlier reform in his own way, Qutb specifically takes up Abduh and Iqbal's ideas. He grants that both were responding to condescending Orientalists who held that Muslim views of predestination had incapacitated human reason and praxis.¹²⁷ Abduh was also trying to overcome the East's ignorance and superstition¹²⁸ and to reinvigorate the principle of *ijtihad* in the face of reason's dormancy.¹²⁹ However, Abduh's attempt to fix a certain deviation led to the opposite deviation that elevated reason to the same status as revelation. In fact, concepts, principles, and proofs of reason can only be evaluated on the basis of revelation. Only this can make reason and revelation to be compatible, for perfect (viz., defect-free) reason does not exist. Yet, Abduh explicitly advocates reinterpreting the text to prove that it is compatible with reason. For Qutb, such an approach could only lead to anarchy, because humanity's multiple forms of reason are always flawed by ignorance, whim, and ego. Reason must be recognized as able to perceive and grasp revelation; however, it is not the final arbiter.¹³⁰ In short, Qutb seeks to supplant the earlier reformist conception of reason and revelation's compatibility by assigning the primordial role to revelation, which then

¹²⁶ This does not amount to saying that Qutb regards only premise-like Qur'anic principles as fixed. Specific rulings about usury, adultery, theft, and so on are included in the *shariah*'s non-negotiable part because they are either emblematic of Islamic society or are related to a rule that never changes, regardless of the passage of time. Ibid., 46. For many, this is the most difficult part of implementing *shariah* in the modern age. This would come up as a critical and controversial part of Fazlur Rahman's view of *shariah*, as I will cover in the next chapter.

¹²⁷ Qutb, *al-Tasawwur al-Islami*, 18-19.

¹²⁸ Among Qutb's emphases are how Islam reconciles faith and reason, how it fights against superstition, and the incomparably less demand of Islamic revelation over believers for faith in supernatural creedal elements like Christianity's trinity. Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 38-39.

¹²⁹ In *Social Justice*, Qutb emphasizes his commitment to the *islahi* agenda of "opening the doors of *ijtihad*" by referring to it as "always open *ijtihad*." Seyyid Kutub, *İslam'da Sosyal Adalet* [Turkish Translation of *Al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyyah fi al-Islam*], trans. Beşir Eryarsoy (Istanbul: Düşünce, 1980), 391.

¹³⁰ Qutb, *Khasa'is*, 18-20.

authenticates everything produced by a rationalized order. He suggests the idea of an Islamic or *wahy*-based reason in which it is subordinate to revelation.

This is the point at which Qutb, in addition to his appreciation of the Afghani school's revitalization of reason and *ijtihad*, seeks to curb its excesses via an ontological clearance operation at the foundational level that reclaims revelation as the final arbiter of human affairs. That is to say, he sees the excess of the reformist school in its multiplication of foundations that ended up in secularist modes of thinking, in which all sorts of anti-Islamic concepts could justify themselves as authentically Islamic. Any human pretension to knowing the secrets of human nature, in fact, violates God's realm of knowledge. This is the level on which Qutb would critique secular ideologies; i.e., not based on their political or ethical principles per se, but on how these values are justified at the ontological level.

This is the most distinctive part of his project, for here Qutb plays a pioneering role in conceiving an Islamist axiom as a foundationalist critique of Western civilization and its secularist ideologies:

This system (*nizam*) is clear-cut in its formation and perfect in its configuration. Anything minor or major in it is integrated with each other and is on a *foundation* upon which it rests, and it is from its preciseness that any element that is foreign to the nature of its complexion will change [the system's] nature. This system cannot accept any [foreign] patch,... because its creed and worship, the mode of behavior and interpersonal relations, all of them are connected to each other, are integrated and interacting, and each of them springs from a single creed with definite goals that *found* its social offshoots on its intrinsic complexion. Thus no social offshoot emanating from foreign philosophies or positions can go with it, even if in appearance it is distant from the subject of creed, such as economic or financial issues. We shall soon see that all parts of the system's components, whether they seem distant from the creed or not, are bound with a firm bond to and deeply touched by this creed.¹³¹

Here comes the most significant element of his political ontology. Although this is only another expression of what I dubbed the "Islamist axiom," he is the first one to

¹³¹ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 115 (emphases added).

make such an all-out effort to fully articulate, systematize, as well as enact it as a full-fledged and comprehensive doctrine. In our vocabulary Qutb not only recognizes the ontological prefigurations of ethico-political ideas, but actually sets out to build a perfectly strong ontopolitical edifice on the securest and purest foundation of *wahy* (revelation), an edifice in which each dimension is perfectly integrated and informs each other. He rephrases this idea over and over again.¹³²

Jahiliyyah and Hakimiyyah: An Islamic Ontology of Harmony

This strong foundationalist project leads Qutb to view his ideal universe as an absolutely harmonious *nizam* (system or order) of which the human world voluntarily becomes a part. He develops the most controversial feature of his philosophical system via a stark dichotomy of *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah* against this very background. Building on his earlier re-enchantment of human self-knowledge, he takes a major step to re-enchant the entire universe, including the human sphere.

There is a sizeable literature on his doctrines of *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah*,¹³³ as well as considerable debate on its geographical or historical origins. Some, most significantly Emmanuel Sivan, argue that his doctrines represent a twentieth-century

¹³² In a sense, Qutb calls upon people to become conscious strong ontologists, as in his *Ma'alim*: "We must return to the pure source from which those people [the unique Qur'anic generation, i.e. the Companions] derived their guidance, the source that is free of any mixing or pollution. We must return to it in order to derive from it all conceptions regarding the truth of being, of human existence, and of all the relations of these two beings with the being of Perfect Truth, God Almighty. From it we must also derive our conceptions regarding life and our values, ethics, mode (*manhaj*) of political rule, politics, economics, and all other values of life." Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 18. He also states how his view differs from that of Carrel, whom he holds in high regard, by making a political ontological argument: "The conception of our methodology on religious action is not going to be constrained within narrow boundaries (other than which, Carrel does not know much). But its meaning, as we said, is that the religion is the mode/method [*manhaj*] of life through and through, within the framework of which all human activities operate and develop, among them action, production, politics, economics, ethics, and behavior, and prays and worships whether through a connection with the Almighty, or by getting in touch with instruments and production." Qutb, *Mushkilat al-Hadharah*, 180.

¹³³ Khatab, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb"; Shepard, "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of *Jahiliyya*"; Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*; Sayed Khatab, *The Power of Sovereignty: The Political and Ideological Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb* (London: Routledge, 2006); Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

appropriation of medieval theology, in particular, Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 1328) political ideas that were developed against the non-practicing Muslim Mongolian rulers who were applying Genghis Khan's *yasa* instead of *shariah*.¹³⁴ Others tend to emphasize the Indian origins of the modern conception of *jahiliyyah*, specifically with reference to Mawdudi, whose ideas were known in Egypt.¹³⁵ Regardless of these speculations, however, his systematization of *jahiliyyah*, *hakimiyyah*, *nizam*, and *manhaj* into a full-fledged Islamic Weltanschauung remains unique.

Qutb's novel use of *jahiliyyah* transformed it from a historical epoch into a condition:

Jahiliyya[h] (barbarity) signifies the domination (*hakimiyya[h]*) of man over man, or rather the subservience to man rather than to Allah. It denotes rejection of the divinity of God and the adulation of mortals. In this sense, jahiliyyah is not just a specific historical period (referring to the era preceding the advent of Islam), but a state of affairs. Such a state of human affairs existed in the past, exists today, and may exist in the future, taking the form of jahiliyyah[h], that mirror-image and sworn enemy of Islam. In any time and place human beings face that clear-cut choice: either to observe the Law of Allah in its entirety, or to apply laws laid down by man of one sort or another. In the latter case, they are in a state of jahiliyyah. Man is at the crossroads and that is the choice: Islam or jahiliyyah. Modern style jahiliyya[h] in the industrialized societies of Europe and

¹³⁴ "The genius of Qutb consisted in his grounding his argument in the thought of a prominent medieval thinker, Ibn Taymiyya (1268-1328), and some of his votaries, through an act of 'creative interpretation.'" Sivan, *Radical Islam*, 94. See, also Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Lav asserts that radical factions see themselves as heirs to a minority tradition that perpetuated the neo-Hanbali legacy (Ibid., 41). Although it brings to light the dimension of Qutb's thought that has some medieval precedents, I do not see much analytical gain in overrating this influence on Qutb's thought. In my interpretation, his modern strong foundationalist character situated in a civilizational discourse is far more significant.

¹³⁵ Qutb's ideological affinity as well as personal relations with Mawdudi and Nadwi attracted special attention. Sivan, *Radical Islam*, 23; Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 147-50. While Sivan attributes the origins of Qutb's *jahiliyyah* doctrine to Nadwi and his translations of Mawdudi's works into Arabic, including *Islam and Jahiliyyah*, Khatab contests this idea by showing the intrinsic development of the idea of *jahiliyyah* in Egypt's intellectual landscape and the complex amalgamation of local and transnational factors. All in all, Khatab opines that Qutb's intellectual trajectory is far more determinate in this doctrine's development. It is true that Qutb and Nadwi personally met for the first time in 1950 during the Hajj. Qutb also hosted him in February 1951 at his Cairo house along with a group of people. While Qutb wrote an introduction to the second Arabic edition of his *What Has the World Lost by the Decline of Muslims?* Nadwi extended his praise for Qutb's *Social Justice*, which had been published a little earlier. Nadwi also notes that he had been reading Qutb's works since the 1930s and was amazed by his original style and research (Ibid., 147-50). Although the exchange of ideas among Qutb, Nadwi, and Mawdudi is noteworthy, there is no reason to assume that the theory of *jahiliyyah* was a direct import from these two Indian thinkers. Indeed, as Khatab aptly notes, there are several precedents in Abduh, Farid Wajdi (d. 1954), and the young Qutb himself, where an amorphous view of *jahiliyyah* could be discerned. Abu Rabi' agrees, for he emphasizes the Nasserist background and the challenges posed to the development of his thought by Arab socialism and nationalism. Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence*, 164-65.

America is essentially similar to the old-time jahiliyyah in pagan and nomadic Arabia. For in both systems man is under the dominion of man rather than of Allah.¹³⁶

This idea attained its final form in *Ma'alim*, where Qutb's assertion that all existing societies, without exception, were founded upon *jahiliyyah* ignited a serious intra-Muslim controversy about Qutb and his ideas. However, Qutb is concerned only with society's *jahili* foundations, and not with the excesses of particular individuals, for he never accuses anyone of apostasy. *Jahili*, probably the most frequent word in *Milestones*, is used mainly to describe societies, and sometimes their systems, values, norms, civilization, and culture, but never to describe an individual. Most significantly, he says, "the whole world today lives in a '*jahiliyyah*' in terms of the *foundation*, from which emanate the norms of life and their systems."¹³⁷ He thus sees only two options: submit to God's *hakimiyyah* (sovereignty)¹³⁸ in all the intents, purposes, and implications of that term, or step into *jahiliyyah*.

For analytical purposes, the Qutbian system considers *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah* as antithetical to each other.¹³⁹ Under this incredibly pure, integrated, and harmonious order of God, as individuals submit to God (literally become Muslim) and take up the duty of vicegerency, they join the absolutely harmonious universe, the great Unity (*al-wahdah al-kubra*):¹⁴⁰

[The prophet] came to make people acknowledge God's *hakimiyyah* as the state of all being that also comprises humanity. It is essential that the authority that regulates their lives is the authority that governs the universe. They are not supposed to deviate by a method [*manhaj*], or an authority, or a caretaking from the method, the authority, and the caretaking that oversees the whole universe. ... Humans are ruled by the natural laws

¹³⁶ *Fi Zilal al Qur'an*, commentary on Qur'an 5:44-48. Cited by Sivan, *Radical Islam*, 23-24.

¹³⁷ Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 8 (emphasis added).

¹³⁸ Khatab notes that *hakimiyyah* has a broader meaning than sovereignty, but for lack of a better translation he continues to use it. He also notes that it first appeared in Qutb's *Social Justice*. Khatab, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 151.

¹³⁹ Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb*, 3.

¹⁴⁰ Khatab, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," 151.

among the laws of God in their birth and growth; in their health and in sickness; in their life and in their death. They are ruled by these laws in their associations, and in the consequences of what comes out of them; the results of their voluntary actions themselves... They cannot change the Laws of God [*Sunnat Allah*] ...that govern the universe and its movements. Consequently, they must follow Islam in those aspects where they have free will and make His *shariah* sovereign in all matters of this life. They must integrate the voluntary and natural parts of their life so that their being and the being of the universe will be wholly integrated.¹⁴¹

As the vicegerent humbles himself by admitting his lack of self-knowledge and commits to the Qur'an's revealed knowledge about his affairs, he now embarks on making *tawhid* (God's absolute unity) the foundation of his norms, values, and everything related to arranging his life. This transforms all of his actions into the status of worship (*ubudiyyah*) and aligns him with the harmonious universe. Then, supposing that he is a scientist, his scientific research and inventions become part of his vicegerency. If an entire society acts this way, then its culture and civilization will be Islamic and this Islamic civilization will complete the harmony of the universal order.

By re-enchanting human nature and joining the human sphere with the rest of the universe through a voluntary submission to *shariah*, Qutb re-enchants the whole universe and the social-human sphere. While Afghani's ontological gestures sought to disenchant the natural and social worlds via his concept of a *Sunnat Allah* that is graspable by reason, Qutb overturned his secularizing influence by using the very same vocabulary and drawing on our essential inability to acquire accurate self-knowledge. In other words, joining with Euben, we can view Qutb's ontopolitical project also as a re-enchantment project.¹⁴² Qutb attains an absolute reconciliation by harmonizing the natural and social

¹⁴¹ Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 47. It is worth noting that he refers to Mawdudi on this point. For other places where he makes a similar point, see Sayyid Kutub, *Cihan Sulhu ve İslam* [Turkish Translation of *Al-Salam Al-'Alami wa al-Islam*] (Istanbul: Hikmet, 2007).

¹⁴² Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 15, 17, 86. Also note, "Fundamentalism appears to be less a cultural and political aberration than an extreme attempt to 're-enchant' the modern world." Ibid., 152.

worlds, his own version of *Aufhebung*, where sovereignty, servitude, and liberation are all perfectly reconciled without negating each other. Its unattainability aside, this version of an “ontology of harmony” assumes that conflict is a surmountable feature of social life and that pluralism is, at best, an unfortunate discord with the rest of the universe. This is the intrinsic perilous element of Qutbian political ontology, the element that carries the potential for unpleasant political implications. But it remains to be seen how this ontology of harmony will reconcile liberation with servitude through a dialectic of freedom.

Liberation under Servitude: Qutb’s Dialectic of Freedom

Interestingly enough, Qutb views his political theory, which is generally taken to be the inspiration of certain totalitarian projects of *jihadis*, as an all-out liberation project for humanity. Although his doctrine of *jahiliyyah* might have precedents in medieval theology, it would be a stretch to argue that his political theory represents their resurrection in a modern context.¹⁴³ As noted before, Qutb’s secular literary criticism background caused him to articulate his ideas within a modern framework. He therefore shares the Western ethical goals of freedom, justice, and equality as the goals of a common human civilization. In many ways he might be taken as more modern than he himself would acknowledge. This can be sustained even for the last and most radical stage of his life, for he never renounced his commitment to human liberation or civilization. I therefore contend that despite his project’s undeniably fundamentalist moments, Qutb presented a liberation theology, as opposed to a resuscitated medieval theology, for Muslims.

¹⁴³ In this sense, I am closer to Euben’s view of Qutb as striving to develop an alternative means of integrating modernity than Sivan’s reading, which interprets Qutb, at best, as adapting a medieval theology to a modern context.

In his dialectic of freedom, Qutb does his utmost to liberate the modern Muslim individual from those hurdles that impede his direct relationship with God, which is a servitude reserved exclusively to Him. These hurdles include not just political tyranny, but also any economic inequality that deprives a segment of society of the basic economic resources and renders them powerless vis-à-vis authorities. Other targets of Qutb's criticism include scholars who abuse religion for worldly gains and collaborate with illegitimate political authorities and colonialists who keep people down; capitalists who exploit the poor; and, finally, imperialists who both plunder the country's resources and exercise cultural imperialism. All of these block an individual's proper acknowledgement of God's sole sovereignty and his participation in the universal harmony. Such a view allows Qutb to justify *liberty*, a modern principle of the French Revolution as well as human emancipation (a key Marxian idea), within an Islamic framework. In this sense, he can be credited with offering an Islamic version of "liberation theology."¹⁴⁴

Qutb sees Islam as the unsurpassed liberation movement of humanity: "It is an emancipatory (*tahriri*) leap, the like of which humanity has never known"¹⁴⁵ and "the grand emancipatory revolution that Muhammad led for twenty-three years."¹⁴⁶ Islam's mission is not to negate the values of French Revolution, but rather to give them a new

¹⁴⁴ Comparing Islamism to liberation theology has precedents. While Robin Wright notes this resemblance with reference to Islamism in general, Hamid Dabashi and Ibrahim Abu Rabi approach Qutb as a liberation theologian in certain ways. Dabashi sees both Afghani and Qutb as formulators of liberation theologies. Emmanuel Sivan, despite his medieval theology argument, also notes this aspect of Qutb's thought. See Robin Wright, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: Two Visions of Reformation," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 65. Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence*, 181. Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008), 41-43; Sivan, *Radical Islam*, 108.

¹⁴⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Dirasat Islamiyya* [Islamic Studies] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1995), 76.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 11. He continues, "and the social, economic, military, and literary revolutions that were completed within this short period."

meaning.¹⁴⁷ Having established human liberation as his project's central goal, Qutb then lays out a political theory of liberation that makes him comparable to Rousseau in many ways, as pointed out by Andrew March and Sayed Khatab.¹⁴⁸ As Rousseau takes up the problem of how to be both free and governed, Qutb seeks to articulate how humans can be free only in their servitude to God.

One might be taken aback by Qutb's repeated emphasis on Islam's realization of the values of French Revolution, namely, freedom, equality, justice, and fraternity.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, irrespective of how the practical outcomes of this theoretical project are interpreted, he articulates his conception of Islam within a framework of a theory of liberation: "Islam is, in itself, an emancipatory revolution (*thawrah tahririyyah*). It is freedom of thought as well as freedom of spirit. It is freedom of thought from any delusion and superstition that would prevent it from improving life on Earth."¹⁵⁰

Qutb's concept of human dignity contains an intrinsic element of a free human being in his capacity as a vicegerent of the Earth. His concept of justice also takes freedom as the prerequisite for justice.¹⁵¹ For him, the Islamic order "is a perfect method of life that rests on an absolute liberation in conscience and action from all forms of servitude, except to God."¹⁵² This is quite like a comprehensive application of Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive liberty.¹⁵³ Qutb's understanding of liberty seeks to eliminate those external hurdles that obstruct an individual's free will and choice; but beyond that,

¹⁴⁷ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 17.

¹⁴⁸ March, "Taking People as They Are," 193.

¹⁴⁹ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 36.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵¹ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 83; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyyah*, 43-44.

¹⁵² Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyyah*, 12.

¹⁵³ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979).

it seeks to liberate one from all internal failures that result from enslavement to one's desires: "Belief in God bestows upon human beings their liberty in the face of pleasure and tools. At the same time, belief in God requires that there be no hurdles against reason, no captivity of human nature, and no obstacle against production and development in life."¹⁵⁴ Likewise, Qutb formulates the liberty of conscience as "liberating human conscience from worshipping anything but God."¹⁵⁵ He provides his notion of positive freedom in more explicit terms, as follows:

The human soul can liberate itself from worshipping false sanctities; from fear of death, injury, poverty, and humiliation; and from all external considerations and social values. But on the other hand, it might still remain demeaned in the face of its own pleasures and appetites, and thus might submit to its desires and ambitions. This time, while it breaks free of the external restraints, it is restrained by internal ones. In this case, the soul cannot attain the perfect liberation of conscience that Islam wishes for it so that it can realize the utmost degree of human social justice.¹⁵⁶

Qutb places his notion of social justice within this rather Platonic moral psychology. Thus freedom, as a prerequisite for justice, can be attained only in a just context in which the soul is liberated from all external economic, social, and political restraints. But then it has to turn inward to liberate itself from its own desires and appetites so that its relationship with God will not be subjected to any internal mediating or debilitating forces. This is the framework in which we can locate Qutb's theology of liberation, with its strong commitment to social justice as well as the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle. In other words, an individual can only be a true servant to God when he attains external and internal liberty, and only when he reserves his obedience exclusively for God can he be free.

¹⁵⁴ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 64; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 33.

¹⁵⁶ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 78-79; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 41.

This is the dialectic of freedom that constitutes the essence of Qutb's liberation theology. Any other attempt to construct an understanding of liberty will always end up with serving something/someone inferior to God, be it a political order, an ideology, or the clergy, not to mention worldly desires. According to this model, liberal freedom in its Lockean, Kantian, or Millian versions cannot fully actualize itself. In their anti-paternalistic stance, for instance, liberals will not forestall the danger that certain self-regarding acts pose to human liberty. Thus they will end up causing individuals to serve to their own desires and appetites, which Qutb stated has happened in Western societies. In short, only serving God engenders true liberation, namely, liberation from all worldly things. This renders liberation contingent on a unique form of servitude that is solely directed toward God.

This is the framework in which Qutb works out the details of his theory of human freedom borrowing from both liberal and Marxian notions, which sometimes takes a very eclectic form. Thus, he affirms ideas that are more in tune with negative liberty, such as freedom from "social tyranny,"¹⁵⁷ thereby paralleling Mill's concerns, or "equality of opportunity."¹⁵⁸ Yet the real weight of his notion of liberty is rather towards a view of social justice and egalitarianism that carries more Marxian elements. For instance, in his *The Battle between Islam and Capitalism*, he gives a dramatic description of the lives of the Egyptian poor, the starkly unequal distribution of land, and the overall inefficient use

¹⁵⁷ Note the Millian echoes in Qutb's words: "If it is a social oppression that violates justice, and if an individual's ambitions and desires tyrannize the community, likewise any attempt by society to overwhelm the individual's nature and ability is an oppression. This oppression is not just against that particular individual, but also against the community itself. The negative effects caused by destroying that individual's vivacity through suppressing his inclinations and aspirations do not only deprive that individual of his due, but they also deprive the community of benefiting from his abilities." Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 27-28.

¹⁵⁸ "Islam does not require arithmetic equality in wealth, because acquiring wealth depends on the people's unique aptitudes. Absolute justice requires that sustenances vary; that some have more than others, along with the deliverance of human justice, thereby providing an equal opportunity to all. Progeny, origin, nobility or race, or any restriction that curbs the human effort cannot deter the individual." Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 56; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 29.

of resources. Qutb asserts that all of this exists because “the state represents not the needy majority, but the capitalists.”¹⁵⁹ Well aware that such problems do not derive from the resources themselves but rather from their distribution, he accuses the economic regime of being unjust. He also has a particular problem with the subservient ulama class that legitimizes the regime’s injustices,¹⁶⁰ which would justify Marx’s assessment of this version of religion as a tranquillizer.¹⁶¹ In this vision, his Islamic reform project incorporates certain social policies regarded as core Islamic economic measures designed to make humans free and equal servants before God. So, these socioeconomic policies not only seek to place the individual and God in direct contact with each other, but they are also grounded in a theory of property that attributes absolute ownership of the whole universe to God.

The Qutbian Theory of Social Justice

Qutb’s God-centric worldview suffuses his theory of property. Closely resembling the Lockean premises of property and as an extension of his theory of vicegerency, he says “property *in toto* is a right that belongs to society that, in turn, is composed of God’s vicegerents. Personal property is the result of individual effort expended to appropriate a

¹⁵⁹ Qutb, *Ma’rakat*, 8.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 22. Also note his interpretation of Qur’an 20:131: And never turn thine eyes [with longing] towards whatever splendour of this world’s life We may have allowed so many others to enjoy in order that We might test them thereby for the sustenance.” “Some suppose that this verse and similar ones let the rich do whatever they want and call upon the poor to be content with their condition, whereby they are deprived of their rights. This is a misunderstanding, an interpretation of the self-serving “men of religion” (not scholars of religion) during the times of oppression to numb the public consciousness and keep the public from demanding social justice.” Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 76-77. Just like Afghani and Banna, Qutb is known for his harsh critique of those conservative ulama who trade their bestowal of legitimacy on oppressive regimes for worldly gains. On several occasions he makes a distinction between “men of religion” and “scholars of religion.” His attempt to appropriate Islamic leadership from the former has a lot to do with their lack of concern for the people’s socio economic problems. In this regard, Qutb holds that as a believing Muslim, he can articulate an Islamic vision just by referring to the Qur’an, hadith, and Islamic history. He states that as long as the men of religion monopolize religion, Islam cannot be revived. Qutb, *Ma’rakat*, 87.

¹⁶¹ Qutb, *Ma’rakat*, 103.

share of this common property over which human beings are the vicegerents/agents.”¹⁶² Importantly, one seeks to acquire property out of a sense a duty instead of a desire for personal ownership.¹⁶³ Positing the idea that property is a “universal conditional trusteeship” over God’s earthly creation is a stark move that secures for each person the right to a basic standard of sustenance and restrains property ownership at the expense of other individuals, sometimes through radical redistributive measures.¹⁶⁴ In other words, Qutb’s understanding of social justice is undergirded by a view that resembles natural law perspective in which each individual, regardless of race or religion,¹⁶⁵ can claim her right to a basic standard of living based on her divinely appointed role as God’s vicegerent, as well as by a consequentialist perspective in which the ultimate goal is to ensure that each person serves only God as opposed to a state, institution, or person.¹⁶⁶ In short, in Qutb’s conception the right to property is guaranteed but restrained by such overarching social values as the common good and social solidarity.¹⁶⁷ That is to say, Qutb holds that Islam guarantees the right to property and considers social security a human right that is valid regardless of one’s religion or lack thereof.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 177-78. Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 91.

¹⁶³ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 177. Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 191.

¹⁶⁴ “Islam abhors hoarding wealth while there is poverty and deprivation. To alleviate this situation, it lets the ruler use the public property as he sees fit, provided that he remains within the confines of God’s law.” Qutb also cites the progressive tax levied by the early Islamic state on its non-Muslim subjects. Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 360; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 179.

¹⁶⁵ For some examples where Qutb refers to early Islamic state as securing the Christian and Jewish subjects share of the common property, see Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 130-31, 305. The latter reference concerns Caliph Omar’s exemption of an old Jewish woman and non-Muslims facing similar circumstances from taxes and his giving them a monthly grant from the public treasury. In another instance, he came across a Christian group of lepers and granted them a monthly provision from the public treasury.

¹⁶⁶ “[T]here must be a guaranteed sustenance so that they will not become slaves to the state and fear that if they speak the truth to the government or oppose it that they will lose their sustenance.” Ibid., 246; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 124. This idea is also implicit in his view that social justice is a form of worship. Qutb, *Dirasat Islamiyya*, 44.

¹⁶⁷ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 248.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 305.

Apart from other basic rights and liberties (e.g., the rights to legal justice, privacy, and security),¹⁶⁹ the measures that he posits as Islamic policies of social justice include a “guarantee for basic sustenance” regardless of race or religion¹⁷⁰; measures against any concentration and/or hoarding of wealth without reinvestment (*kanz*); nationalizing natural resources and water on the grounds that such public goods can never be privatized; banning usury, hoarding, extravagance, and squandering; and, last but not least, *zakat* (poor-tax/relief) as something the poor can demand, rather than be given as charity on the part of the rich.¹⁷¹

Qutb’s attribution of a core significance to social justice is such that in his narrative of Islamic history, the existence of Islam’s spirit has been contingent upon these principles’ proper application. Accordingly, he maintains that under Othman (644-56), and most decisively along with the Umayyad usurpation of authority, this spirit was lost and eventually disappeared completely. It is interesting that despite his Sunni background, Qutb coldheartedly cites Othman’s policies of nepotism and corruption as engendering the decline of the Islamic spirit, even though he ascribes this to Othman’s old age and his cousin Marwan ibn al-Hakam’s taking advantage of the situation. He goes so far as to assert that the rebellion against Othman, during which he was assassinated, represented “an outpouring of the Islamic spirit.”¹⁷² Even though Ali’s succession (656-61) meant lifting the veil on the Islamic spirit, Muawiyah’s (661-80) usurpation and

¹⁶⁹ Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 115-25.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 125-29. He refers to Omar’s social service policies: the state provide monthly monetary assistance and milk money to children, orphans, and elderly subjects regardless of their religion. Ibid., 127-28. Also note that “the social justice that Islam will accomplish will serve not only the Muslim residents of a Muslim country. All citizens, regardless of their religious, linguistic, and color differences, will benefit from it. This is Islam’s exceptional conception of humanity, one that does not exist in other regimes.” Qutb, *Ma'rakat*, 72-73.

¹⁷¹ Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 129-44.

¹⁷² Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 322.

subsequent replacement of the caliphate with a kingdom caused the Islamic spirit's extinction. The only hope for its comeback remains in the secret power intrinsic to Islam, which accounts for the historic resistance and struggle that manifests itself in the various sporadic "Islamic moments."¹⁷³

Qutb extends his social justice project to the political sphere via his theory of *shura* and international peace, which I will cover below. The basic *jahiliyyah-hakimiyyah* dichotomy also serves as the political sphere's underlying principle, which is informed by his liberation theology that tolerates no interference in the direct God-human relationship. Although this is an extension of his dialectic of freedom, because of its centrality to my overall project, which constitutes its central puzzle, his theory of *shura* and democracy deserves an independent treatment.

Liberation at the Political Level: Shura against Democracy

One of the most significant ruptures in contemporary Muslim political thought arises from Qutb's bold rejection of democracy as the usurpation of God's authority. Indeed, he goes even further than Mawdudi's theory of theo-democracy,¹⁷⁴ which allows for a partial accommodation of the Western democracy. Before Qutb, *islahi* thinkers had viewed this concept in a fairly positive light. In some ways, Qutb's stark position led to misunderstandings among friends and foes alike. Some thought he was defending Islamic

¹⁷³ Ibid., 329. Caliph Omar ibn Abd-al-Aziz's era is an example of these sporadic "Islamic moments." When he assumes power by hereditary succession, he acknowledges this method's illegitimacy and opens his office for contestation; the population selects again. Qutb calls this "the return of the usurped authority back to its rightful owner: the *ummah*" (Ibid., 330). Qutb's criticism of the early Islamic generation in such terms sparked controversy among the Wahhabi Salafis, who have a particular hostility against such quasi-Shi'a interpretations of Islamic history. Thus some of them rejected him and sometimes declared him an apostate. These are significant instances that could help one differentiate between the reform movement, which would not have a serious problem with hereditary rule, an anathema to Islamist movements in general, and the strict revivalism of the Wahhabi sort.

¹⁷⁴ Syed Abul Ala Maudoodi, *Islamic Law and Constitution* (Karachi: Jamaat-e-Islami Publications, 1955).

theocracy¹⁷⁵ or a violent Islamic revolution to impose *shariah* from above in order to Islamize society. This section will show that his major objection to democracy was, in essence, ontological and epistemological and can best be understood as an offshoot of his political ontology.

Qutb does not approve of such phrases as “Islamic socialism” or “Islamic democracy,” for they signify a mixture of God-given and human-made orders. Instead, reiterating his all-comprehensive strong ontology, he contends that Islam provides its own solutions from its own conception, structure, principles, and methods; therefore, there is no need for any human patches or infiltrations.¹⁷⁶ It is not that such institutions and the principles of democracy are in and of themselves un-Islamic, but that the core premises of democracy that authorize people to legislate on those affairs that are exclusive to God’s domain (and are therefore inaccessible to human knowledge) represent an attempt to rival God’s power. Qutb’s theory of sovereignty requires that God’s *hakimiyyah* be recognized in all human political affairs. Stating that sovereignty belongs to God is, for him, not the same as denying any authority to people in their collective self-government.

As the Arabic word *mulk* means both property and political power, the God-human relationship as regards property may conveniently be carried over to political power. God’s absolute *mulk* of creation, and for that matter *hakimiyyah*, might as well go along with the vicegerents’ overseeing this authority on God’s behalf. How, then, are the

¹⁷⁵ Note Berman’s interpretation at the beginning of this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 153. Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima’iyyah*, 78. Here, I disagree with Khatab’s assessment that Qutb finds democracy in Islam. Qutb does not use Democracy in Islam (the title of Khatab’s book) in an affirmative sense; rather, Qutb says that such book titles can be freely published in Egypt while subjects such as “Government in Islam” are censured. Qutb, *Dirasat Islamiyya*, 120-21.

vicegerents to use their fiduciary political power? Interestingly enough, Qutb agrees with the *islah* movement's earlier view of *shura* as the basic principle of governance in Islam. It is also in this sense that even his fundamentalist moments, so to say, do not signify a political break, but rather an ontopolitical shift. As an extension of his earlier affirmation of human liberation to forbid any mediating or incapacitating forces on the direct God-human contact, Qutb argues for a consensual, consultative government on the grounds that it would prevent any violation of human liberty.

While developing his narrative of Islamic history, Qutb concluded from the era of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs (632-61), as Sunni orthodoxy refers to Muhammad's four political successors, that Islam left the method of choosing a leader to the community's deliberation. Rejecting the traditional juristic condition that the caliph be a member of the Quraysh tribe, Qutb stated that "the only way someone can acquire the power to rule is to secure the Muslim community's consent."¹⁷⁷ In clearer terms:

We have to differentiate between the authority that implements the religious *shariah* and its derivation by the sultan for his personage in the name of religion. Religious authority does not come upon the ruler directly from heaven, as was the case with some earlier rulers in a "theocracy." Rather, he comes to power by being selected for that role by Muslims who enjoy absolute liberty. No one is bound by the previous ruler or a hereditary principle to favor a family. Therefore his authority is derived from implementing God's *shariah* without claiming any right of legislation for himself... If the Muslims do not give their consent, he cannot exercise any guardianship; if they give their consent first but he deserts God's *shariah*, no one is required to obey him.¹⁷⁸

Qutb is not satisfied with the traditional juristic understanding of *shura* as an undertaking limited to the elite. He envisages it as a deliberation in which the entire population participates. This is only a technical matter of planning for him. While free

¹⁷⁷ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 308. Thus the caliphate's perversion into a kingdom at the hands of the Umayyads was nothing but a remnant of the *jahili* current. Ibid., 309.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 160-61. Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyyah*, 82.

elections are the only mechanism, elections should not be distorted by the power of feudal lords, capitalists, and power holders.¹⁷⁹

In terms of his presentation of the Islamic principles of government, Qutb is never apologetic toward Islamic history. As pointed out earlier, despite the absolute immunity granted to the Companions by traditional Sunni scholarship, Qutb never conceals his opinions on Muawiyah's method of usurping Ali's power, and thereby from the *ummah*, to transform the emerging Islamic empire into his family's private property.¹⁸⁰ Based on this view, his assessment of Islam's future is rather bleak: "We do not see any existence of Islam, for it ended once the last caravan that professed that sovereignty belongs only to God abandoned it."¹⁸¹

But then how and by whom is Islam to be revived? To the consternation of quite a few Islamists and anti-Islamists, Qutb does not consider imposing *shariah* through an Islamic revolution as the solution; nor does he even see *shariah* as confined to a form of government (i.e., a *shariah* state). He is quite clear in his opposition to theocracy and his dislike of the ulama: "The way to establish God's rule on Earth is not to give some consecrated people—the priests—the authority to rule, as occurred with the Church, nor that some spokesmen of God rule, as in a 'theocracy.' Establishing God's rule means enforcing His laws and that the final decision in all affairs complies with them."¹⁸²

Shariah, for Qutb, is an entire way of life that manifests itself in the beliefs, lifestyle, ethical rules, and the criteria used to evaluate persons, things, and events, and

¹⁷⁹ Qutb, *Ma'rakat*, 72-73.

¹⁸⁰ Kutub, *Sosyal Adalet*, 329-30.

¹⁸¹ Ibid; Qutb, *al-Adalah al-Ijtima'iyah*, 183. As he qualified his narrative earlier, Qutb does not mean that after Muawiyah (excluding Omar b. Abd-al-Aziz), the whole Islamic history was governed by *jahiliyyah*. He sees episodic Islamic moments in certain times, places, and occasions. This Islamic spirit is just hidden, as opposed to totally eliminated, which would allow future reinvigorations.

¹⁸² Qutb, *Milestones*, 58.

not the least in arts and culture.¹⁸³ Thus, it cannot be imposed forcefully from above.

The correct meaning of the creed first has to be revived in the people's hearts and minds free of any diversions brought about by political games. Over and over again, Qutb emphasizes that the creed's truth has primacy over the system and that the formation of personality has primacy over collective organization. Neither of these can be achieved through a top-down revolution.¹⁸⁴

Qutb is certain that Islam has the potential to create a political system. As Muslims have not yet developed this potential,¹⁸⁵ his envisaged political system will be perfected in action by a vanguard. Thus his normative theory of sociopolitical change is based on a *fiqh* of praxis. With a strong focus on creed and ethics, this vanguard (viz., the major force of change) will engage in political action only as informed by the onto-ethico-political whole laid out here. It is imperative, then, that its members, who are determined to revive the unique Qur'anic generation, always oscillate between their ontological commitments, ethical goals, and political actions.

While Lenin is considered the inspiration behind Qutb's theory of the vanguard, it is more probable that this distinction belongs to Carrel, given that both he and Qutb desire to save the human individual's true nature and to build a new civilization on it.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Kutub, *İslam'da Sosyal Adalet*, 394.

¹⁸⁴ Kutub, *Son Sözler*, 79. Qutb, *Li Madha*, 86.

¹⁸⁵ Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 14.

¹⁸⁶ See Carrel, *Man the Unknown*, 286-99. Indeed, Carrel's idea of a high council (p. 292), its mental isolation from the crowd (p. 293), the idea that "the renovation of the individual demands his affiliation with a group sufficiently numerous to separate from others" (p. 294) where this group, "although very small, is capable of eluding the harmful influence of the society of its epoch by imposing upon its members rules of conduct modeled on military or monastic discipline" (p. 294) seem to have had some influence on Qutb's project for training the Qur'anic generation. But note that he develops his idea from within a eugenics and social Darwinist framework to develop "an ascetic and mystic minority" (p. 296) that is non-existent in Qutb. For Carrel, then, it is "chiefly through intellectual and moral discipline, and the rejection of the habits of the herd, that we can reconstruct ourselves; but the only way to obviate the disastrous predominance of the weak is to develop the strong" (p. 296). On this latter point, Lenin's vanguard is closer to Qutb's idea when compared with Carrel's "hereditary aristocracy" (p. 297). Carrel clearly says that "eugenics is indispensable for the perpetuation of the strong" (p. 299), which would be of little concern to Qutb.

The youth organization that Qutb referred to in his *Why Did They Execute Me?* can be taken as a practical application of this idea, although it started out as a prison network that he agreed to lead only until a leader emerged from its ranks. He also used this theory to articulate his ideas of vicegerency, socioeconomic liberation, and civilizational rejuvenation to remove oppression and secure justice, peace, and liberation on Earth.

Qutbian World Peace and Offensive Warfare

I take the question of offensive warfare, one of his most controversial ideas, as the foremost apologetic dimension of his thought. Although Qutb maintains a decline-and-extinction theme in his narration of Islamic history, his inclination to whitewash the Prophet's time and the early caliphate (excluding Othman's term) as a real-life case of the "unique Qur'anic generation" is indisputable. But this attitude leaves him with a challenge: How does one explain the early Islamic empire's historic expansion through offensive wars? While his motive might be to justify early Islamic history, he attempts to integrate this historical record with the rest of his thought via a theory of world peace based on the idea of an "Islamic emancipatory intervention."

Qutb rejects war as the means to disseminate the Islamic message. In his view, Islamic wars are essentially different from other religious or racial wars¹⁸⁷ because, in accordance with the earlier theory of liberation, they are justified only insofar as they eliminate the interference between God and humanity (i.e., oppressive rulers who deny religious freedom):

Whoever seeks to prevent this good [Islam] from reaching humanity and stands between them and it by force is an aggressor against the Word of God. Thus his removal is the fulfillment of God's Word. [War is engaged in] not to force Islam on people, but rather to confer on them the freedom of knowledge and the choice of salvation. Islam does not

¹⁸⁷ Kutub, *Cihan Sulhu*, 25; Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 23.

compel conversion (2/256); however, it does stand against those who forcibly stand in its way.¹⁸⁸

It is important, then, to recognize that Qutb never justifies offensive war in “power” terms, namely, that Islam must conquer the world to make itself the only acceptable doctrine. In this regard, he repeatedly refers to the British Orientalist Thomas W. Arnold’s (d. 1930) major argument that Islam owes its spread not to religious wars but to the good morals of Muslim merchants.¹⁸⁹ Although Qutb might be accused of providing an ethical discourse only to cover up “the Muslim will to worldwide domination,” it is significant that he avoids the language of domination and opposes the *libido dominandi* in his construction of an ethical order. In order to assuage the worries about the potential his view poses for unrestrained warfare for religious domination, he maintains that war is designed to secure a world peace in which Islam can spread peacefully. Therefore, if the other party agrees to make a treaty and grants religious freedom to its subjects, the Muslims can no longer attack them.¹⁹⁰

Thus, as part of the mission of vicegerency Muslims are duty-bound to remove injustice from the world, whether it is committed by or directed toward Muslims or non-Muslims.¹⁹¹ But one element remains vague: At which point will the vanguard decide to establish a just polity in order to remove injustice and exactly how will they accomplish

¹⁸⁸ Kutub, *Cihan Sulhu*, 28; Qutb, *al-Salam al-'Alami*, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Westminster, UK: A. Constable and Co., 1896).

¹⁹⁰ “The general rule is that there is no fighting except with those who fight you and those who try to push people away from their religion by oppression. There is no hostility except against the oppressors.” One can also fight those who habitually break their promises and constantly threaten the Muslims. But, he says: “Even then, once they promise to fulfill the requirements of their contracts, the Muslims must accept this offer” Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 88-89.

¹⁹¹ Kutub, *Cihan Sulhu*, 29. He quotes: “And how could you refuse to fight in the cause of God and of the utterly helpless men and women and children who are crying, ‘O our Sustainer! Lead us forth [to freedom] out of this land whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, a protector, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, one who will bring us succour!’” (Qur’an 4:75). Kutub, *İslam Toplumu*, 95-97.

this goal? Qutb can only go so far to imply that he does not envisage some kind of an ideal theocratic regime that would forcibly establish Islam's global dominance.

In conclusion, we can argue that Qutb's political ontology sets up a totally harmonious, all-comprehensive ethico-religious order in which each part is at peace with itself and the rest of the system (*nizam*), where *jahiliyyah* is removed and all obedience is dedicated to God, and where global human peace and human civilization reign. This is the high point, the moment of total reconciliation (*Aufhebung*) of his thought, for in it all of his onto-ethical goals of *tawhid* and *hakimiyyah*, freedom, justice, equality, civilization, and peace are reconciled.

One might wonder, and quite naturally, if this all-too-harmonious ontopolitical edifice contains any gaps.

5.4 Rifts and Gaps in Qutb's Political Ontology

If Qutb positions himself as a man of peace, liberation, and civilization, are the Islamophobes just using him as a scapegoat? If this is the case, their specter of Islamism would conveniently be embodied by Osama bin Laden and Qutb, who has supposedly served as his mastermind. Although Zawahiri may have admired for Qutb and bin Laden studied under Qutb's brother Muhammad in college, the ideas and methods of the Salafi jihadis cannot be easily attributed to Qutb's project. Qutb's endeavor to achieve human emancipation without imposing *shariah* by a top-down Islamic revolution or using violence to spread Islam is a clear sign that he would not condone many of the subsequent Islamically motivated violent actions. Perhaps for this reason most of his

Muslim readers remained peaceful Islamist activists who wanted to bring about social change through educational work and bottom-up sociopolitical activism.

The Impossible Purity

But even after detaching Qutb's project from the overemphasized instances of Muslim violence, can it fulfill its promises? In other words, is this totally reconciled and harmonious world made up of an authentic religion purged of all *jahili* influences; a consensual, *shura*-based application of *shariah*; and a global peace in which adherents of each (or no) religion can enjoy complete religious freedom and the largest degree social justice possible?

I contend that Qutb has taken Afghani's Islamist axiom to its logical conclusion by giving an interconnected coherence to the ontological, ethical, and political spheres; however, what he desires in the form of a re-enchanting, all-too-harmonious world will eventually undermine his own ethical goals of liberation, equality, social justice, and total human freedom. Then, to the same extent that his political theory emerges as a liberation theology, it also contains fundamentalist elements. In his attempt to give absolute coherence to Islamic foundationalism, he ends up affirming an ontology of harmony that is far too pure to ever be attained. In other words, what starts out as a liberation theology designed to pursue the anti-imperialist and anti-despotic struggle on the way to perfect human freedom will become the victim of its own anti-hermeneutic re-enchantment and will to harmony. My general conclusion will revolve around this interpretation of Qutb, which see him as oscillating between liberation theology and fundamentalism.

This harmonious ontopolitical edifice contains numerous problems, some of which are seen in other ontologies of harmony. First, despite his increasing attempt to

achieve full authenticity, Qutb remains a modern thinker with a modern vocabulary, a fact that, ironically, accounts for his appeal among modern educated Muslims. Aside from his indebtedness to the works of Western authors, especially to Carrel, he extensively cites Thomas W. Arnold, Robert Briffault, John H. Denison, John Draper, Will Durant, Julian Huxley, Adam Metz, A. Cressy Morrison, Bertrand Russell, and Bernard Shaw. Notwithstanding his purificationist attempts, Qutb's ideas remain decidedly mixed in their lineage, namely, the civilizational discourse and the ideals of the French Revolution.

Yet the problem is deeper than that. Qutb seems to be oblivious to two dimensions of the hermeneutic circle in which he is entangled. His vanguard supposedly bears no traces of *jahiliyyah*. As he continually narrows the scope of *ijtihad*, despite the vanguard's direct link with God and God's revelation without any interference from the political rulers or clergy, the vanguard is relegated to forever being on the receiving end of the *shariah*'s absolute imperatives. In other words, even when his sole task is to implement God's supposedly clear orders the vanguard will remain inevitably influenced by his prejudices. Thus while Qutb in his own way interferes with the multiplication of foundations to balance Afghani and Abduh's conciliatory attitudes, he does not pay much attention to the hermeneutic circle between the revelation and vanguard, who supposedly is to understand and act upon the revelation. As long as this mediating role of human reason remains under-theorized, his vanguard cannot recognize the human element in their religiously motivated actions and, as a result, their resulting self-righteous and fundamentalist inclinations will jeopardize their ethicopolitical praxis.

Even further, the Qutbian strong ontology is faced with some difficulty when it attempts to accommodate the hermeneutic circle among the ontological, ethical, and political levels. As his metaphoric imagery is always about the foundation upon which the remaining parts of the edifice will rest, just how the ethical and political levels will fold back into the ontological level remains unclear. It may be suggested that he is, in fact, not as a strong ontologist as he wants to be, given that he draws heavily on the concept of “Islamic spirit” as well as such juristic principles as *maslahah* (public interest), *maqasid* (the *shariah*’s general goals as opposed to specific rulings), and *sadd al- Dhara’i* (blocking the means to illegality). Each of these would smuggle a considerable rationalistic content into a rather formalistic framework. Thus a more truthful account of the hermeneutical relationship among God, the revealed text, and human reason, the spirit of Islam, along with the other concepts, has to be clearly articulated.

The Limitations of Shura

This problem manifests itself especially in his understanding of *shura*. Although Qutb emphasizes that in his practical view of Islam the details of the political system will develop through praxis,¹⁹² he points out *shura*’s centrality as the governing principle of Islamic rule. But even given this, who decides what belongs in the domain of *shariah*, which is closed to any public deliberation, as opposed to what belongs in the domain of *shura*? Is whatever Muslims decide in their public consultation to be considered part of jurisprudence? After all, he asserts that *shura* should now be extended to the whole populace. Given his stark opposition to the ulama, will the general public engage in

¹⁹² Qutb, *Ma’alim*, 45.

ijtihad and thereby break the monopoly of the religious scholars? In any case, the respective positions of the human sphere, as well as those of *fiqh* and *shariah*, still need to be clarified and made consistent with his view of reason and revelation.

Qutb can comfortably seek to assuage the worries that his envisaged system will impose *shariah* on reluctant Muslim masses and will necessarily beget a theocracy. He would state that his government would emerge only after a well-trained and willing Muslim majority is formed and engages in system building. Their own practical wisdom would lead them to find answers to specific problems by applying *shariah*. Just like Rousseau's public reason seeks the general will, in Qutb's model Muslims will be involved in an "Islamic public reason," so to say, whereby they would search for God's will for a particular society at a particular time. Would God's revelation and its fixed fundamental principles then function as Rousseau's Lawgiver? To suggest a solution, perhaps we could refer to our earlier distinction between politics and "the political." Thus we can suggest that the moment of the political, the founding moment, can be take shape here as an Islamic political moment par excellence whereby a sporadic outpouring of the Islamic spirit would result in the establishment of a Muslim polity that would, at a particular point, adopt *shariah* as its basic framework. Everyday politics, in turn, would be managed through *shura*.

Yet again, Qutb seem oblivious to the "fact of pluralism." He is committed to an ontology of harmony as opposed to an ontology of conflict, which both agonistic and radical democrats affirm. But this does not prevent him from acknowledging pluralism at

its face value. Citing the Qur'anic verse 11:118,¹⁹³ he says that Islam tolerates individuals who have different beliefs; such difference is, in fact, essential to human nature.¹⁹⁴ But this requires that he recognize that perhaps Muslims will never become such an overwhelming majority, and that even if they did, they might never agree that his model is the most authoritative interpretation of the Qur'an. In such a case, would he resort to Rousseau's solution of "forcing them to be free"?¹⁹⁵ Although he categorically denies that he intends to bring everybody under Islamic rule in order to force their conversion, what safeguards can non-Muslims or dissident Muslims use to ensure their liberty and individuality, both of which he values highly, when the majority will seek God's will through Islamic public reason? He is clearly against isolationism, given his view that one does not sever relations with *jahiliyyah* and thereby isolate Muslims. Instead, he advises Muslims to mix with others with discretion, give and take with dignity, and speak the truth with love.¹⁹⁶ However, as long as the vanguard maintains its sense of self-certainty about their truth claims without feeling any need to learn from others or allow some room in which their claims can be contested, the living space he leaves for *jahiliyyah* does not seem to secure a meaningful coexistence or full citizenship.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ "And had thy Sustainer so willed, He could surely have made all mankind one single community: but [He willed it otherwise, and so] they continue to hold divergent views"

¹⁹⁴ Qutb, *Mujtama' Islami*, 87.

¹⁹⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 64.

¹⁹⁶ Qutb, *Milestones*, 140; Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 161-62.

¹⁹⁷ "This understanding in itself creates in us confidence and power, compassion and sympathy, while presenting Islam to the people: the confidence of a man who know that he is with the truth, while what the people have is falsehood; and the compassion of a person who sees the suffering of mankind and knows how to bring them to ease; and the sympathy of a person who sees the error of the people and knows what the supreme guidance is." Qutb, *Milestones*, 133; Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 153. Although Qutb tries to cultivate an ethics of sympathy and compassion out of the vanguard's self-certitude, this patronizing attitude does not seem to offer enough ground for mutual learning and sufficient mutual respect to sustain equal citizenship or a peaceful coexistence on equal terms.

World Peace on the Muslims' Terms?

In a similar way, his vision for world peace seems tantamount to peace on the Muslims' terms. But where is the non-Muslim voice and mutual deliberation in this model? Qutb opposes attacking those non-Muslim states with which Muslim states have signed peace treaties, which would give full liberty and justice to their own citizens. He insists that offensive wars may be fought only to remove injustice and give every person the liberty to freely choose their own religion. But this view points to his most fundamental paradox, as well as that of the subsequent Islamist paradigm for that matter. As Olivier Roy also pointed out,¹⁹⁸ in order for this ontopolitical edifice to sustain individual liberty and secure a virtuous human society, it has to have those virtuous Muslim individuals in the first place. Even then, it is as if the onto-ethical sphere would totally absorb the political sphere to ensure that any political decision would be decisively determined along ethical lines. In order for any offensive war to be a truly Islamic war, instead of a war of domination or economic imperialism by Muslims couching their ambitions in Islamic terms, we must somehow begin with those perfect Muslims whose political actions would be perfect translations of their onto-ethical principles. But this would entail a huge omission of *the political* with its distinct ontology, as Schmitt would immediately contend.

Concluding Remarks

Qutb may be defended as a figure comparable to those Christian political thinkers who strive to find a proper locus for their religious commitments in the public sphere against the oppressive secularism that denies any such accommodation. Further, his strong

¹⁹⁸ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 60-62.

emphasis on anti-imperialism and social justice resting upon a God-centric ontology would easily place him alongside liberation theologians. Accordingly, his political theory and formulation of the Islamist paradigm can pass on these sensibilities to subsequent generations of Muslims who would be interested in articulating an Islamic project of social justice and anti-imperialism in the late-modern world. But just like Rousseau's oscillation between radical democratic and totalitarian imaginaries, Qutb's project suffers from a demand for purity, a will to harmony, and a belief in self-certitude that amounts to a fundamentalist mode that will eventually undermine the emancipatory dimensions of his thought. I argue that Qutb must be read within these opposing moments. Therefore, the more one can reclaim his emancipatory moments, the less future Islamist generations will have to see him as a liability in their attempt to develop a contestable and pluralistic vision that gives "difference" its due. As we will see in the coming chapters, although he may not be considered as a profound political philosopher, Qutb was the major paradigm builder and future Islamic political thinkers had to wrestle with his legacy in their attempt to democratize Islam and reconcile popular sovereignty with God's *hakimiyyah*. As he set the terms of the debate on modern political concepts and institutions, Liberal Muslims had to establish themselves by dismantling his ontopolitical edifice.

CHAPTER 6

FAZLUR RAHMAN: ISLAM AS AN ETHICAL PROJECT AND A DELIBERATIVE ENDEAVOR

*[T]he Qur'an itself not only has a great deal of definitive philosophic teaching, but can also be a powerful catalyst for the building up of a comprehensive world view consistent with that teaching. This has never been systematically attempted in Islamic history; it can and must be done. After the general world view, a systematic attempt must be made to elaborate an ethics on the basis of the Qur'an.*¹

*The distinctiveness as well as the practicality of Islam may be demonstrated ... by a bona fide attempt... to found an ethically based social order on earth. If the Muslim can successfully attempt this task, he will have implemented the basic élan of the Qur'an and saved mankind from what seems to be nothing less than a suicide. Otherwise, there is little left for him to do but indulge in a trivial and vainglorious self-satisfaction; only "vainglory can be no substitute for Truth", as the Qur'an has it (LIII, 28).*²

*[T]he Quran had created a community to carry on the task assigned to it by God who had made this community self-governing through Shura and had thus made it the repository of the power for Islam upon which was based the Islamic state.*³

Fazlur Rahman (1919-88) was a lone figure at a particular juncture of contemporary Islamic intellectual history. One might at first have a hard time making sense of his significance to an ontological narrative of contemporary Muslim political thought. Unlike the popular personalities of Afghani and Qutb, he is not very well-known outside American academia or the rather small circles of scholarly communities in a limited number of Muslim countries. He is not known so much as a political thinker or as an activist who took part in any remarkable political movement. Nonetheless, in my

¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 256.

² *Ibid.*, 265.

³ Fazlur Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 17.

ontological narrative he stands out as a significant transitional figure who, with his distinctive Qur'anic hermeneutics, paved the way for the emergence of a diasporic "Liberal" or "Progressive Muslim" *Stimmung* that is having an ever-widening impact on Islamic social and political reform.

More specifically, I have chosen to focus on Rahman's work on account of two of his deeply held concerns. First, throughout his long publishing career he insistently called for establishing "an ethically based sociopolitical order" on Earth and under God, a task he regarded as the Qur'an's basic *élan*.⁴ For him, the basis of the Qur'anic message was ethical through and through and thus everything else about normative Islam has to be interpreted accordingly. In that sense, the ethical sphere is the primordial element of his ontopolitical constellation and the main locus of his corrective to Qutb's ontologically driven paradigm. Yet his formulation of Islam joins with Qutb's ontopolitical approach by holding that the ontological, ethical, and political spheres are deeply entangled with each other. This makes his work an even more significant object for a political ontological analysis. Second, Rahman assumed the responsibility of reflecting upon the Muslims' stagnation (*inhiyat*) and offering his unique solutions for revival, thereby joining the long line of reformist (*islahi*) thinkers. Of crucial importance in this regard is

⁴ Rahman, *Islam*, 265; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 15, or "to establish a viable social order on earth that will be just and ethically based." Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 37. Rahman's specific use of "élan" is quite significant to understand his ethical and legal theory as this is one of the most frequent recurring themes of his work. Normally understood as a combination of style and vigor, élan in his theory is closer to Qutb's concept of the "spirit of Islam." They both charge Muslims with the duty to contemplate the gist of the Islamic message, over and above its particular principles or formal rules.

the special attention he paid to the *islah* tradition in some of his monographs, including his posthumous *Revival and Reform in Islam*.⁵

Thus, in my interpretation, approaching Rahman as simply an innovative formulator of Islamic legal methodology misses his larger project: a comprehensive reform project that takes legal and political reform as a natural culmination of an ontological/theological and ethical reform.⁶ In this chapter, I will approach him as a theologically oriented political thinker, as a thinker who differs from many other *islahis* by his diagnosis of the stagnation's origins. Accordingly he would see it in essence not as a sociopolitical decadence due to their political defeat by European colonialism or economic underdevelopment. In his view, the root problem is the Muslims' moral underdevelopment that has grown out of a fundamental misunderstanding of the Qur'anic message. This can be traced back to the critical juncture when the major Islamic sciences and institutions were instituted around the eighth and ninth centuries. The solution then, as the basic revivalist and reformist motto goes, is to go back to the Qur'an. But in Rahman's sense, this means approaching it afresh as a coherent and holistic text,⁷ systematically working out its socio-moral principles, and, more fundamentally, an

⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2000). See also Fazlur Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 4 (1970); Fazlur Rahman, *Selected Letters of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi* (Karachi: Iqbal Academy, 1968); Fazlur Rahman, "Muslim Modernism in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21, no. 1 (1958).

⁶ "The Qur'an's message must be understood as unity and not as so many isolated commands and injunctions. But in order to bring out the Qur'an's message as a unity, one must start with the theology and ethics of the Qur'an and only then approach the realm of law... [An ethics grown out of the Qur'an] presupposes a satisfactory theology." Fazlur Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," in *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference, 1983, in Honour of Fazlur Rahman*, ed. R. Hovannisian (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1985), 11.

⁷ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 145; Rahman, "Law and Ethics," 11.

Islamic Weltanschauung, which Rahman took to be an immediate imperative for Muslims.⁸

Rahman articulates this task as an ongoing reform process based on a double hermeneutics between the sociohistorical circumstances of a given context and the moral imperatives of the Qur'anic worldview. In this chapter, I will seek to uncover his ontopolitical constellation by disentangling its ontological, ethical, legal, methodological, and political aspects. I argue that the ensuing ontopolitical edifice defies the overdetermined Qutbian structure by showing that the link between God, revelation, and human agency (vicegerency) is not as clear cut and linear as Qutb assumes. In the end, although both reformists assume a deeply entangled ontopolitical circuit, Rahman, via his hermeneutic method, rips apart any strong ontological determination of the political level, as found in Qutb. In his alternative vision, he shows how the ethical level plays a primordial role in this constellation through its particular relationship with the other levels, as enmeshed in constant hermeneutic circles. In the end, a specific ontological relationship between God and the human being, as well as among humans in the sociopolitical sphere, is established.

In both instances, these relationships are prefigured by a deeply ingrained ethical element that fosters an empowered human agency for Islamic political ontology and defies the Qutbian all-enchanted whole, without, however, secularizing its overall structure. In the end, legal and political positions take the form of contestable articulations reached through deliberations in self-governing Islamic communities. Therefore, they are not divinely ordained, enchanted, and uncontestable principles that

⁸ Ibid., 86.

are merely uncovered through an “Islamic general will,” so to say. This definitely eases matters for Liberal Muslims who are intent upon formulating an “Islamic democracy” and makes the transition from the Qutbian paradigm much smoother.

To substantiate these assertions, I will first give a brief sketch of Rahman’s life of active intellectual engagement (6.1) via holding academic positions in mostly non-Muslim-majority countries. A brief active political life in Pakistan, however, did have a lasting impact on his subsequent reform project. Subsequently, I will present different levels of his ontopolitical constellation in separate sections. I will embark on this in section 6.2 by analyzing his ontological and theological reflections that laid the ground of his Islamic Weltanschauung. Following my own footsteps in the earlier chapters, I will demonstrate what his conception of the human being as a vicegerent denotes and entails, as well as what kind of a relationship among God, the human being, the universe, and the revealed text results from this particular reading of the Qur’an.

Prefigured by a notion of human agency empowered at the theological level, section 6.3 will concentrate on his ethical commitments, the primordial element of his ontopolitical edifice. There I show how he expands the ethical sphere by presenting the Qur’an as a holistic message that assigns reason an active role and upholds human freedom alongside a strong faith-action link. The special emphasis he puts on social justice will also be elaborated here. In section 6.4, I will approach Rahman as a legal-political theorist. Subsequent to presenting how the doctrine of the objectives of the religion (*maqasid*) gives an ethical content to the legal sphere, I will move on to assess his “Living Tradition” (*Sunnah*) theory, in which he makes the case that religion is a collective product of the Muslim community’s deliberative process at a particular time.

By using this approach, he prepares the ground for his Qur’anic hermeneutics, which is primarily characterized by his double movement theory. He then employs this innovative historicist approach to propose some of his most controversial views. I will continue with his political theory of *shura* or “Islamic democracy,” as he uses both terms. Of special importance in this section is how he revisits such controversial legal-political matters as *zakat* (the poor-relief), bank interest, polygamy, stoning, apostasy, and slavery. Likewise, his views on religious and political pluralism are an upshot of his earlier reformulations of the Qur’an’s ethics and legal methodology. Section 6.5 will assess his “Islamic modernist” reform project, a term I do not find particularly helpful. Still, one has to understand his typology of reform movements and the legacy which he attributes to himself, in order to comprehend the orientation of his overall reform project. Finally, I will conclude by analyzing the overall significance of Rahman’s political ontology for my ontological narrative.

6.1 The Life of a Radical Reformist Academic

Fazlur Rahman was born in the Hazara district of pre-Partition India, now part of Pakistan, in 1919.⁹ His father, a graduate of the famous Deobandi seminary system, chose to teach his son the system’s Nizami curriculum on his own, rather than sending him to a traditional madrasa for a formal education. Rahman acquired his strong background in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), prophetic traditions (*hadith*), Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*), logic (*mantiq*), and philosophy (*falsafa*) through these private studies. Later on, he attended Punjab University in Lahore and earned a B.A. in Arabic, followed by an

⁹ Ebrahim Moosa, introduction to *Revival and Reform in Islam*, by Fazlur Rahman (Boston: Oneworld, 2000), 1. The biography I present here summarizes Moosa’s biographical sketch in this “Introduction” to Rahman’s posthumous book.

M.A. in the same field. He went to Oxford in 1946 to pursue his Ph.D. His dissertation dealt with Ibn Sina, which was later published under the title *Avicenna's Psychology*. He taught Persian and Islamic philosophy at Durham University (1950-58) and then took a position as associate professor of Islamic studies at Canada's McGill University.¹⁰

His life departed from the usual academic career path when Pakistan's president General Ayyub Khan (r. 1958-69) sought to form a state via initiating political and legal reforms that were in accord with Pakistan's founding Islamic ideals. Rahman moved to Pakistan and, becoming the director (1961-68) at the newly formed Central Institute of Islamic Research, produced serious research designed to provide a fresh interpretation of Islam. He also set out to implement a reformed educational model at the institute, one that combined traditional curricula and modern research techniques.¹¹ At the same time, he served on the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology, a supreme policymaking body. Thus he was in a position to propose policies for official implementation. But while carrying out his duties, he was incessantly targeted by conservative circles and the president's opponents due to his reformist views. Thus even the most arcane theological matters became the focal points of political rifts. After this turbulent period, he had to resign and immigrate to the United States.¹²

Following a brief professorship at the University of California, in the spring of 1969 he moved to the University of Chicago to serve as a professor of Islamic thought until he passed away in 1988, where he carried on his reformist intellectual agenda till the

¹⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

¹¹ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 123.

¹² Moosa, "Introduction," 2-3.

very end. Rahman left behind numerous books and articles as well as a wide number of Islamic studies students who have impacted the intellectual discourse on Islam in North America.¹³ Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to assert that his Qur'anic hermeneutics eventually became a major source of influence on how Islam is now interpreted by many Muslim scholars in the American academy.

6.2 Rahman's Theistic Ontology

As a committed Muslim, Rahman's God and Qur'an-centric ontology shapes his whole ontopolitical edifice, although his real interest is the Qur'an's ethical message. In large part, his ontological commitments rest on his affirmation of the Qur'an as a revealed text, as an authentic word of God. Yet he has a particular understanding of its nature, the significance of which unfolds over the entirety of his political ontology: "[T]he Qur'an is a divine response, through the Prophet's mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia."¹⁴ He sees the formulation of a proper Qur'anic theology as a necessity in order to define the God-human relationship. Accordingly, the ensuing legal rules concerning the details of everyday life can be formulated only by recourse to "ultimate principles."¹⁵ That is to say, the first step in any process of comprehensive reform is to realize that "the Qur'an as a whole does inculcate a definite attitude toward life and does have a concrete weltanschauung."¹⁶ The intellectual task, therefore, is to elaborate "an

¹³ For a full bibliography of his works, see Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 210-16.

¹⁴ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 5. This definition is quite a challenge in itself to the traditional understandings of the nature of the revelation: it underlines the text's responsiveness to the situation's particularities, in addition to assigning a role to the mental processes of the Prophet's mind as opposed to taking him just as a delivery person. In another instance, Rahman challenges the traditional scholarship for making the Prophet "almost like a record in relation to Divine Revelation." Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965), 9.

¹⁵ Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," 12.

¹⁶ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 6.

Islamic metaphysics on the basis of the Qur'an."¹⁷ He states that this was never achieved in the past, for although there were brilliant metaphysicians, no "systematic and coherent body of metaphysical thought fully informed by the Qur'anic *weltanschauung*" was ever developed.¹⁸

And so Rahman takes it upon to himself to derive this *weltanschauung* by studying its fundamental concepts, as in his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.¹⁹ Here, he clarifies the Qur'anic conceptions of God, the human being, nature, and some other basic theological concepts and figures. The most striking fact about his conception of God is not simply that he rebuts the Orientalist view of Allah as a capricious tyrant or that God's justice is tantamount to an infinite majesty balanced by an infinite mercy. In his interpretation, God is, to begin with, "*the Master-Truth*."²⁰ But the Qur'an does not tend to give lengthy theological proofs to make people believe in God, or even a theoretical discussion of his nature.²¹ It simply gives reminders because everything in the universe is God's "sign" (*ayah*).²² In other words, it does not "'prove' God but 'points to' Him from the existing universe."²³ In stark contrast to some of the post-foundational ontological imaginaries I presented in chapter 1, and very much in line with Qutb's views, our

¹⁷ Ibid., 133. Moosa, in this sense, finds Rahman closer to Muhammad Iqbal's viewpoint that Muslims must "make the Qur'an the centerpiece of a Muslim *ontology*." Ebrahim Moosa, foreword to *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, by Fazlur Rahman (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), xi.

¹⁸ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 132. He continues, "an overall worldview of Islam has to be first" (Ibid., 133). He thinks that the primary basis of medieval Islam's *weltanschauung* was Hellenic thought, not the Qur'an (Ibid., 132).

¹⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes*.

²⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

²¹ Fazlur Rahman, "The Qur'anic Concept of God, the Universe and Man," *Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (1967): 1. "The Qur'an is no treatise about God and his Nature; His existence for the Qur'an is strictly functional."

²² Rahman, *Major Themes*, 4-5. "God is not an item among other items of the universe, or just an existent among other existents. He is 'with' everything; He constitutes the integrity of everything ... And just as everything is related directly to Him, so is everything, *through* and *in* relation to other things, related to God as well. God, then, is the very meaning of reality."

²³ Ibid., 10.

universe *is* a purposeful universe: “The whole of nature is one firm, well-knit structure with no gaps, ruptures, and no dislocations.”²⁴

However, the point is not to subdue the human being as a powerless appendage to an omnipotent God’s all-purposeful harmonious universe. Nor is Rahman interested in portraying God and the universe as exclusive objects of mystical experience in which the experience becomes an end in itself. He repeatedly says that the Qur’an’s central concern is human conduct, which means that belief in God plays a strictly “functional” role.²⁵ God is the “transcendent anchoring point” of moral values.²⁶ To be precise, “just as in Kantian terms no ideal knowledge is possible without the regulative ideas of reason ... so in Qur’anic terms no morality is possible without the regulative idea of God.”²⁷ At the end of the day, therefore, the goal of the Qur’an is the human being and his behavior, not God.²⁸

This “functional” conception of God, since the center of interest is the human being, prepares the ground for Rahman’s formulation of vicegerency, the essential concept of the *islah* tradition. At this point, we find his views strikingly similar to those of Qutb:

The overall gain for a man or society generally imbued with such a faith is that they march ahead hopefully to conquer nature and to build a just, equitable, free and creative

²⁴ Ibid., 3. Granted that this is quite reminiscent of Connolly’s major problem with such imaginaries of purity and wholeness, here Rahman’s view does not totally go against contingency, although it is employed in a different sense. Nature is contingent, “but a contingent cannot be thought of without that upon which it is contingent,” i.e., God (p. 3).

²⁵ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 14. Or in even starker terms, “The Qur’anic concept of God is, therefore, primarily – indeed, purely – functional.” Rahman, “The Qur’anic Concept of God, the Universe and Man,” 1. To him, the Qur’an’s practical purposiveness is the reason why it avoids all theoretical discussion of God’s nature.

²⁶ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 14.

²⁷ Ibid. He continues, “The Qur’an is undoubtedly *for action in this world*, since it provides guidance for man concerning his behavior on earth in relation to other men. God exists in the mind of the believer to regulate his behavior.” His problem is, again, with the late medieval Islam that made God simply an object of experience that was either neutral or even negatively related to social morality.

²⁸ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 3. Even further, the Qur’an’s statements about God are actually statements about the human being. Rahman, “The Qur’anic Concept of God,” 1.

social order *in harmony and unison with laws of God* and avoid the numbing frustration of a materialist or an agnostic whose hopelessness is the handiwork of the negative forces called the Devil.²⁹

Just like Qutb, Rahman wants the human being to join the universal harmony by submitting to God and assuming the role of vicegerent. The entirety of nature is already *Muslim* (literally “one who submits”), in the Qur’an’s own terms, as it obeys God’s command.³⁰ Moreover, everything in the universe prays to God due to the necessity of obedient behavior. Only human beings have been given the right of choice in this matter,³¹ for they are the noblest of all creation and thus the universe has been made for them and is subservient to their purposes.³² Among all of creation, only humans are endowed with moral and rational powers and free will, and thus only *they* are charged with the grave responsibility of subduing nature and using it to achieve good ends.³³ To create a moral social order on Earth is their mission, which the Qur’an describes as a “trust” (33:72).³⁴ The heavens and Earth, as the Qur’an’s metaphoric language puts it, rejected this heavy burden, the charge of *khilafah*; humans, however, voluntarily accepted it.³⁵ Thus those who use their rational powers and free choice for higher moral ends will be acting as vicegerents, namely, God’s trustees on Earth.³⁶ As they discharge

²⁹ Rahman, “The Qur’anic Concept of God,” 5 (emphasis added). This use of the Devil in the sense of “negative forces,” as opposed to a spiritual being is an important theological move on his part. It must also be noted in regards the left-outs, the “others” of his theology, and hence his political theodicy.

³⁰ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 13. The verse he refers to is, “Do they, then, seek an obedience [or religion] other than that to God, while it is to Him that everyone [and everything] in the heavens and the earth submits” (Qur’an 3:83).

³¹ Rahman, “The Qur’anic Concept of God,” 15.

³² He quotes the same verse as Qutb to establish the Qur’anic proclamation of humanity’s nobility: “We have, indeed, dignified man and enabled him to be mobile on land and sea ...” (17:70). Ibid., 10.

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ Rahman defines “trust” as “to discover the laws of, and thus get mastery over, nature – or, in the Qur’anic terminology, ‘to know the names of all things’ – and then use this mastery, under the human moral initiative, to create a good world order.” Ibid., 9.

³⁵ Ibid. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 18.

³⁶ This is as long as they are not morally incapacitated and act in accordance with *taqwa* (God-consciousness and a sense of responsibility so as to guard against moral peril, as will be explicated below). See, Fazlur Rahman, “Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur’an,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1983): 182.

this duty, they will be carrying out their voluntary service (*'ibadah*) to God, just as the rest of the universe does.

Clearly, Rahman's entire ontopolitical structure rests on an ethical foundation; even his concept of God acquires its fullest sense from this ethical orientation. To posit that the human being is essentially an ethical being endowed with free will and ready to discharge his ethical duty, Rahman had to break with the medieval orthodoxy dominated by the Ash'ari doctrine of theistic determinism. He condemns Ash'arism for its particular conception of the God-human relationship, which has had a long-term debilitating impact upon human agency. In fact, he flatly declares that the cardinal tenets of this school's theological view of free will contradict the Qur'an by assuming the human will's inefficacy and the divine will's purposelessness.³⁷ In this sense, he subscribes to Afghani's position that the orthodox misinterpretation of predestination, which directly influenced the ethicopolitical sphere, resulted in the Muslims' own political inefficacy and eventual decadence.

Rahman pays particular attention to the contentious debates on human freedom and determinism that occurred when the Sunni orthodoxy was being consolidated in the late medieval age around the thirteenth century. More specifically, he regards this period as a battleground between the rationalist Mu'tazilis³⁸ and the determinist Ash'aris. The

³⁷ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 3. His major problem with this view is its position that only an omniscient being (God) can act. This solution on the theological question of free will, in his view, "had moved far beyond any reasonable distance from the spirit of the Qur'an and the ethos and early Community. Even with al-Ash'ari and his early followers, the problem had retained its original moral urgency, but in the hands of the systematic theologian it became a purely doctrinaire pedantry." Rahman, *Islam*, 98-99.

³⁸ The Mu'tazila school is an interesting case in the history of Islamic theology. In Rahman's interpretation, they are not the exact Muslim equivalents of the Rationalists, or entirely "free-thinkers," for they took reason as an equal source, along with revelation, of moral truth. They called themselves *Ahl al-Tawhid wa al-'Adl* (People of Divine Unity and Justice). Its founder Wasil ibn 'Ata (d. 749) broke off (*i'tazala* – hence the root word of their name) from the circle of al-Hasan al-Basri. Their impulse to a systematic thinking out of dogma led them to pursue ratiocination further and

former went to the extreme of so defending human agency that they rob God of his godhead, whereas the latter deprived human beings of both their will and efficacy.³⁹ Reacting to the former school, nascent orthodoxy accentuated God's will and power.⁴⁰ In the end, human freedom became a victim of the balance of forces in the contentious theological field of free will. Rahman turns this into a blanket statement that "the chief property of the spiritual and intellectual life of the Muslims approximately from the seventh century [thirteenth century] onward is fatalism and the moral-psychological attitude that goes with it."⁴¹ Although he could understand the original impetus, he thinks that such an extreme understanding of determinism has outrun its original function and "has been in fact very injurious to the moral and social life of the Community."⁴² This perilous determinism became even more petrified in the face of an entrenched despotism that both sustained and was sustained by this theoretical attitude.⁴³

In conclusion, as Rahman's entire political ontology is driven by a strong ethical impulse, his ontological and theological figures of God, revelation, and the vicegerent

further. They are also known for their relentless struggle in defense of Islam against Manichaeism, Gnostic, and Materialist polemicists. Rahman credits them with producing the first systematically thought-out creed for Islam. Rahman, *Islam*, 88. Although Mu'tazila rationalism could hardly be philosophical in its main scope, Rahman held that the philosophical school in Islam was an extension of this rationalistic thinking. Then, he notes, it is no coincidence that the first great Muslim philosopher al-Kindi (d. circa 873) had a Mu'tazila background. Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 118. For a detailed study of this school with important original texts, see George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1997).

³⁹ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 100.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁴¹ Ibid., 102. He illustrates this rather bold claim by presenting the influential theologian Razi's (d. 1198) argument against human potency. As Rahman relates, Razi claims that "in order to be able to act, the would-be agent must know exactly what he is doing; otherwise he cannot be said to 'act.' But in order to know exactly what I am doing, e.g., when I am said to move my finger, I must know the consequences of this act. But when I move my finger, an infinite series of motions is initiated (both in my body and outside it) which I can never *possibly* know. I cannot, therefore, be said to be able to move my finger. The motion of my finger is, therefore, an event which is created by God, or rather God had created it in eternity in His infinite Wisdom and Knowledge" Ibid., 102.

⁴² Ibid., 78.

⁴³ Rahman, *Islam*, 99. In Rahman's account, each field of thought within Islam developed its own version of determinism: the philosophers argued for a pure rationalistic determinism; Sufis advocated a monistic determinism on the basis of the doctrine of the Unity of God [a version of pantheism]; and finally the discipline of *kalam* (dialectical theology) adopted a complete theistic determinism.

human, along with her freedom, essentially acquire their significance in relation to the fulfillment of the overarching ethical end: founding a just universal order. I will now move on to unveil different aspects of the specifically ethical sphere of his ontopolitical constellation.

6.3 An Ethical Order

The ethical element in Rahman operates in two separate hermeneutic circles, so to say. Even though ethics ultimately is under God's command (*amr*), namely, having a strong ontological determinant, it nonetheless gives the ontological level its spirit. This is so much the case that even God's status could appear to be relegated to a function of the overarching ethical goal. On the other hand, ethics subordinates the legal-political sphere to its domain in such a way that no legal rule or political arrangement can operate on a *raison d'état* that disregards any ethical justification.

Apart from the entanglement between the theological concepts with their ethical goals as presented above, Rahman's transition to ethics proper can be observed through the close link he conceives of existing among the concepts of *iman* (faith), Islam, and *taqwa* (God-consciousness). In fact, when taken together they form the foundation of Qur'anic ethics.⁴⁴ According to the Qur'anic worldview, faith necessarily results in action because it invariably couples faith with good works.⁴⁵ As for *Islam*, we have already seen how Rahman highlights its sense of "surrendering oneself to [the Law of] God," which makes the whole universe Muslim. His distinctiveness here lies in the way he considers

⁴⁴ Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts," 170.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 171. Pretty much echoing Augustine's statement quoted in the first chapter, Rahman contends that "real good works must proceed from faith; works not rooted in faith are nothing and, in fact, often are worse than nothing because they are positively harmful" (Ibid., 171-72).

Islam as integral to *iman*. The two are “identical, and confer peace, security, and integrity on their subject.”⁴⁶

This might seem to be a rather minor point; however, he construes it in such a way that it poses a radical challenge to orthodoxy. While he agrees with orthodoxy’s objection to the Khariji⁴⁷ (the Seceders’) position that external religious rituals are the sole indicator of one’s faith and thus asserts that non-practicing Muslims are infidels, he is not satisfied with their resulting isolation for the sake of preserving communal solidarity. This, of course, has to do with his worries about disconnecting faith from action, which would result in eventually emptying the action of its faith and, in turn, of its ethical content. Although the reification of “submission to God” into an organized normative community called *Muslims* might have been inevitable, it surely takes a toll on the dynamism of *iman*. Instead, he seeks to strike a balance by holding that “[a]n individual may have some sort of *iman* but it cannot be true and full *iman* unless it is *islamically* expressed and worked out through a proper community, a community that will be both *muslim* and Muslim community.”⁴⁸

But the real ethical concept he wants to get at by this discussion is *taqwa*. Rahman sometimes follows the standard translation of “guarding against moral peril,” but his

⁴⁶ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁷ Along with the Shia, the Kharijis are one of Islam’s earliest theologico-political sects. They are known for judging one’s faith status decisively on the basis of his religious practice, declaring a grave sinner to be an infidel, and considering jihad as a pillar of faith. They acquired this name by seceding from Ali’s camp at the battle of Siffin (657) by refusing to accept Muawiya’s offer of arbitration (in fact a political trickery) on the grounds that only God can judge a matter. One of them eventually assassinated Ali because this doctrine made him an infidel in their eyes. Although the Kharijis are infamous for their fanaticism and puritanism, they stood out due to their egalitarian views on gender and race. They are known for having the most egalitarian caliphate doctrine because only they maintained that Muslims can choose anybody, even a “black slave,” for that office. Rahman, *Islam*, 170.

⁴⁸ Rahman, “Some Key Ethical Concepts,” 176.

preferred translation is “the fear of responsibility” in the utmost sense of righteousness.⁴⁹ His more critical move, though, is his view of all three as part of an integral whole: “[W]hile *iman* (‘faith’) is primarily concerned with the inner life (although it is supposed to end in overt action), and while *islam* (‘surrender to God’s law’) belongs primarily to outward action (although its inner dimension is equivalent to faith), *taqwa* equally comprises both faith and surrender.”⁵⁰ *Taqwa*’s most important function is to enable a person to correctly examine oneself and discern the right from the wrong. The real ethical import of the inseparability of these concepts is that the extreme reaction and exasperation to the Khariji view had, in the long run, a suicidal impact: Keeping faith and action separate resulted in an undue easing of the religious conscience, which lowered the moral tension and, proportionately, the moral standards.⁵¹ The extent to which this view served the despotic rulers by perpetuating political quietism and passivity, despite their utter disregard of Islam’s moral rules, is beyond dispute.⁵²

From this, Rahman moves on to another critical distinction that is at the center of his narrative of moral decadence and project of ethical reform: the source of good and evil. Here again the theological debate between the Ash’aris and the Mu’tazilis set the terms of discourse. In fact, it rather began to take shape when the original debate on the extent to which the human will was actually free was subsumed into the larger polemic about the “justice of God.” On this question, the Mu’tazilis posited that “God cannot do

⁴⁹ Ibid. A more comprehensive definition is, “a mental state of responsibility from which an agent’s actions proceed but which recognizes that the criterion of judgment upon them lies outside him.” Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 155. The definition’s last part is the weak ontological element in that one can never be sure whether God accepts his actions. Thus he cannot indulge himself in a feeling of moral supremacy vis-à-vis other human beings.

⁵⁰ Rahman, “Some Key Ethical Concepts,” 177. In this sense, *taqwa* must be rooted in inner faith and overt actions cannot indicate it, as Qur’an 2:177 and 22:37 demonstrate.

⁵¹ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 99.

⁵² Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 70-71. Here Rahman explains this view’s political ramifications by analyzing the doctrine of *irja’*, postponing the matter to God’s judgment in an apathetic mode. While in religious matters this comes to mean predestinarianism, it manifests itself as political quietism in politics.

the unreasonable and the unjust.”⁵³ However, their extreme assertion that God *must* do the best for humanity or *must* send them prophets and revelation provoked the orthodox establishment. The Ash’aris viewed this as an attempt to use human freedom to bind God and thus drifted to the other extreme: God is above human concepts of justice. On the human plane, this took the shape of whether we can know right and wrong (*husn wa qubh*) by reason. The Mu’tazilis may have gone too far by assigning to reason the decisive role as regards declaring things good or bad for the sake of affirming a universal rationalistic ethics.⁵⁴ The Ash’ari orthodoxy did just the opposite by perceiving good and evil to be the function of the arbitrary will of the law-giver. In other words, they posited a Leviathan-type God who alone can declare anything good or bad. Thus, Rahman concludes that “whereas the Mu’tazila subsumed the idea of God under that of human justice, the orthodox subsumed the idea of justice under that of God.”⁵⁵

Although Rahman does not explicitly support the Mu’tazilis’ stand on morals, his position does echo their sensibilities when he argues that “a rational understanding of the Qur’an and the Sunnah is the only reliable method for arriving at moral imperatives and legal enactments.”⁵⁶ He objects to the orthodox establishment’s condemnation of reason

⁵³ Rahman, *Islam*, 89.

⁵⁴ Against the Ash’ari position, al-Ghazali, who himself thinks that “No obligations flow from reason but from the Sharia[h],” portrays the Mu’tazilites in following terms: “A rational being regards as good that wherein he does not (necessarily) see any benefit and (sometimes) regards as bad that wherein he may find benefit...If someone sees a man or an animal on the verge of perishing, he regards it as good to save him ... although not believing in the Shari’a and even when he does not expect any benefit from this in this world.” Ibid., 106.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁶ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 138. Rahman’s position seems to bear an extensive indebtedness to a wide array of schools and reformist figures, as opposed to a strict subscription to a school like Mu’tazila. For instance, he criticizes the Mu’tazila for not differing their school from the other schools in legal matters despite their commitment to derive moral imperatives directly from reason. In fact, Rahman’s real favorite is the Maturidi theological sect, which is located somewhere between the Mu’tazila’s morbid rationalism and the Ashar’ite’s excessive conservatism. The Maturidis maintained a healthy and moderate rationalism on the issues of free will, good, and evil. This school held that very many human actions are good or bad beside the proclamation of shariah, while it did not believe in the authoritative and final role of reason. Rahman, in fact, sees the Maturidi as pointing to the only reasonable stand. Fazlur Rahman, “Maturidiya: A Happy Blend of Rationalism & Traditionalism,” in *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Thought*,

just to counteract the Mu'tazili thesis, and its subsequent major efforts to prove reason's inadequacy by asserting its inability to apprehend moral truths.⁵⁷ In his normative ethics, Rahman resorts to a Qur'anic distinction between *ma'ruf* (that which sound human nature accepts as good) and *munkar* (that which sound human nature rejects as evil). He opines that the Qur'an contains so few laws because *ma'ruf* and *munkar* are basic to its ethical system.⁵⁸ The implications of affirming a "sound human nature" that can differentiate between good and evil are tremendous for a reformist who wants to expand a rational ethical sphere at the expense of a formalist legal understanding. The next section analyzes the full legal-political implications of Rahman's move, right after I elaborate another dimension of his ethical theory, that of social justice.

Social Justice

Rahman's project of deriving ethics from the Qur'an pays particular attention to social justice and the Qur'an's egalitarian ethos. Inasmuch as the Qur'an's central aim is "to establish a viable social order on earth that will be just and ethically based,"⁵⁹ it

ed. Mahmudul Haq (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies Aligarh Muslim University, 1992). In his interpretation, although this promising tradition remained partly alive in the Hanafi school of law, the spread of Ash'arism via the teaching of such towering personalities as al-Ghazali largely dampened its influence. Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 63.

⁵⁷ Rahman's tone becomes heated as regards orthodoxy's condemnation of reason to uselessness in determining right and wrong (*husn wa qubh*). First he quotes al-Amidi's (d. 1233) statement that reason has no role in law since it cannot declare things good or bad, an assertion that was completely absent from the earliest schools: "[A]cts in themselves cannot be described as good or a bad because reason cannot declare acts to be either good or bad... 'Good' is applied to that whose doer the law-giver has declared to be praiseworthy... while 'bad' is that the doer of which has been condemned by the law-giver." Rahman also quotes Shatibi (d. 1388), otherwise a venerable figure for his ideas on the general objectives of *shariah*. This figure, however, dismisses reason and experience-based human knowledge as untrustworthy and thus an inadequate instrument to apprehend moral truths. Rahman's reaction to these medieval scholars is furious: "This is the uttermost moral relativism imaginable. It has been resorted to by the upholders of the *Sunnah* in order to counteract the Mu'tazilite thesis of the power of human reason to know good and evil. So strong was the orthodox reaction against the Mu'tazila that they were prepared to employ any arguments, sceptical, cynical, relativistic – indeed anything they could lay their hands on in the rich armory of Greek philosophical ideas – no matter how obviously incompatible this might be with the fundamental teachings of the Qur'an and the actual *Sunnah* of the Prophet. Where does the Qur'an say and, indeed, how can it even tolerate that man can neither know anything nor act? How can any religion befriend scepticism? And, strangest of all, can any genuine moral system accept this kind of relativism?" Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 153-56.

⁵⁸ Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," 21.

⁵⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 37.

unrelentingly denounced the economic disequilibrium and social inequalities prevalent in the Makkah of Muhammad's day.⁶⁰ Rahman considers this as central to the Qur'anic message as monotheism: "[T]he basic *élan* of the Qur'an is moral, whence flows its emphasis on monotheism as well as on social justice."⁶¹ In fact, according to him, this sense of socioeconomic justice had the same intensity as did the monotheistic idea in Muhammad's monotheism, so much so that the two must be regarded as expressions of the same experience.⁶² Inasmuch as they were each one side of the same coin, one God could ensure the essential unity of humanity as his creation, despite its members being divided by economic disparities and tribal feuds, not to mention the abuse of girls, orphans, women, and slaves.⁶³

To ensure its major goal of social justice, the Qur'an proclaims that the wealthy cannot spend their wealth as they wish, since the poor have a right in it. This does not mean, however, that it opposes one's efforts to earn wealth.⁶⁴ Rather, this is one of the measures taken to ensure social justice, for it imposes *zakat* (poor-tax/relief) on the rich as well as a ban on usury and hoarding⁶⁵ to realize one of its central principles, that of redistributive justice: "[W]ealth should not circulate only among the rich" (59:7). Since

⁶⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶¹ Rahman, *Islam*, 32.

⁶² Ibid., 12. He refers to Qur'an 107: 1-7, which links the two in a moving description: "Did you see the one who repudiates the Faith? He it is who maltreats the orphan and does not exhort (others) to feed the poor. Woe betide those who (although) they pray, are (yet) neglectful of their prayers; those who (pray for) show and (even) refuse (the use of) utensils (to needy people)." It is a well-established fact that the Qur'an's monotheistic declarations and injunctions on social justice repeatedly come together. But in this essay on weak ontology, the important question to be addressed is whether One God is a *sine qua non* for social justice; or is the point here about how strong faith in One God must lead one to the work of social justice?

⁶³ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 39, quoting "in their wealth there is a definite right of the indigent and the deprived" (70:25; 51:19); and "does man think that none can put reins on his wealth when he says, 'I have thrown away stacks of money [on such-and-such]?' (90:6); or (people of prophet Shu'aib telling him) "Shu'aib! Do your prayers order you that we should give up those [idols] which our fathers worshipped or that we should desist from doing with our wealth whatever we please?" (11:87).

⁶⁵ As the ground of this ban, he cites the "the wealth you invest in usury so that it should grow at the expense of other people's wealth, does not grow in the sight of God, but whatever wealth you spend on welfare [*zakat*] – supporting sincerely the cause of God – it is multiplied several-fold (30:39).

both Rahman and Qutb ground their social justice theories on this verse, they are found on the same plane. Indeed, both of their Qur'an-centric social reform projects contain a strong economic element.⁶⁶ Rahman's understanding of the Qur'an's ethical élan will, at a later point, mold his interpretation of the legal status of verses dealing with slavery and polygamy. On both issues, his concept of egalitarianism would go far beyond those of Qutb. At the end of the day, we can safely assume that what Rahman had in mind in many ways contained elements of an Islamic liberation theology, although we do not find him referring to his work in such terms.⁶⁷

6.4. Rahman as a Legal Reformer and a Theorist of *Shura*

I have consistently argued that each piece of Rahman's political ontology rests on a firm ethical foundation. He deeply believes that anyone who has carefully studied the Qur'an cannot but be impressed by its ethical fervor. Accordingly, his overall reform project can best be understood as an attempt to formulate an ethics of the Qur'an, something that he claimed no previous Muslim scholar had ever attempted, either systematically or otherwise.⁶⁸ This is why his overall project cannot be adequately grasped unless the ethical impetus, "the crucial pivot" of the entire system from which the law flows, is given its due.⁶⁹ The further significance of ethics as the Qur'an's essence stems from its

⁶⁶ On the legal issues of *zakat* and interest, we will observe Rahman as advancing a very radical modernist claim. However, their common reading of Islam's goals are still remarkable. This manifests itself also in their common narrative on the demise of the social justice ideal. Both identify Othman's caliphate (644-56) as the turning point in this regard, which came to a complete end with the Umayyad's usurpation of power. Thus the organic link envisioned by the Qur'an between the ideals of the state and economic justice was severed for good. Rahman, *Islam*, 259.

⁶⁷ Tamara Sonn also notes the parallels between his work and liberation theology. She sees him in full agreement with Catholic liberation theologians. Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Methodology," *The Muslim World* 81, no. 3-4 (1991): 225.

⁶⁸ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 154.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

being, at least for Rahman, the “the necessary link between theology and law.”⁷⁰ I will now elaborate on this dimension of his reform.⁷¹

Legislation by Analogical Reasoning vs. the Maqasid Doctrine

Rahman’s attempt to situate religion around an ethical axis means paying special attention to Islam’s overarching ethical goal and message to humanity above and beyond any specific ruling(s) on any particular issue. In practical terms, this means disentangling the ethical from the legal, which he would follow up by subverting the orthodox trends favoring a legalistic interpretation of the Qur’an, *shariah*, and, in general, religion over ethics. He squarely asserts that “the Qur’an is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations, and is not a legal document.”⁷² Likewise, the Prophet was not a pan-legist who neatly regulated the fine details of human life from administration to those of ritual purity, but rather a moral reformer of humanity.⁷³

We have already seen that Rahman considers an explicitly formulated ethical system as the prerequisite of Islamic legislation. One blessing in disguise of Islam’s legal tradition (*fiqh*) was that it did not clearly differentiate between the strictly legal and the strictly moral.⁷⁴ Thus it remained somewhat permeated with ethical values; however, one has to link the two organically by working out the ethical systematization of the Qur’anic teaching and the Prophet’s *Sunnah* (Muhammad’s exemplary conduct).⁷⁵ That is to say,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ He clearly views the legal sphere as the “last part of the chain,” although it governs all of a society’s religious, social, political, and economic institutions. Still, he is mostly known for his legal views as he was unduly put on the spot for his controversial opinions in this area. Ibid., 156.

⁷² Rahman, *Islam*, 37.

⁷³ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 10. Accordingly, apart from occasional decisions that had the character of *ad hoc* cases, he seldom resorted to general legislation.

⁷⁴ So, for instance, some violations of the law did not require punishment as opposed to others that did, such as theft, which is normally penalized in any legal system.

⁷⁵ Rahman, *Islam*, 256.

law and ethics first have to be separated conceptually, after which one has to re-link them organically by constructing a legal system based on Qur'anic ethics.

I argued earlier that Qutb's normative move to approach the Qur'an as a holistic text and to imagine "a spirit of Islam" as separate from the formal legal rules opened up a rational space in which one could contemplate the *élan* of religion. However, in Qutb's political ontology this space remained under-theorized. In my reading, Rahman takes up the challenge to spell it out and theorize it. His major premise here is his assumption that "whereas the spirit of the Qur'anic legislation exhibits an obvious direction towards the progressive embodiment of the fundamental human values of freedom and responsibility in fresh legislation, nevertheless the actual legislation of the Qur'an had partly to accept the then existing society as a term of reference."⁷⁶ His earlier moves to elevate ethics as the overarching criterion have already paved the way for rethinking the legal sphere in these terms.

Now, the most striking step he takes in this regard is to go back to the critical juncture of the legal tradition's formative period and suggest a crucial shift from syllogism and analogy-based jurisprudence to an objective-oriented approach (*maqasid*). Toward this end, he deconstructs all of the major concepts related to legislation beside the Qur'an, namely, *Sunnah*,⁷⁷ *ijtihad*, and, *ijma*. Finally, based on his proposed conceptualizations, he advocates a novel legal methodology known as "historicism"⁷⁸ or the "socio-historical approach."⁷⁹ Using this methodology to deduce legal rulings, he

⁷⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁷ We will see below how Rahman revises the meaning of *Sunnah* to be a normative living tradition embodied and passed on by the Prophet and his Companions.

⁷⁸ Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Methodology," 227.

⁷⁹ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 128.

would go on to propose radical revisions of certain rules, for example, those related to stoning and polygamy. This is perhaps his reform agenda's most contentious dimension; unfortunately, it overshadowed his real concerns and caused many Muslims to misunderstand his intentions.

At the broadest level, Rahman offers a rethinking of Islamic legal reasoning based on the reinvigoration of the "objectives of shariah" view (*maqasid al-shariah*), which are generally enumerated as protecting life, religion, property, progeny, and reason. God sent down revelation to protect these five sacred values, so to say. Things began to go wrong, however, when Muslim jurists took the Qur'an's strictly legal injunctions as being applicable to any society irrespective of time and context. This runs counter to the Qur'an's original intent. The Qur'an should not be taken as a text where the actual legislation is "meant to be literally eternal,"⁸⁰ nor did the early Muslims feel themselves bound by the letter of the text (*nass*).⁸¹ There was actually a counter-trend from the fourteenth century onward, led by those who sought to work out the law's objectives or the intentions of the *shariah* obligations. Rahman quotes Shatibi, this tradition's most celebrated scholar, as he speaks of infusing "spirit into the dead body and the real substance into the external shell (of the law)."⁸² Rahman argues that "the Shari'a[h] is thus not an actual formal code of particular and specific enactments but is coterminous with the 'good.'"⁸³ In another instance, he formulates the five objectives as basic rights: right to life, right to religion, right to property, right to safeguarding one's personal honor or human dignity (as he translates the word *ird*), and right to reason (*aql*). Notice that *ird*

⁸⁰ Rahman, *Islam*, 39.

⁸¹ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 181.

⁸² Rahman, *Islam*, 115.

⁸³ Ibid.

becomes the primordial one, the one on which all of the others depend. In essence, this means that religion fundamentally exists for the sake of “human dignity.”⁸⁴

Sunnah as a Communal Deliberative Activity

Moving to a more specific area, Rahman revisits the dominant legal formulations of *Sunnah*, *ijtihad*, and *ijma*. Here we find him pointing out some crucial mistakes in their initial configuration after the mass-scale Hadith⁸⁵ movement that destroyed their organic relationship.⁸⁶

Rahman does not condone trivializing either the Prophet’s status in legislation or the concepts of *Sunnah* or *Hadith*.⁸⁷ To the contrary, he thinks that the Qur’an is not intelligible purely by itself, for “nothing can give coherence to the Qur’anic teaching except the actual life of the Prophet.”⁸⁸ His whole point is to reclaim the *Sunnah* by negating its meaning as a totally formalized, fixated, petrified set of rules and articles of faith. In reference to the Prophetic *Sunnah*, Rahman idealizes it as the implicit teaching rather than a set of laid-out rules.⁸⁹ But in a broader context, he gives it the sense of a

⁸⁴ Rahman, “Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State,” 15-16. Note that this hierarchy of values implies that human dignity is a higher value than religion, which clearly forestalls any subordination of human dignity to organized religion. The striking commonality between Afghani and Qutb, regardless of their radically different conclusions, is noteworthy here. In fact, the *islah* tradition’s emphasis on human dignity is their common gesture geared toward empowering the individual vis-à-vis the established religion or its institutionalized bodies, such as the ulama, religious schools, state, and caliphate. Rahman credits Afghani for introducing an entirely new element in the understanding of Islam: a concern for the human being as such (the “weal of man *qua* man”). Rahman, *Islam*, 216.

⁸⁵ Hadith is generally understood as the collected narrations relating the Prophet’s sayings, actions, or exemplary behavior; Rahman, however, defines it as “largely the situational interpretation and formulation of [the] Prophetic Model or spirit.” Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 80.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁷ Rahman is quite critical of those trends that brush aside the Hadith literature and the Prophetic *Sunnah* in the name of “progressivism.” *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12. Prophetic *Sunnah*, then, is “rather a pointer in a direction than an exactly laid-out series of rules, and ... it was precisely this notion of ‘Ideal *Sunnah*’ that was the basis of the early activity of the Muslims, and that *ijtihad* and *ijma* are its necessary complements and forward reaches in which this *Sunnah* is progressively fulfilled.”

“Living *Sunnah*” – an ongoing process.⁹⁰ This is a critical move, for it challenges the view that confines *Sunnah* to the Prophet’s practices.⁹¹ It is, instead, “the living practice of the Community; ... [it] is the result of the progressive thought-and decision-making activity of the Muslims.”⁹² Thus the Hadith literature is indispensable, because it represents the interpreted spirit of the Prophetic teaching, namely, the “living *Sunnah*.”⁹³ But the Sunni orthodoxy misinterpreted its meaning and thus it ended up being subjected to a growing rigidity that ends up in complete petrification. At this point in time, the noted jurist Shafi’i played the role in jurisprudence that Ash’ari had played in theology. Shafi’i limited the original function of the organic whole – the Living *Sunnah*, *ijtihad*, and *ijma* – to just the Prophetic *Sunnah*. Even worse, this body of literature itself was confined to something that was already absolutely literal and specific.⁹⁴ Thus the verbal tradition (Hadith) supplanted the living tradition as the vehicle of the Prophetic *Sunnah*.⁹⁵

Although Shafi’i was understandably responding to the exigencies of his time, his successful formulation severed the organic relationship among the three sources. In Rahman’s imaginary, each of the three complements the rest as part of an ongoing

⁹⁰ Ibid., 30-31. “The *Sunnah*-concept as used by early lawyers, ... although it ideally, goes back undoubtedly to the Prophetic Model, is nevertheless, in its actual *materieux*, inclusive of the practice of the Community. This *Sunnah* –... which may be called, the “living *Sunnah*” – is identical with the *Ijma*’ of the Community and includes the *ijtihad* of the ‘ulama’ and of the political authorities in their day-to-day administration.” This is precisely how he links the three concepts together.

⁹¹ In an ideal sense, the literal Prophetic *Sunnah* in a specific and legal sense cannot be easily disentangled from the Living *Sunnah* as reflected in the Hadith. Ibid., 67. He continues, “if all *Hadith* is given up, what remains but a yawning chasm of fourteen centuries between us and the Prophet? And in vacuity of this chasm not only must the Qur’an slip from our fingers for the only thing that anchors it is the Prophetic activity itself – but even the very existence and integrity of the Qur’an and, indeed, the existence of the Prophet himself become an unwarranted myth.” Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 71.

⁹² Ibid., 188.

⁹³ Ibid., 74. In another instance, he asserts, “the Hadith is nothing but a reflection in a verbal mode of this living *Sunnah*. The Prophet’s *Sunnah* is, therefore, in the *Hadith* just as it existed in the living *Sunnah*. But the general living *Sunnah* contained not only the general Prophetic Model but also regionally standardized interpretations of that Model – thanks to the ceaseless activity of personal *ijtihad* and *ijma*” Ibid., 74.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 23. In terms of evidentiary value, he then proposes *sunnah* of the Companions, especially the first four caliphs, then *ijma* and only later *ijtihad*.

⁹⁵ Rahman, *Islam*, 76. In Rahman’s account, Shafi’i in effect attacked the dominant *ijma practice* of his time and made a vigorous plea for accepting the Hadith materials as the law’s major source.

deliberative and collective interpretive activity. Although the goal is to attain consensus (*ijma*), disagreements will inevitably result from personal *ijtihad*s, which has been an indispensable activity for both the Prophet and the ordinary Muslim.⁹⁶ In this sense, *ijtihad* intervenes between *Sunnah* and *ijma*.⁹⁷ What would come out of these ongoing processes of *ijtihad* and *ijma* is a communal, interpretive activity, a living tradition, a *Sunnah* of the Muslim community at a certain historical moment, one that remains open to contestation and is always a forward-looking process as opposed to a backward-looking emulation.⁹⁸ I will delve into the full political implications of this shift during my discussion of Rahman's theory of *shura*. Suffice it to say for now that by reconceptualizing and relinking the three sources of law, Rahman attempts to "recast the *Hadith* into living *Sunnah* terms by historical interpretation so that we may be able to derive norms from it for ourselves through an adequate theory and its legal re-embodiment."⁹⁹ I will now analyze how he specifically does this.

Qur'anic Hermeneutics and the Double Movement Theory

From this broadest level of *objectives of the Shariah* and reconceptualization of the sources of law, we can move to the specifics of Rahman's historical method: the historicist approach.¹⁰⁰ This approach is considered a form of historicism mainly due to its parallels with the "historicism" that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and that

⁹⁶ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 158.

⁹⁷ Rahman, *Islam*, 75.

⁹⁸ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 24.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Although Tamara Sonn, Basit Koshul, and Ebrahim Moosa ascribe this term to Rahman, and I have no objections that his theory fits with this category, I have not come across him describing himself as a historicist. Instead, he opts for the term "historical method." Rahman, "Islamic Modernism," 329. See, Basit Koshul, "Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity* Revisited," *Islamic Studies* 33, no. 4 (1994): 412; Moosa, "Introduction," 22. In Koshul's account, "historicists assert that a true understanding of ideas and theories cannot be gained unless the historical circumstances surrounding the articulation of these ideas and theories are taken into account"; whereas Moosa simply refers to the assumption that "metaphysical truth, far from transcending history, [is] on the contrary the product of history." According to Moosa, this view undermined an epistemology that was rooted in the stable universe of metaphysics.

opined that “the classics of one’s own society embody basic truths that must be reformulated to meet new circumstances.”¹⁰¹ However, as a concept best known for its elusiveness and multifarious quality,¹⁰² this understanding of historicism does not sufficiently characterize the intricacies of Rahman’s thought. For instance, he has a clear and definite conception of a normative Islam and a transcendent and universal foundation: “[A]ll values that are properly moral have also an extrahistorical, ‘transcendental’ being, and their location at a point in history does not exhaust their practical impact or, one might even say, their meaning.”¹⁰³

Rahman subscribes to a view of historical objectivity that suggests that “the meaning of a past text or precedent, the present situation, and the intervening tradition can be sufficiently objectively known and that the tradition can be fairly objectively brought under the judgment of the (normative) meaning of the past under whose impact the tradition arose.”¹⁰⁴ However, he still differs from the objectivity school in hermeneutics, for he argues that the ideas we seek to bring to life in a subject’s mind cannot be easily deduced from the coherent whole of the mind, since their intention or

¹⁰¹ Yahya Birt, “The Message of Fazlur Rahman,” *Free Republic*, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/fr/531762/posts> (accessed: March 19, 2013).

¹⁰² Christopher Thornhill, “Historicism,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/encyphil/encyphil-browse?id=S028>. Note the contrast that he makes between Nietzsche’s and Popper’s conceptions of historicism.

¹⁰³ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 8. With that, he seems to stand closer to the objectivity school in hermeneutics than he does to Gadamer’s subjectivism, which sees no way out of the predetermination of “effective history,” even when the subject develops an effective-historical consciousness. Effective history is, “not only the historical influence of the object of investigation, but the totality of other influences that make up the very texture of my being.” (Ibid., 9) Although Rahman does not engage in a comprehensive discussion of various hermeneutical approaches before situating himself, for Moosa he is closer to Betti’s approach. Moosa, “Introduction,” 18-22. But Rahman sees Betti’s technique of reversing the creative process back to the creative mind as lacking one essential element: one must consider the situation to which it is a response. Especially in the case of the Qur’an, the objective situation is a *sine qua non* for understanding. Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 8. Therefore, for Rahman, conscious effort and self-aware activity, in addition and distinct from effective history, also constitute part of our response to the past. As such, effective history becomes part of the process of questioning. Under these circumstances, an objective understanding of the past is possible. (Ibid., 10).

meaning refers to something outside the mind.¹⁰⁵ This is how he introduces a transcendent normative force – revelation – into the process.¹⁰⁶

Departing from this hermeneutic ground, Rahman embarks on laying out his methodology by taking issue with atomistic interpretations of the Qur’anic verses. Given that traditional scholarship insisted upon fixing the words of various verses in isolation, laws were often derived from verses that had no legal intent and import. The subsequent lack of an adequate method resulted in an excessive reliance upon analogy (*qiyas*). This not only rendered the totality of Islamic thought stagnant over time,¹⁰⁷ but also caused an implicit secularism eventually, for want of an adequate method to integrate the new facts of life into an Islamic way of life. Against this backdrop, one must consider the Qur’an to be an integrated, cohesive body of teaching before one can understand it. As noted earlier, Rahman viewed the Qur’an as the divine response through the Prophet’s mind to the moral-social situation of his society. For the most part, it consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements revealed as responses to the specific problems confronting Makkan (Meccan) society at that particular time.¹⁰⁸

The Prophet did not engage in general legislation, apart from occasional decisions on *ad hoc* cases, and legislation in and of itself comprises a tiny part of the Qur’anic text.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶ On this point, I am inclined to maintain that Gadamer has hopelessly locked agency in language; however, Rahman’s objectivity also seems to have gone to the other extreme. The interacting subject needs to at least acknowledge that she cannot be cognizant of the extent to which her effective history has predetermined her understanding of the subject under consideration. As Rahman says that people like Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya were not captives of history, they also did not know to what extent their ascertaining of the past was “objective.” To me, it seems safer to see this process as a continual unfolding of the previous generation’s subjectivity by the later generations, while there is still enough room for objectivity to question and supersede the predetermining effective history. Rahman’s view of *Sunnah* as a communal deliberative process already leaves enough room for this. At the end of the day, while Rahman’s self has considerable agency in his relation with the past and the text, as compared to Gadamer, the normativity of the text – the Qur’an – supersedes all.

¹⁰⁷ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5.

The legislation contained therein displays a situational character,¹⁰⁹ for the Qur'an's universality is not embodied by its declaration of eternal laws for each and every possible legal matter. Rather, the universality of its message flows through and beyond any given historical context, for the Muslim community, regardless of time and place, is called upon to interpret in a way that is relevant to their particular realities.¹¹⁰ What Muslims need to do is study the Qur'an in the chronological order of its verses' revelation, which would give them a chance to distinguish between the Islamic movement's basic impulses and the measures and institutions established later.¹¹¹ The next step would be to differentiate the Qur'anic legal injunctions and their *objectives* and *ends*.¹¹² This would not be so much of a matter of subjective speculation, because the particular injunctions either explicitly or implicitly provide the rationales behind them, from which one can deduce general principles.¹¹³ A great help toward this end would be provided by the traditional literature on occasions of revelation (*sha'n al-nuzul*) to correctly identify the specific problem to which the legal rules responded.¹¹⁴

As a result, based on what we can "distill" from specific texts in light of the socio-historical background and the oft-stated *rationes legis*,¹¹⁵ we can deduce statements of general moral-social objectives. Rahman uses these guidelines to develop his *double-movement theory of Qur'anic interpretation*:

¹⁰⁹ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 10-11. Note, also that "[i]ndeed, the Muslim community went about its normal business and did its day-to-day transactions, settling their normal business disputes by themselves in the light of commonsense and on the basis of their customs which, after certain modifications, were left intact by the Prophet. It was only in cases that became especially acute that the Prophet was called upon to decide and in certain cases the Qur'an had to intervene."

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹¹ Rahman, "Islamic Modernism," 329.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 20.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a twofold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an, taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account-to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining.¹¹⁶

The second movement will necessarily require an accurate assessment of the current situation so that we can determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qur'anic values afresh. Thus, to the extent that we can actually implement this double movement, the Qur'an's imperatives will become alive and effective once again.¹¹⁷ This part of his theory is sure to alarm many Muslims, because it proposes legislating new *shariah* laws by dropping what is held to be in the Qur'an. Rahman actually ensures that this change does not violate the general principles and values derived from the Qur'an. He even says that this reformist fervor includes changing the present situation to bring it in conformity with the Qur'an's general principles and values.

This latter aim is clearly an Islamist objective, but the part about attempting a change in the Qur'anic legal dicta, no matter how much one claims that it is guided and permeated by the core Qur'anic ethical values, has created a great deal of consternation among the ulama. Essentially, this results from the fact that Rahman reconfigures the Qur'an's "explicit orders" as a contested space. But above and beyond just proposing a new methodology, he goes on to make several controversial suggestions, such as banning polygamy, ending the amputation of hands for theft¹¹⁸ and stoning for adultery,¹¹⁹ treating

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁸ Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives," 330. Rahman notes that classical jurists tried to find a way out of the harsh and irreversible punishment for theft and therefore used "benefit of doubt" generously and let many thefts go unpunished. In other words, "When there exists a law – and divine law at that – which is hardly ever applied, the moral wrought by such a situation was obvious."

¹¹⁹ Fazlur Rahman, "The Concept of Hadd in Islamic Law," *Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (1965): 247. The Qur'an contains no verses that call for stoning, and previous scholars found it baseless as far as the original sources of legislation are

bank interest as separate from usury,¹²⁰ extending *zakat* to a general government taxation rather than redistributed poor-tax set at 2.5 percent of one's yearly savings,¹²¹ and outlawing slavery as the Qur'an's intended injunction.¹²² With respect to polygamy and slavery, Rahman charges that overall logical consequence of the Qur'anic ethics would require the historical Muslim community to ban them. However, later Muslims either did not observe these guidelines or, to some extent, actually thwarted them. Thus the Muslim community, in its various historical manifestations, never actually implemented the clear logic of the Qur'anic attitude.¹²³ His views on slavery did not draw any noticeable objection, as Muslim countries had already passed legislation to ban it under Western duress¹²⁴; however, the rest was enough for the traditional ulama to launch a widespread uproar against him.

An easy target within Rahman's views has been the controversial new legislative suggestions. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that the ulama would immediately express fears that human beings would follow their own whims or desires after the truth has come to them.¹²⁵ Rahman is not unaware of the peril of projecting subjective ideas into the

concerned. Rahman cites al-Sulami, a thirteenth-century scholar, for his dissenting views on stoning and interest. Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 30.

¹²⁰ Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 41. See also Fazlur Rahman, "Riba and Interest," *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (1964): 41. Here he argues that "the system of economy which the Qur'an requires us to establish, being based on the spirit of co-operation, the further nourishment and development of this spirit in the right manner and the reconstruction of society in accordance therewith would make bank-interest and the present banking system quite superfluous which is just what the spirit of the Qur'an and the Sunnah requires of us. As long as our society has not been reconstructed on the Islamic pattern outlined above, it would be suicidal for the economic welfare of the society and the financial system of the country and would also be contrary to the spirit and intentions of the Qur'an and Sunnah to abolish bank-interest" and, he continues, "it would be necessary to enact legislation against such grave social inequities as feudalism and hoarding, etc. before proceeding to abolish bank-interest."

¹²¹ Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 186.

¹²² Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 187.

¹²³ Rahman, *Islam*, 38-39.

¹²⁴ It is interesting that his proposal for an Islamic ban on slavery was treated differently, even though it rests on the exact same methodology.

¹²⁵ The reference is 5:48: "[D]o not follow their low desires after the truth has come to you."

Qur'an; however, he thinks this can be minimized if the method is observed strictly.¹²⁶

Indeed, some might argue that his work suffers from methodological problems in terms of his use of evidence, his fidelity to the Qur'an, or his excessive reliance upon a radical rejection of Muslim tradition.¹²⁷ Others might charge that he indulges in the same kinds of wild interpretations of the Qur'an as do the Sufis, "esoterics," philosophers, and theologians.¹²⁸

Nonetheless, he insists that the Qur'an, despite its own distinction between "firm" and "ambiguous" verses, categorically characterizes itself as a coherent text with a certain ethos that would not allow such free interpretations. In fact, he seeks to establish a collective, communal interpretive activity and deliberation. This will require an open and accountable process in which everybody would be able to give an account of her own *ijtihad* in a rational manner and grounded in the Qur'an's ethical élan. This should provide enough checks and balances against any fanciful and esoteric interpretations. This is the exact point at which we can elaborate upon the political implications of his intellectual project, in particular his theory of *shura* and religious pluralism.

Rahman's Self-Governing Deliberative Community: A Democratic Theory of Shura

Given that the political level represents the culmination of Rahman's ontological, ethical, and legal reflections, it is a necessary ingredient to complete this ethical organic whole.

As I have argued, his political ontological edifice deconstructs traditional normative Islam at each and every level in order to open up a space for a free, rational, and ethically

¹²⁶ Rahman, "Islamic Modernism," 329.

¹²⁷ Birt, "The Message of Fazlur Rahman."

¹²⁸ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 143.

oriented Muslim individual who works for justice. His particular views on *shura* are, therefore, only the political upshot of his earlier steps.

Rahman believed that in order for Islam's ethical goals to be realized, "the Qur'an wanted Muslims to establish a political order on earth *for the sake of creating an egalitarian and just moral-social order.*"¹²⁹ In line with his earlier moves, he had to grapple with traditional interpretations as well as some revivalist views in his attempt to empower the individual Muslim as a political actor. These include his formulations of *khilafah* (both caliphate and vicegerency), *shura*, and sovereignty.

If God entrusted each Muslim with the mission to act as his vicegerent on Earth, and if the goal is to create an egalitarian and just moral-social order, then who is going to implement this duty? Rahman zeroes in on 3:104, "Let there be of you a community who calls [people] to virtue, commands good and prohibits evil."¹³⁰ Now, while traditional scholarship normally confers this duty upon the religious leadership, Rahman objects to this interpretation and asserts that it is a collective responsibility to be shared in equally by each vicegerent. Indeed, he even questions the extent to which the caliphate was truly a Qur'anic institution by stressing that the Qur'an does not speak of such an office, but rather calls humanity as a whole "*khalifas*" of God on Earth.¹³¹ This is a remarkably

¹²⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.

¹³⁰ Fazlur Rahman, "The Principle of Shura and the Role of the Ummah in Islam," in *State, Politics and Islam*, ed. Mumtaz Ahmad (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986), 88. He also cites "Those [are Muslims] who, when We give them power on the earth, shall establish prayers, pay *zakat*, command good and prohibit evil" (Qur'an 22:41) and "[Y]ou are the best community produced for mankind, for you command good, prohibit evil, and you believe in God" (Qur'an 3:110). Note in the first verse that Rahman favors "give power on Earth," whereas it is also translated as "establishing on Earth," in a less political sense. In another instance he seeks the support of Abduh, who interpreted 3:104 to prove the necessity of the principle of *shura* and maintained that it was a stronger proof than the *locus classicus* (42:38, as it will come below). Fazlur Rahman, "A Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of 'Shūrā,'" *History of Religions* 20, no. 4 (1981): 294.

¹³¹ Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," 19.

empowering gesture, one that challenges elitism and estrangement of the Muslim individual from working for justice.

If this community of vicegerents collectively discharges its duty, united in thought and purpose,¹³² then the particular means to carry it out will be through *shura* (collective deliberation). This is another area of reform for Rahman. He points out that *shura* is a pre-Islamic, democratic Arab institution that Islam upheld (42:38).¹³³ The tribe's chief only decided crucial questions after reaching a collective decision with the tribal elders of the various clans making up that tribe.¹³⁴ But mostly because of the Umayyad's decisive usurpation of power, and just like the cases of social justice, slavery, or polygamy, Muslims failed to develop this into an effective and permanent organization. The Sunni ulama were instrumental in perpetuating this deviation by inculcating their political theory of passive obedience¹³⁵ and deep-rooted pragmatism.¹³⁶ Of particular importance in this regard was how they distorted the meaning of the relevant verse by confining it to the ruler's seeking counsel from his advisers (*istishara*) without obliging him to follow it, although the verse clearly says "those whose affairs are decided by mutual consultation" (*amruhum shura baynahum*).¹³⁷

I have already elaborated how Rahman reformed the concept of *Sunnah* as a living tradition composed of an ongoing search for consensus (*ijma*) via the collective deliberations of individual personal opinions (*ijtihad*s). His radical measure is essentially

¹³² Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 77.

¹³³ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 43.

¹³⁴ Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," 18.

¹³⁵ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 94.

¹³⁶ Rahman, *Islam*, 259. For how the ulema legitimized the blatantly despotic rules by their doctrine of passive obedience, see also Rahman, *Revival and Reform*, 71.

¹³⁷ Rahman, "The Principle of Shura," 91. It must be noted that traditional scholarship buttresses this point by drawing rather on the other verse on *shura* (3:159), which commands the Prophet to consult with the people's leaders. Rahman, *Major Themes*, 43. See, also, Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," 19.

a call for breaking the ulama's monopoly on legislative activity and integrating the public into the process so that the people's will can be expressed via representation. To him, it was an accident of history that the lawmakers have been private jurists who gained influence by mastering the Islamic sciences. He opines that this activity does not require too much expertise, for "the Qur'an is not such a mysterious or difficult work that one needs technically trained people to interpret its imperatives."¹³⁸ Rather, they only need to follow the guidelines as laid out above in his double movement theory. Therefore, the ulama are not entrusted with legislating but with providing religious leadership through teaching and preaching.¹³⁹ An "Islamic democracy" thus formed just calls for the average Muslim to be made aware of the Qur'an's basic purposes and to strive to approach them.¹⁴⁰ When this *shura* process enacts a law, it may be right or wrong, "but insofar as it reflects the will of the community, it will be Islamic and democratic." After all, it is not irreversible and future assemblies can change it in favor of a new consensus.¹⁴¹

Rahman's suggested form of deliberative Islamic democracy and the "Islamic" public reason elaborated here are worth comparing to Qutb's *shura* model. Although both thinkers are equally committed to this Qur'anic principle and both seek to capture God's will for their own time, it must be recalled that Qutb confined *shura* to a far narrower scope on the ground that many injunctions had already been set by the Qur'an. Echoing Ash'arite sensibilities, he contended that human reason cannot legislate on those essentials. Rahman, on the other hand, quite boldly broadens the scope of *shura* to update Islamic legislation, including the explicitly stated Qur'anic legal dicta, by the Muslim

¹³⁸ Rahman, *Islam*, 261

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State," 19.

¹⁴¹ Rahman, "A Recent Controversy," 262.

community itself to meet the needs of the particularities of the time. Perhaps less noticed is the fact that Rahman's own views on controversial legal rules are no more than his own *ijtihad*s to be presented in a dialogical setting along with opinions. In other words, they are not conclusive positions of a monological legal theory and are therefore contestable opinions open to a deliberative process.¹⁴²

Perhaps one can take issue with some basic assumptions of this otherwise quite radical Islamic democratic theory. Actually, Rahman is very clear when he forbids imposing this process on an unwilling community:

The process is totally democratic, since the Community is freely constituted by its voluntary acceptance of the Shari'a: that Islam can or will be imposed upon the Community by a group or a government in case it chooses to give it up for some other goal is not only Islamically absurd, it is physically impossible. This free Community, by its free will also elects an assembly. This is also Islamically correct and democratically sound.¹⁴³

However, coming to terms with the fact of pluralism requires a lot more than this sensibility to consensual rule, which is equally shared by Qutb if not the other "neo-revivalists" he often opposes. Rahman has to recognize that in this scheme of things, political activity is absorbed by legal-religious activity regardless of how much the legal sphere is permeated by ethical values. Given that perhaps there will be no time in the future when a Muslim-majority country will engage in *shura* in the terms he envisaged, if they ever want this religiously infused term as opposed to a secular alternative, Rahman has to find a more viable political arrangement. Otherwise, as he rightly diagnosed in the case of such historically dysfunctional laws as regarding cutting off a thief's hand, the legal-political sphere will be drained of its ethical fervor.

¹⁴² This point here lends itself to quite fruitful comparisons with Rawlsian, agonistic, or any other discussions of deliberative democracy.

¹⁴³ Rahman, *Islam*, 260.

Moreover, is there any room here for other ethical strivings for mutual coexistence that stem from alternative ontologies, including materialist or naturalist ones? Perhaps he should have reflected more on comprehending *the political* on its own terms and disentangling it from the legal sphere, which would be accompanied by distinguishing law-making (as a collective political activity) from Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Indeed, unless Rahman can propose a setting in which Muslims' *fiqh* activity is clearly separated from a political deliberation engaged in equally by all citizens, regardless of their ontological commitments and even through them, his theory will be good only for an impossible society that would, *in toto*, want to live under an "Islamic state."

Nonetheless, granted that during the time he wrote the Muslim scene was dominated by far more authoritarian formulations of an Islamic state, his Islamic deliberative democracy was still a radically more progressive option.¹⁴⁴ Rahman must also be noted for his efforts to theorize religious pluralism from within Islam when he elaborates on the status of non-Muslim minorities living in an Islamic state.¹⁴⁵ While determining how such minorities would engage in "public reason" if it were monopolized

¹⁴⁴ This is clearly the case, given his account in Rahman, "A Recent Controversy over the Interpretation of 'Shūrā.'" Here he takes up the widespread views of some conservative and "neo-revivalist" (as he dubs them) scholars and community leaders, namely, Mawdudi (d. 1979), Khomeini (d.1989), Abd al-Hamid Mutawalli, and Muhammad al-Ghazali, (d.1996) a scholar with "Muslim Brotherhood" origins. In this article, Rahman discusses the traditional and modern objections to democracy, as well as how they challenge *shura*'s comparison with democracy. Among them were views that advance its non-binding and non-general character, in contrast to democracy; the mental and rational incapability of the "average man"; and Mawdudi's famous divine sovereignty argument of contra the popular sovereignty of democracy. Among these thinkers, al-Ghazali comes closest to affirming popular rule and general elections as more Islamic options. He is also perhaps the only one who takes *shura* as a binding process. Rahman makes it a special task for himself to rebuff the arguments stated there against democracy.

¹⁴⁵ Rahman, "Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State."

by *shura* remains an unresolved issue, he searches for a way to include them in the body politic through some suggested theological, legal, and political reforms.¹⁴⁶

To conclude, Rahman never completely broke with the concept of an Islamic state, nor did he seem to be ready to take up the full implications of the “fact of religious and political pluralism.” Nevertheless, his proposals definitely advanced a communal, deliberative form of an Islamic democracy. Despite its obvious problems related to various minority groups’ inclusion, it provided ample space for free, rational, and ethically oriented Muslim individuals to contest, revise, and reform the legal-political structure. By implementing *shura*, the people would be able to elect their leaders and freely engage in deliberative processes to legislate new rules for their common religious, legal, and political life.

6.5 Fazlur Rahman as an Islamic Modernist: An Assessment

As a unique case in the *islah* tradition, Rahman’s work proposes a well-thought-out reform project scattered in a number of publications and a life of intellectual activism. In addition, he also carefully ascribes himself to a definite genealogy that includes major reform figures. His work involves an account of the revival and reform tradition itself. Part of this is his typology of those reform movements that adopted the motto of “going back to the Qur’an.” He calls himself an “Islamic modernist,” the reformist tradition of

¹⁴⁶ On the theological ground, he argues that divine guidance has been universal, that the Qur’an emphasizes humanity’s unity and acknowledges the truth of the earlier divine revelations, as well as the sanctity of their books and temples. The Qur’an does not monopolize the truth, but contends that it is a more developed truth. Ibid., 14-15. On the legal ground, he argues that non-Muslims are protected by the same five basic rights granted to Muslims given that all people, regardless of religion or lack thereof, have a common human dignity. In addition, he explains away the death sentence for apostates from Islam as non-Qur’anic and a result of contingent factors related with the *logic imperium*. Rahman, “Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur’an,” 15-16. As for the People of the Book status (Christians and Jews, which was later extended to some other religious communities in the Islamic history) he offers some fresh interpretations of the *jizya* tax. Although his suggested reforms do not contain full participatory rights and thus full citizenship in the body politic, his honest efforts in this direction are discernible.

which Afghani is the real father,¹⁴⁷ while its most serious and daring figure is Muhammad Iqbal.¹⁴⁸ What might cause some confusion is his assertion that a Modernist Muslim is also “a direct heir of the Pre-Modernist reformers,” such as Wahhabism,¹⁴⁹ because the Wahhabi revolt “paved the way for Modernist Muslims to overcome the literalism and fundamentalism of the Wahhabis themselves and to allow for the scriptural text itself to be treated and interpreted on more liberal lines.”¹⁵⁰ In contradistinction with Modernist Muslims, Rahman identifies (neo)-revivalists or (neo)-fundamentalists in this tradition, as exemplified by Mawdudi and his Jamaat Islami. He describes them as a direct heir of pre-modernist reform as well, although a more conservative one. The difference between this group and an ordinary conservative is the former’s dismissal of orthodox beliefs and practices in favor of going back to the Salaf.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, the difference between them and the modernists is that the former essentially want to reenact the past, while the modernist knowingly pursues reinterpretation. In this sense the neo-revivalists are more in line with the pre-modern revivalists, for their going back to “pristine” Islam does not so much involve filling an empty space with fresh *ijtihad*.¹⁵² For instance, a Wahhabi type of revivalism carries a rather reactionary character.

Although his project is far away from both, Rahman still has mixed feelings toward revivalism/fundamentalism and the extreme modernism of the secularist type. In some instances, he sympathizes with fundamentalism in the face of secularism’s fierce attacks on the Islamic way of life, while in other cases he shows some understanding of

¹⁴⁷ Rahman, “Islamic Modernism,” 318.

¹⁴⁸ Rahman, *Islam*, 234.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 215-16.

secularism vis-à-vis certain conservative reactions. In his view, the *islah* tradition's reformist impulse, to which he attributes himself, was seized and exhausted by the neo-revivalist movements, as in the case of Pakistan's Jamaat Islami.¹⁵³ While he credits them with reorienting the modern-educated lay Muslim *emotionally* toward Islam, he castigates them for their almost total lack of positive-effective Islamic thinking and scholarship within their ranks, their intellectual bankruptcy, and their substitution of cliché mongering for serious intellectual endeavor.¹⁵⁴

All in all, Rahman's intellectual project is one of constant renewal and progress that would allow Islam to manifest itself as a dynamic reality. It is not a fixed set of rules or a received teaching, but rather the name of certain norms and ideals that are to be progressively realized through different social phenomena and set-ups. Indeed, if understood properly, Islam seeks ever new and fresh forms for self-realization and finds these forms.¹⁵⁵ As he subscribes to a progressive understanding of Islam, his narrative of Muslim decadence is understood basically in moral and intellectual terms. In his effort to revitalize Islamic civilization, then, Rahman sees the problem's root as "moral underdevelopment," something that can be fixed by starting from the intellectual level.¹⁵⁶ Thus, as I have sought to present throughout this chapter, he engages in a reformulation of Islam.

¹⁵³ "The modernist gave in and even joined the reactionary chorus." Rahman, "Islamic Modernism," 319. Apart from Mawdudi's well-known conservative views on women, Rahman notes how the Pakistani government's social justice measures, in particular the land-reform, were condemned by Mawdudi as an attack on property rights sanctified by Islam (Ibid., 320, 26). This is one reason why I take Qutb's reformism, as a case more worthy of analysis for my ontological narrative, which tries to capture liberation theology's presence in Islamism, than that of Mawdudi.

¹⁵⁴ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 137.

¹⁵⁵ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 189.

¹⁵⁶ Rahman, "Islamic Modernism," 321, 29.

But the words he chose to describe his project may not have been the most appropriate, since his use of “modernist” has enabled his adversaries to discredit his work as a clear surrender to Western modernity.¹⁵⁷ However, he clearly states that “the ethics of the Qur’an ... is not only congruent with the genuine modern values but even transcends them.”¹⁵⁸ Even when he situates himself within a long line of “modernists,” they include those who are quite critical of Western modernity, such as Iqbal. Besides, his intellectual project does not readily dismiss the Muslim scholarly tradition in order to start with a clean slate; rather, it seeks to find for itself a place within the historical trajectory of Islam I have called the *islah* tradition, which has always existed side by side with orthodox Islam. Through a selective reading of major thinkers, he picks some whom he critically analyzes and partially integrates some of their ideas into his reform program. Among them are the Mu’tazila, Maturidi (d. 944), Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), Shah Waliyullah al-Dihlawi (d. 1762), and Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). Against this rich background, and owing to his strong mastery and skillful knowledge of the Islamic sciences, Muslim intellectual history, and Western scientific methodologies, Rahman’s proposed reform program was far more coherent and well-grounded than those of his predecessors.

Insofar as he portrayed himself as a unique figure by naming his own endeavor and finding a genealogy for it, his terminology is still marred by ambiguities. All things considered, I find it less useful to define his project as “Islamic modernism.” This is despite the fact that I hold Qutb and al-Benna, for instance, to have both “revivalist” and

¹⁵⁷ He sometimes seems to use Muslim modernity in the sense of secularist Westernist; other times he provides a confusing definition of modernism as “the trends which seek to integrate Westernism with Islam.” Rahman, “Muslim Modernism in the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent,” 91.

¹⁵⁸ Rahman, “Non-Muslim Minorities in an Islamic State,” 21.

“Islamic modernist” elements, in Rahman’s terms, in their thought. But I am more inclined to bring all of them together under a single line of an *islah* narrative, which is clearly distinguishable from the Wahhabi-Salafi style of revivalism or reactionism, even though it was characterized by ambiguous and uneasy interactions with this latter current.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout his prolific academic life, Fazlur Rahman embraced a unique Islamic reformist perspective as his mission. His ethically defined action-oriented disposition boldly advanced Islam as “the first actual movement known to history that has taken society seriously,” because it perceived that “the betterment of this world was not a hopeless task nor just a *pis aller* [the last resort] but a task in which God and man are involved together.”¹⁵⁹ Given his commitment to formulating a Qur’anic weltanschauung that would permeate all spheres of life, as well as his commitment to the idea of an Islamic state, one can comfortably place him alongside Islamist thinkers in certain respects.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, he frankly declares his goal as “the Islamization of all aspects of life,” a clearly Islamist goal.¹⁶¹

His real interest, however, is in the “actual, positive formulation of Islam, of exactly spelling out what Islam has to say to the modern individual and society.”¹⁶² Just like the rest of contemporary Islamists, the archenemy of his intellectual project is secularism. Should Muslims fail to reformulate Islam for the modern world, then the only

¹⁵⁹ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 86. He continues, “in the post-Islamic era it is only Communism that has expressly and systematically set out to mold history.”

¹⁶⁰ Note also, “[T]he crucial question to which we must eventually seek an answer here is whether there is an awareness among Muslims ... that an Islamic worldview does need to be worked out today and that this is an immediate imperative.” Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Rahman, *Islam*, 260. Immediately afterwards, he says: “As for political life, its foundation is the Muslim Community itself. This Community is constituted by its acceptance of the Shari’a, or Islamic imperative, as its goal; i.e., it agrees that it shall realize the Shari’a gradually in its individual and collective life.”

¹⁶² Ibid., 249.

solution left would be secularism, which would be tantamount to changing Islam's very nature.¹⁶³ As a matter of fact, as he states in a quite Qutbian tone, the task of reformulation should go even further in order to "save modern man and society from the nihilistic demoralizing effects of crass secularism."¹⁶⁴ Therefore, it is safe to argue that Rahman wrote within a somewhat shared terms of discourse with Qutb, notwithstanding his radically different conception of the free-thinking Muslim individual or his far more liberal legal views.

In spite of their common goal to undo the destructive effects of secularism and Westernism by reforming the Muslim community's sociopolitical order, Rahman poses important correctives to Qutb. This reaches new heights when he lays the groundwork for the new *Stimmung* of the *islah* tradition. In his effort to buttress an all-harmonious ontopolitical constellation, Qutb had eventually moved to a position that tended to relegate the vicegerent to inefficacy. Posited as a passive recipient of God's direct commands, his view of vicegerency had blindfolded human agency. Rahman challenged this strong ontological determination by underlining the free, rational, and interpretive capacities of human agency in the individual's relationship with God. Even Muhammad would be a more active interpreter of the message in this picture, as opposed to a delivery person. His chief contribution to this effect was to redefine the relationship between God and his vicegerent in essentially "ethical" terms. On the theological plane, this amounted to replacing Ash'ari theology with a theological position that is closer to the Mu'tazilis or the Maturidis.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 254.

In a certain sense, and quite similar to Coles' contestation of Mouffe's agonistic democracy on ethical grounds, Rahman challenged Qutb's strong ontological edifice by making *the ethical* the pivotal element of an Islamic political ontology. This was despite Qutb's strong concern for social justice, his affirmation of a spirit of Islam apart from its "letter," or his emphasis on the primacy of Islamic society over Islamic state that both figures affirmed to an equal degree. Perhaps one problem that taints both projects is their common misapprehension of *the political*. Indeed, both Rahman and Qutb fail to recognize the distinct ontology of the political; instead, they saw it simply as a projection of the ontological or ethical-legal dynamics over the political sphere.

Rahman's intellectual reform project was not purely an intellectualistic one, as might expected from an isolated academic, no matter how much he invested in the intellectual reform as the starting point for Islamic sociopolitical reform. In point of fact, we could safely assume that the original impetus behind his project was the dire social justice issue facing the Muslim community, which led him to believe that "[the modern challenge] assumed purely intellectual proportions since a change in social mores involves a re-thinking of the social ethic, which touches the foundational ideas of social justice."¹⁶⁵ It is at this point that he began to take apart the intellectual edifice that has sustained those injustices and tried to deal with the Muslim societies' ethical gap and moral underdevelopment that, he believed, had been far more devastating than any economic underdevelopment.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Rahman, *Islam*, 215.

¹⁶⁶ One might dispute the still intellectualistic solutions he offers to the Muslim world.

Rahman sought to bring about a viable and up-to-date formulation of Islam by unearthing the Qur'an as an ever-vibrant and revolutionary foundation of a weltanschauung. He was a loner in his project, for his organizational ties were rather weak and there was not a committed cadre or institutions to promote his ideas – except for those young scholars who have been enrolled in North American Islamic studies programs for a couple of generations now. In that sense, I second Koshul's assertion that for a long time his ideas were just "free floating in the 'marketplace' of ideas with no group or institution to give them a concrete form."¹⁶⁷ In my interpretation, Rahman took the necessary and concrete steps for an Islamic ontopolitical reform, provided a new ethical orientation, and passed on a methodological toolkit to be employed by future Muslim reformers. One might object to his specific legal conclusions or disprove his particular definitions of *Sunnah* or *ijma* on the basis of primary sources; however, his ontopolitical constellation, which revolves around an ethical axis, has always been open to such contestations. He is more concerned with securing a new orientation for the Muslim elites and masses alike on a strong ethical ground, so that each Muslim can realize her rational powers and freedom and thus live up to her mission: to establish justice on Earth.

Based on these gestures, Rahman must be credited with opening up a wide space for the individual Muslim to interpret and participate in her religion in a far more empowered fashion. However, he did not provide a more inclusive space for the unwilling secular Muslim who has far less interest in taking part in *shura*, or the non-Muslim who would simply opt for a secular democracy. The question that still remains is

¹⁶⁷ Koshul, "Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity* Revisited," 415.

as follows: How can a committed, practicing Muslim who wants to ground his ethico-political action on a Qur'anic, theistic foundation carry out his vicegerency for a just world on an equal footing with his fellow dialogue partner who draws on different ontological commitments but is a willing participant in the deliberative process in the search for a just political arrangement? Rahman takes a few steps in this direction by reconceiving religion as an ethical project with some room for contestability. But there is still a long way to go. Whether the subsequent generation of Liberal Muslims, who has contemplated these questions mostly in a diasporic context, can adequately address these issues is the next question I will turn to in my ontological narrative. This is where I will discuss the merits of the current formulations of Islamic democracy.

CHAPTER 7

THE LIBERAL MOOD IN CURRENT MUSLIM POLITICAL THINKING AND THE FUTURE OF *ISLAH*

*Not every one who supports the idea of
Islamic government is a saint and Islamic
history is mostly a history of villains who
claimed to rule in the name of God.*
Abdelwahab El-Affendi¹

*Islam from its very inception has been a
religion of protest that can never completely
deliver its promises without simultaneously
negating itself... As the template of the
revolutionary sentiments definitive to its
doctrinal texture and history, Islam is
triumphant at the moment of its insurrection,
defeated at the moment of its success...
Because it has historically spoken the truth
to power, it cannot be in power, for it then
robs itself of speaking the truth to power.*
Hamid Dabashi²

How can a committed, practicing Muslim who wants to ground his ethico-political action on a Qur'anic, theistic foundation carry out his vicegerency for a just world on an equal footing with his fellow dialogue partner who draws on different ontological commitments but is a willing participant in the quest for a just political arrangement?

Since I wrapped up my account of Fazlur Rahman without answering this question, I want to pick it up here as the overarching question to conclude my ontological narrative on self-government in contemporary Muslim political thought. This is a more fundamental question than shifting discourses on “Islam and democracy,” the puzzle that

¹ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State?* 2d ed. (London: Malaysia Think Tank, 2008), 99.

² Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008), 214.

led me to undertake this project. But as this ontological narrative has revealed, so many other issues – the larger problem of self-government that covers *shura* as well as democracy; human vicegerency; the basic relationship among God, revealed text, and human reason; and, last but not least, a quest for Islamic authenticity – are entangled with the initial question.

Accordingly, in this chapter I will approach the ongoing political reflections of Islamically oriented Muslims in this broader context. The themes and concerns that emerged out of the previous chapters of my ontological narrative will form the background against which I will evaluate the dominant questions and sensibilities of the current stage of the *islah* tradition, along with its particular relation to democracy. This assessment will be normative: I take up these religio-political questions on the normative ground that I sought to develop in the first part of my dissertation.

As most observers would agree, current Muslim political thought has gone through a sea change in the last several decades. The Qutbian paradigm, namely, democracy as a usurpation of God's sovereignty, and its grip on many politically active Muslims has given way to a new political understanding that is more akin to the pre-Qutbian era's reconciliatory stance toward Western ideas. In 1993, Gudrun Kramer pointed toward a growing number of Muslims, including many Islamists, who were calling for pluralist democracy.³ Three years later, Asef Bayat asserted that in the Islamic state of Iran, Islamic language in politics seemed to be waning and that the country was

³ Gudrun Kramer, "Islamist Notions of Democracy," *Middle East Report* 183 (1993).

moving toward a “post-Islamist” phase.⁴ He defined it as “a condition where, following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, symbols and sources of legitimacy of Islamism gets exhausted, even among its once-ardent supporters.”⁵ Charles Kurzman, on the other hand, discerned a Muslim intellectual tradition distinct from revivalism, one that he called “Liberal Islam,” borrowing from the Indian scholar Asaf Fyzee (d. 1981) with certain caveats.⁶ While it was a powerful trend until the 1920s, after which it was overtaken by other ideological trends (most specifically by Islamist revivalism), he observes Liberal Islam’s renewed popularity, a novelty that he traces back to as early as the 1970s.⁷ Given that he perceived it as having appeared in simultaneous but independent instances throughout the Muslim world,⁸ his most significant contribution was to bring their works together in an anthology and thereby prove that it has become a widespread phenomenon represented by numerous thinkers from at least nineteen countries.⁹ Finally, Mumtaz Ahmad proclaimed an “emerging consensus” even among mainstream Islamist thinkers that democracy is the spirit of the Islamic governmental system, even though the problem of God’s sovereignty, as raised by Qutb and Mawdudi, remains unresolved for them.¹⁰

⁴ Asef Bayat, “The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society,” *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 5, no. 9 (1996): 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4. He includes Tahtawi, Afghani, and Ahmad Khan in this tradition, affirming also Fazlur Rahman’s “Islamic modernism” (*Ibid.*, 8-9).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ Charles Kurzman, “Liberal Islam: Prospects and Challenges,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1999): 13.

⁹ Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 18. One can also include Leonard Binder’s debate on “Islamic Liberalism” and its prospects for development of political liberalism in Muslim societies in this narrative of its fall and rise as an earlier discussion of this subject. See Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islam and Democracy: The Emerging Consensus,” *Milli Gazette*, February 1, February 16, 2002. One of the earlier statements by diasporic Muslim scholars came out in an edited book out of a conference held in the United States in 1982. See, Mumtaz Ahmad, ed. *State, Politics, and Islam* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986). At that stage, Ahmad talks about a general agreement among participating scholars that

All of these observations reflect a crucial shift, the emergence of a new *Stimmung* shared among politically engaged Islamists and non-Islamist thinkers.¹¹ One can hypothesize many different ways to account for this Islamist impasse: the failure of the “Islamic state” experiences in Iran, Sudan, and Pakistan; and the sense of defeatism conveyed by the intra-systemic confrontations with authoritarian secularist regimes, such as in Algeria and Turkey in the 1990s, and, most significantly, the horrors of Taliban or Jihadi Salafi violence, as in the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, some significant sociological transformations, among them the emergence of a vibrant religious bourgeoisie in some Muslim countries or, more importantly, the entrenchment of diasporic Muslim immigrant or Islamist exile communities with first-hand experience of Western liberal democratic regimes, can be studied as factors leading to a different kind of thinking public than that of earlier generations. The worth of such political or sociological models notwithstanding, these transformations signify a new mood of political thinking that is of fundamental importance for my ontological narrative. More specifically, I am rather interested in the new ontopolitical constellations that can be discerned in the recent theoretical attempts to offer Islamic democracy theories.

As the locus of Muslim political theory has increasingly shifted towards Europe or North America, home to most exilic intellectuals, my major focus will be on the diasporic thinkers. Along with offering political ontological analyses of their theories of

“democracy is the spirit of the Islamic governmental system, even though they reject its philosophical assumptions about people’s sovereignty.” This amounts to saying that an “Islamic state” should depend on majority’s voice for its exercise of power so long as it recognizes and remains “within the parameters of Allah’s political and legal sovereignty” (Ibid., 4).

¹¹ El-Affendi relates a striking case in the introduction of his book’s second edition: “My primary target was the Muslim leadership, in particular in Islamic circles, whom I wanted to disabuse of some serious misunderstandings of Islamic history and norms. Some of these readers thought otherwise, though, and believed that I was promoting what amounted to heretical ideas. It is funny that many of these, given the tumultuous developments of the last decade and a half, now see it in a different light. A lot can happen in sixteen years.” El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 24.

democracy, I will also probe how well these recent attempts can respond to the critical issues discussed in the first part of my work on post-foundational political ontology, critical political theology, and the debate between liberal and radical formulations of democracy. I will then take a few steps on that normative ground to offer new ways of addressing some of those crucial issues. My goal is not to articulate something like a full-fledged post-foundational, Islamic radical democracy. Rather, it is far more modest: to offer new ways of thinking about this chapter's opening question, with specific reference to the issues of self-government, pluralism, and difference on a post-foundational ground.

Toward this end, I will start off by addressing the issue of naming the current *Stimmung* (Section 7.1), in which a vibrant Islamic political discourse on Islamic legal theory, democracy, pluralism, secularism, gender, and interfaith issues continues to expand. I will advance the position that although there is a dominant "liberal mood" in the current discourse, subsuming the multiplicity of views under the general label of "Liberal Islam" looks like a mischaracterization. While similar calls for freedom, equality, and rights clearly unite many current scholars, the net effect of the multiple and sometimes opposing sensibilities constitutes a stream of thought that is not adequately captured by the term "liberal", at least when that term is used by itself or as an adjective before "Islamic." I will probe, for instance, if "progressive Muslims" can adequately represent an alternative.

In the following section (7.2), I will present a political ontological analysis of some formulations of Islamic democracy that are clearly more liberal in their orientation than those of the thinkers I have considered in the previous chapters. I will consider the

views of Abdelwahab El-Affendi, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Abdullahi an-Na'im, and Nader Hashemi. These analyses will not be as comprehensive as those of the previous thinkers, because my goal here is to demonstrate a common thread among those who write within a liberal framework, and to compare and contrast it with the ontopolitical constellations we observed in Qutb and Rahman. I will elaborate on the themes and issues of this emerging discourse in section 7.3, in order to address certain tensions and problems raised with respect to the sensibilities carried over from the dissertation's first part, as well as the reform figures I covered earlier. Finally in section 7.4, I will make some normative interventions in the form of suggestions for alternative ways to take up the chapter's overarching question. I will proceed in this vein through some themes and concepts that are critical for such a normative endeavor. This will complete my ontological narrative and constitute the first steps toward a broader normative perspective that emerges from my political ontological approach to self-government, liberation, pluralism, and difference.

7.1 Naming the Current *Stimmung*

As this discourse is still in the making, even naming it appears to be a matter of contestation. Following Bayat's anticipation of the coming of a post-Islamist society through some societal trends in post-Khomeini Iran,¹² a number of prominent scholars started to deploy post-Islamism to characterize general shift in the attitudes and strategies of Islamists in the Muslim world.¹³ Bayat understands Islamism as "the language of self-

¹² Asef Bayat, "The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society," *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East* 5, no. 9 (1996).

¹³ See, Olivier Roy, "Le Post-Islamisme," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 85, no. 1 (1999); Reinhard Schulze, "The Ethnization of Islamic Cultures in the Late 20th Century or from Political Islam to Post-Islamism," in *Islam: Motor or Challenge of Modernity, Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam*, ed. George Stauth (Hamburg: Lit Verlag,

assertion to mobilize those (largely middle-class high achievers) who felt marginalized by the dominant economic, political, or cultural processes in their societies.”¹⁴ These are generally those college graduates who cannot access economic or political positions due to their more explicit religious identity. In response, Islamists tried to articulate a version of Islam that could respond to their political, economic, and cultural deficits in their quest for an “authentic,” nativist ideology.¹⁵ Against this background, he views post-Islamism as both a condition and a project. While as a condition it represents Islamism’s exhaustion, as a project it refers to the attempt to transcend Islamism by emphasizing rights, plurality, and historicity and to orient itself toward the future.¹⁶ Bayat refers to scores of old Iranian Islamist revolutionaries who renounced their earlier ideas and warned of the dangers a religious state represented to both religion and the state.¹⁷ Yet this represents an even wider phenomenon, one that includes political parties, political movements, and intellectuals from all over the world.¹⁸ While this discursive shift is in and of itself important, Bayat undertakes a comparative study of Egyptian and Iranian Islamists, in his *Making Islam Democratic* (2007) to explain why Iran experienced a post-Islamist turn as opposed to Egypt’s “passive

1998); Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 368. Cited by Asef Bayat, *Islam and Democracy: What Is the Real Question?*, ISIM Papers (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 8:17-18. Kepel describes the term as the new orientation of some Islamists who, in the name of democracy and human rights, have departed from radical, jihadi, and Salafi doctrines. Bayat further relates that Roy more recently defined it as an individualized “neo-fundamentalism,” or a “privatization of re-Islamization,” from which he differs. Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 97.

¹⁴ Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 6. He continues, “It was the Muslim middle-class way of saying no to what they considered their excluders—their national elites, secular governments, and those governments’ Western allies” (Ibid.).

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Bayat, *Islam and Democracy*, 19.

¹⁷ Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13. Writing in the pre-Arab Spring era, he includes in his list Rashed al-Ghannoushi’s Nahda, Egypt’s Al-Wasat Party, as well as Turkey’s National Outlook movement and Justice and Development parties.

revolution,” which resulted in a profound Islamization of society despite Islamism’s fragmentation.¹⁹

Things might look a little different writing after Iran’s rigged 2009 presidential elections. Even more definitely, the trajectory of the post-Islamist actors in the Arab Spring’s aftermath presents a far more complicated picture compared to the state of affairs in 2007. Back then, even in Turkey the JDP’s self-proclaimed “Muslim democrats” seemed to represent a committed democratic discourse that Bayat could comfortably call post-Islamism.²⁰ However, increasing references to religion and morality in political discourse, as well as certain top-down Islamization policies, now make it far more difficult to decide whether the JDP’s discourse and policies are post-Islamist or rather simply religious conservative. This has become a legitimate quandary for Egypt and Tunisia as well, due to the Islamists’ experimentation with power after the long period of their oppositional post-Islamist discourse of freedom, rights, and democracy. These recent developments have led some to see post-Islamism as a failed theoretical framework.²¹

Other concepts of “Liberal Islam,” “Islamic liberalism,”²² or “progressive Muslims” are no less contested. As Bayat contends, terms like “Islamic society” or “Islamic world” may imply the Orientalist notion that Islam is the primordial factor that

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ For some exemplary studies on the Turkish Islamists’ experience with power, see Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Güneş M. Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: The Paradox of Moderation*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

²¹ See, for instance, Luz Gómez García, “Post-Islamism, the Failure of an Idea: Regards on Islam and Nationalism from Khomeini’s Death to the Arab Revolts,” *Religion Compass* 6, no. 10 (2012).

²² Islamic liberalism was mostly popularized by Leonard Binder’s relatively early study that sees political liberalism as contingent on the development of an Islamic liberalism within Muslim societies Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*.

shapes the dynamics of these societies.²³ Hence, emphasizing self-conscious “Muslims” as defining their own reality in an inevitably contested, differentiated, and dynamic fashion seems to be a more reasonable choice. My conceptual preference thus accords with his concerns. I prefer “Liberal Muslims” to “Liberal Islam,” as the former term emphasizes the self-conscious liberal actors’ dynamic and contested formulation of their own thinking without the pretension of a better “version” of Islam. Islamic liberalism, and “Islamic democracy” for that matter, carry the connotation of “Islamizing” a finished product by molding only one part of the compound, namely, Islam, as opposed to renegotiating both of the equally dynamic parts. Furthermore, as Kurzman notes, the term “liberal” has other problems. Most of those whom he places in this category would not identify with liberalism or at most would consider themselves partially liberal. Even more important is this term’s negative connotations, in some parts of the Muslim world, of “foreign domination, unfettered capitalism, hypocritical paeans to rights, and hostility to Islam.”²⁴

Can “progressive Muslims” be an alternative? The Progressive Muslim Network popularized this term in the late 1990s, as did Omid Safi’s edited volume *Progressive Muslims*. In his definition, “progressive” refers to “a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another,” and which holds such fundamental values as social justice, gender justice, and pluralism.²⁵ On the other hand, Farid Esack states that

²³ Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, 2.

²⁴ Kurzman, *Liberal Islam*, 4.

²⁵ Omid Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2003), 3. Safi does not see the word as problem-free, especially because of its elite-connotations; however, he justifies it for want of a better term. The contributors to that volume have problems with Liberal Muslims, which could mean those who are too enamored with modernity and too eager to identify themselves with European and American structures of power. They

“progressive Islam is that understanding of Islam and its sources which comes from and is shaped within a commitment to transform society from an unjust one where people are mere objects of exploitation by governments, socio-economic institutions and unequal relationships.”²⁶ Needless to say, this definition carries a far more leftist vision.

In this chapter, I argue that at the present time several strands of thought make a case for issues like democracy, pluralism, and gender equality. Post-Islamism, a still useful word to describe the discursive shift especially in the Middle East, can be deployed for a good number of them; however, and particularly in the diasporic communities, many never took part in the Islamist discourse to make that shift. On the other hand, many others would neither call themselves “liberal” nor “progressive.” Under these circumstances, I will refrain from identifying any Muslim thinker or their work as post-Islamist, liberal, or progressive if they have rejected those for themselves.

Still, I will call the current mood the “Liberal *Stimmung*,” while leaving room for deploying a different term for a particular thinker. In essence, I will use “Liberal Muslim” as a loose appellation, rather than a strong identity or organizational belonging, to refer to a selected number of the authors, some of whom I will analyze in the next section. Eventually I will argue that those discursive efforts that attempt to transcend the Qutbian paradigm might take a more viable direction if they were to respond to certain sensibilities for social justice and Islamic authenticity, and incorporate a theory of resistance.

also dismiss “Progressive Islam,” since they do not want an idealized notion of Islam apart from engagement with real live human beings (Ibid., 17-18).

²⁶ Farid Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” in *Progressive Muslims*, 80.

7.2 Liberal Muslims' Democracy

El-Affendi and the Undesirability of an Islamic State

The concept of an Islamic state, a modern construct that has existed since at least Rashid Rida's time, has been a signature term for Islamist political movements and intellectuals, either as their main goal or as the final stage of a bottom-up Islamization of society (e.g., as in Qutb). Abdelwahab el-Affendi, the Sudanese-British political scientist, was one of the first Islamists to object to the construct of "Islamic state." He was also a former diplomat in Sudan's foreign ministry following Hassan al-Turabi's (b. 1932) Islamist coup in 1989.²⁷ As he later distanced himself from Sudanese Islamists, he developed a distinctly "political" critique of Islamism from a liberal democratic perspective, one that has only recently found some parallels among those later critics who were for a long time driven by theological or jurisprudential concerns.²⁸

The most distinctive feature of El-Affendi's critique is its recognition of "the political" in a very Schmittean manner, even though he draws upon Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. As he relates from Ibn Khaldun, human societies in general and political power in particular "have an internal logic to them that [is] independent of religious beliefs and moral aspirations."²⁹ His major problem with revivalism, as he calls Islamist movements, is their pursuit of the elusive ethical model of the state coupled with

²⁷ For his critical assessment of Turabi's ideology and politics, see Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan* (London: Grey Seal, 1991). Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "The Long March from Lahore to Khartoum: Beyond the 'Muslim Reformation,'" *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Bulletin* 17, no. 2 (1990). For his overall views on Islamic reform (*islah*) and Islamism other than *Who Needs an Islamic State?*, which I will cover here, see El-Affendi, "The Long March from Lahore to Khartoum." Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "The Elusive Reformation," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 2 (2003).

²⁸ To be sure, he does not identify himself as "liberal" or "moderate" Muslim, as he is dismayed by all these "fashionable" appellations El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 23. However, the writers I cover in this section are the closest ones who could be studied among those who adopt liberal democracy as Muslims.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

the miraculous power of righteous leadership.³⁰ When discussing Qutb and Rahman, I highlighted that “the political” did not exist for them as a separate sphere independent of ethics, for it was, in their understanding, a projection of the onto-ethical relationship to the political sphere. Likewise, El-Affendi takes up Roy’s “vicious circle” critique against all politicized religious projects in which “political institutions function only as a result of the virtue of those who run with them, a virtue that can become widespread only if the society is Islamic beforehand.”³¹ El-Affendi does not find this entirely accurate, as it is, according to him, common to any ethical political project, not just religious ones. Moreover, the real problem with Islamic movements was not their capture by this circular logic, as they prioritized Islamic society, but that they thought this society was already in existence. Qutb and Mawdudi, both of whom perceived Muslim societies as *jahili*, were more consistent in this regard. But Islamist politicians simply thought that this virtuous mass needed to be kept in constant check by a moral guardianship, which has found its most concrete example in *wilayat al faqih al-mutlaqa* (absolute mandate of the jurist) during Khomeini’s last years.³²

The bitter experience with the Iranian regime has proven just how dangerous this form of paternalism can become. The real problem, then, is what Ibn Khaldun rightly diagnosed (although El-Affendi would disagree with his normative conclusions): “The Muslim ideal of the Righteous Caliphate [is] unattainable in our imperfect world.”³³ Thus

³⁰ Ibid., 183.

³¹ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 156.

³² El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 153-58. It is important to note that he sees Shia Islam as representing the Islamist mentality more truly (Ibid., 178).

³³ Ibid., 38. The normative conclusions he would see as the backbone of modern political thinking, and with which he would disagree, is “[t]he science of history is the science of how to acquire and manipulate power in order to approximate the ideal demands of our ethical system which the limits posed by the logic of political power permit.” (Ibid). He sees this as the negation of the Islamic point of view, which seeks to subordinate the reality to the ideal. Then

the challenge for him is to find out how ethics and politics come together in a viable ethico-political order.³⁴ He pits Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, and Hobbes against Locke in his political ontological reflections. He eventually finds the right formula for the viability of virtues in politics in the modern democratic state, as opposed to the republican, city-state model.³⁵ In this general framework, he develops a narrative of Islamic history to demonstrate what went wrong and how it might be fixed.

El-Affendi's point of departure is the normless vacuum on which the modern state was built, as opposed to the normative figures of God, Empire, or "the natural order" of previous eras. This imposes the "primacy of the political," where the modern state creates "reasons of state" to override moral precepts.³⁶ According to him Ibn Khaldun, as opposed to Machiavelli, can be credited with being the real founder of this modern outlook due to his attempt to establish a science of man with self-interested motives and by probing the natural (social) causes behind the social order. This ameliorates the fundamental fallacy of theologians, namely, projecting the "normative" (religious or ethical) onto the "real." El-Affendi follows him only up to this point, because Ibn Khaldun ends up deriving immoral conclusions from his search for universal laws by declaring that "might is right" and "truth cannot create a rival force." This clearly feeds a sense of resignation in the face of decadence and rampant injustice, with no hope of transcending them. He extends this analysis to Machiavelli and Hobbes, as they also

the challenge is to show how to take the realist assessments of Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, and Hobbes while steering clear of their cynical politics.

³⁴ A good comparative case is Reinhold Niebuhr's rebuttal of "ethicists" with a very similar prognosis on the possibility of ethical action in politics. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1960).

³⁵ Accordingly, his analysis insinuates the idea that the Medina model of righteous rulers is only possible in small city-states, not empires.

³⁶ El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 42.

endorsed “the depraved reality they experienced” and used it for the maxims grounding the state.³⁷ Locke, who also saw the state as a human creation, offered an alternative view. El-Affendi credits him with affirming the state’s role as safeguarding the rights and liberties of citizens, who are the best judges of their own interests. This, of course, requires a limited government.³⁸

El-Affendi continues his narration of political philosophy via Hegel, Rousseau, and Marx, but his basic concern remains the same: “[By] simply asserting [that] some ideals were unattainable in reality, descriptive theory condemned these ideals” and regarded the world as essentially “immoral and devoid of value.”³⁹ The central predicament shared by all of them was that in their hands, modern political theory “has turned its back on God precisely by limiting the choices open to man.”⁴⁰ They disregarded the human ability to defy, abolish, and create social laws, an ability to which Islam’s history is a clear testament.⁴¹

Thus, what is the problem with the Muslim past and present? In a gesture reminiscent of Rahman, El-Affendi says the gist of the problem was that classical Islamic political theory was at once too idealistic and pessimistic. It remained revolutionary in theory but accommodated the status quo in practice, thereby leading to a schism in the Muslim psyche.⁴² Above all, the ruler was erroneously identified as the Prophet’s replacement: “Muslim thinkers pictured the ideal of the Righteous Caliphate as a mirage

³⁷ Ibid., 41-48.

³⁸ Ibid., 48-51.

³⁹ Ibid., 52. In El-Affendi’s view, Hegel and Rousseau did not help matters much, as the former saw the state itself as the ultimate moral principle and the latter sought the moral certainty in the “supreme direction of the general will” (Ibid., 52-53).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹ Ibid., 121. In a telling statement, he says, “A Muslim’s faith is the shuttle he mounts to escape the confines of narrow realism” (Ibid., 121).

⁴² Ibid., 72-73.

which they set the *umma[h]* to chase until it was out of breath.”⁴³ It set high standards to a revolutionary degree, urging Muslims to transcend the existing reality, but nevertheless came to terms with that same reality by eventually regarding those ideas as futile. After all, “a moral exhortation that demanded the impossible is an exhortation to immorality.”⁴⁴ This theory, then, contributed directly to the *ummah*’s practical decline.⁴⁵

El-Affendi elaborates on his central argument by developing a narrative of Islamic history that compares what he calls the Medina model (idealist school) and the Damascus model (realist-pragmatic school). The idealist school goes back to Ali, while Muawiyah is the architect of the Damascus model. Even though the idealist model sporadically manifested itself during the reigns of Omar, Ali, and Omar ibn Abd al-‘Aziz (r. 717-20), it was doomed to collapse because of its “original vision which assigned the role of the Prophet to ordinary men.”⁴⁶ It had to be episodic because its assumptions and demands were unrealistic and unsustainable over the long term. The Damascus model, on the other hand, offered more stability due to its disregard for puritanism and its affirmation of *realpolitik*. It was not particularly repressive or despotic; rather, it was based on the dominant social values of a tribal aristocratic system, i.e., “stability based on modest ethical demands.”⁴⁷ With fewer demands and more rewards, this model was destined to be more stable. Muslim thinkers could not grasp the contextual factors that made the Medina model so elusive. The moral of the story is that they continued to deny

⁴³ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 72-80.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66. A second line of argument exists in the appendix that was added to the second addition: The instability of the Medina model was an inherent feature of all pre-modern republican and democratic experiments from Rome and Athens to Italy’s Renaissance republics. Ibid., 167.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 170. The idealists, or “ethical party,” on the other hand, was undermined by endemic indiscipline and suffered from self-righteous pretensions and moral assurance. Thus El-Affendi sees the recurrent the ethicalist and puritan revolts, including those of Imam Hussain, the Shi’a, the Khawarij, and Abdullah ibn Zubayr as precursors of Islamists. Ibid., 171.

the legitimacy of the Damascus model to which they had effectively acquiesced. The resulting divergence between ideals and reality “spelt a dangerous moral vacuum which continued to infect Muslim politics down the years, and accounts for much of its pathology.”⁴⁸

But if El-Affendi insisted on not giving in to the Khaldunian prognosis and wanted to hold an ethical politics possible, how would this dilemma be solved? Here, one can see his liberal democratic vision most clearly. If the Islamists’ main problem is their self-styled guardianship of morality along with their outlook of a pious dictator-ruler and self-righteous virtuous groups, and if their conception of a modern state is basically that of an agent of restriction and not liberation,⁴⁹ then a radical realignment is a must. This entails finding ethics’ true place in politics in the form of freedom. Freedom is not to be viewed as something amoral, but as implying the “lack of external undesirable constraints.”⁵⁰ In a stark rejection of paternalism, he maintains that the community cannot shoulder the individual’s ultimate responsibility for his actions.⁵¹ Nevertheless, this does not mean that the community will give up its ideal of social responsibility, which guards it against individualism and disintegration.⁵² Muslims, as vicegerents, bear the collective responsibility of being humanity’s conscience.⁵³ Thus we have to transcend our centuries-old imprisonment in the debate on the caliphate and stop running around in circles searching for convoluted legitimations for democracy from Islamic sources (by citing

⁴⁸ Ibid., 185.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 93, 99.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 145.

⁵³ Ibid., 125. He seems sympathetic toward Qutb and Mawdudi’s arguments to this effect, but points out the perils of their hegemonistic tone. The role of the *khilafah* was volunteered by the Islamist groups; however, this role is a collective obligation that can be transferred to one man if he agrees to fulfill it. Ibid., 130.

shura, *ijma*, and so on).⁵⁴ If sanity is to return to Muslim political discourse, “the concept of an Islamic state must be completely abandoned,” along with the millennial illusion of a utopian polity in which a righteous and saintly ruler will miraculously emerge to restore the long-lost golden age of Islam.⁵⁵ We simply need to adhere to the ideal state for today’s Muslims: democracy:

The search for an Islamic state must start with the search for freedom for Muslims. Freedom to think, to act, to sin, to repent, and finally to find oneself and one’s fulfillment in obeying God. Only then can the righteous Muslim community and its product, the virtuous Islamic state, emerge. For the present, then, the true Muslim’s fight should be for one thing: democracy, the right of every individual not to be coerced into doing anything. In its freedom this society will find itself and develop its ethical standpoint, and then fashion the state after its own image and on the model of the prophetic community.⁵⁶

He then suggests a complete re-imagination of the Islamic state as simply “a state for the Muslims.”⁵⁷ Does this make El-Affendi, a “sell-out” to modernity and the dominant liberal-capitalist world order? One might suspect this, especially when he says that “the modern democratic state, as a framework for political action, is superior to most... precedents in Islam ... barring the Righteous Caliphate.”⁵⁸ However, he also seeks to clear himself of being “moderate Muslim” which he sees as the means to show how “nice and imperialism-friendly” one is.⁵⁹ Further, he declares his commitment to *shariah* but rejects the understanding of *shariah* as an imposed order along with the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30-31.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 134. El-Affendi sounds pretty anti-foundationalist and pragmatic (in a Rortian sense) in his affirmation of democracy: “It is self-evident that democratic rule is eminently preferable to despotisms and other forms ... and that the values underpinning it are in total harmony with the values of Islam, which are in turn no more and no less than the human values of justice, fairness, decency and rational conduct. Islam has not come up with values of its own distinct from those adhered to by decent human beings over the ages.” Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 151.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 28.

assumption that a Muslim needs the state to be Muslim.⁶⁰ He seems to be after a voluntary submission to its rules in a pluralistic polity, but does not elaborate on the details.

In stark contrast to a liberal universalist, he clearly distances himself from the status quo by affirming Islam's role as "the sole remaining challenger to the liberal-democratic Western dominated international system."⁶¹ After putting their house in order, Muslims must definitely pursue their mission to see that justice and equity rule in the international order. The dilemma here is to combine a commitment to peaceful interaction in the international arena with an equally strong commitment to justice and a mission to guide humanity to the right path.⁶² In his view, this entails an international order based on coexisting communities instead of territorial, mutually exclusive nation-states.⁶³ Only then can the end goal of remolding the whole world to achieve justice and moral probity be reached.⁶⁴

El-Affendi is not seeking to articulate an ontopolitical constellation in which a certain conception of God or human being will prefigure an ethical order and Islamic democracy. His theory is a far more pragmatic, political one with a clear resistance to the "urge to philosophize" or the "urge to theologize," if you wish.⁶⁵ Although he draws on such terms as *vicegerency*, his aim is rather to find the proper locus of ethics in politics without delving into foundationalist debates that would perhaps require a well-grounded theorization of the favorite *islahi* concepts of *shura* or *ijma*. He reiterates similar

⁶⁰ Ibid., 137-41.

⁶¹ Ibid., 118.

⁶² Ibid., 123-24.

⁶³ Ibid., 143-44. What he has in mind is a new kind of polity, one that is based on pacts.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33. He cites Wittgenstein's analogy that likens the philosophize to an itch which one is compelled to scratch.

concerns in another piece by advising Muslims to bypass the “theological question” of the Islamic Reformation altogether and focus on the political work needed to build liberal pro-democracy coalitions.⁶⁶ Such a theological reform, whenever attempted, inevitably proves to be divisive and forestalls the formation of pre-democratic coalitions. While his optimism for a “political, not theological” path to democracy may have declined in the face of the recent controversies on (post)-Islamists in power, I will have a more comprehensive discussion on theology’s relevance as regards Nader Hashemi’s work. But prior to that I want to present how Khaled Abou El Fadl endeavors to construct an Islamic democracy in which democracy appears as an “ethical good.”

Abou El Fadl: Democracy as an Ethical Good and an Islamic State as Idolatry

The Kuwaiti-born Islamic jurist and UCLA law professor Khaled Abou El Fadl (b. 1963) carries on the liberal reformist task of deconstructing the concept of “Islamic state” and making a case for democracy from within Islam. While he agrees with El-Affendi that there is not much to be gained from rough analogies between *shura* and democracy,⁶⁷ his project radically differs inasmuch as it still seeks an Islamic legal justification for democracy. Indeed, his major gestures can be characterized as drawing on the indigenous conceptual repertoire and imaginary of Islamic law to lay the ground for democracy, which is regarded as a freestanding ethical good. In a more basic sense, his fundamental premise about democracy and Islam is that both are defined, in the first instance, by their

⁶⁶ El-Affendi, “The Elusive Reformation.”

⁶⁷ He maintains, “the precise content of those ideas remains contested and provides no direct link between Islam and democracy. To understand the democratic possibilities of Islam we must look more deeply into the role of human beings in God’s creation and the central importance of justice in human life assigned by the Qur’an.” Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 18.

underlying moral values instead of how those values have been applied.⁶⁸ He takes democracy in particular as “a political institution with moral foundations”⁶⁹ and thus seeks to will reinterpret Islam to render it compatible with democracy at the ethical level, or rather prove democracy to be the means through which Islam’s ethical goals can be realized.

In this section, I will seek to demonstrate how Abou El Fadl grounds his legal re-interpretations on new ontological reconceptualizations of the God-human relationship, the relationship between the human being and the revealed text, and inter-human relations. This approach will, in turn, help dismantle such constructs of the Qutbian, revivalist, and fundamentalist political ontologies as the Islamic state and God’s political sovereignty. While Abou El Fadl’s moves will be tantamount to a weakened ontology in certain respects, I will probe his justification of democracy to determine if it can adequately respond to concerns about Islamic authenticity, cultural domination, as well as difference and pluralism.

Abou El Fadl embarks on his ethical theory of democracy by focusing on the fundamental relationship between God and the human being, and what this ethically entails: “[W]e must look more deeply into the role of human beings in God’s creation and the central importance of justice in human life assigned by the Qur’an.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, he reformulates the common *islahi* concept of vicegerency: “God vested *all of humanity* with a kind of divinity by making *all* human beings the viceroys of God on this earth.”⁷¹

While at first this might seem to go along perfectly with the Qutbian notion of

⁶⁸ El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 4.

⁶⁹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Khaled Abou El Fadl Replies,” *Boston Review* 28, no.2 (April/May 2003), <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.2/abou.html> (accessed June 5, 2005).

⁷⁰ El-Affendi, *Islamic State*, 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6 (Emphases added).

vicegerency, Abou El Fadl's conception is defined by three equally important features. First, it assigns all human beings, regardless of their religion or philosophical views, a dignified status by vesting all of them with divinity. Clearly, this has tremendous implications for an egalitarian and pluralistic imaginary. Second, the office of vicegerency burdens us with the charge "to achieve justice on earth by fulfilling the virtues that approximate divinity."⁷² Third, and quite significantly, despite our divinity and duty to establish justice, we do not share God's perfection of judgment and will, which renders us prone to errors of judgment, temptation, and other vices associated with human fallibility.⁷³

Taken together, these three features present a picture of a human being that is partly divine, vested with the duty of justice, and yet fallible. Democracy appears here as the perfect means to realize the transition to the ethico-political sphere from his onto-ethical conception of vicegerent. Democracy is essentially "an ethical good"⁷⁴ amenable to all three features:

Of course God's vicegerent does not share God's perfection of judgment and will. A constitutional democracy, then, acknowledges the errors of judgment, temptations, and vices associated with human fallibility by enshrining some basic moral standards in a constitutional document—moral standards that express the dignity of individuals. To be sure, democracy does not ensure justice. But it does establish a basis for pursuing justice and thus for fulfilling a fundamental responsibility assigned by God to each of us.⁷⁵

Having affirmed democracy as an ethical good, Abou El Fadl makes his major reformist interventions in the philosophical foundations of legal theory as well as in certain views of past jurists. His most important and oft-repeated point in many other works is there must be some form of human mediation if one is to understand the divine

⁷² Ibid., 22.

⁷³ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6.

injunctions: “[R]egardless of how clear and precise the statements of the Qur’an and Sunna [are], the meaning derived from these sources is negotiated through human agency.”⁷⁶ That is to say, the vicegerent’s subjectivity, ethical reflections, and normative commitments are always at work in his interpretive activity of the divine will.⁷⁷ Hence, the Qur’anic orders necessarily will be channeled through intuitive, emotional, and rational processes. While advancing this argument, which echoes Rahman’s hermeneutic moves, he shows a particular alertness to the problem of authority and authoritarianism that he observes in the interpretation of Islam’s primary sources. He notes in another piece that “it is impossible for a human being to represent God’s Truth – a human being can only represent his or her efforts in search of this truth.”⁷⁸

His problem is with those interpreters whose authoritarianism arises when they speak for God without any clear authority.⁷⁹ In fact, Abou El Fadl’s specific target here is the *Salafabis* (his neologism combining Salafism and Wahhabism), a despotic and authoritarian trend that has anchored itself in the confident security of texts. For its adherents, “religious texts became like whips to be exploited by a select class of readers in order to affirm reactionary power dynamics in society.”⁸⁰ In their paradigm, the interpreting agent’s subjectivities are irrelevant to the realization and implementation of the Divine command. Further the text’s author, who regulates most aspects of human life through the text, determines its meaning while the reader’s job is simply to understand

⁷⁶ Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge*, 35.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁸ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islamic Authority,” in *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, ed. Kari Vogt and Moe Christian (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 129.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁰ Khaled Abou El Fadl, “The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford UK: Oneworld, 2003), 58.

and implement what it says.⁸¹ This critique is an obvious challenge to Wahhabis, and especially to their outrageous views on gender justice that he repeatedly targets in his works. But it also applies to later Qutb's anti-hermeneutic conception of the human agent as he leaned toward lessening the scope of *ijtihad*. With that move, Abou El Fadl goes on to deconstruct the Islamic state and its notion of God's sovereignty.

Just like Qutb, Abou El Fadl draws a distinction between *shariah* and *fiqh*. But he takes this to mean a distinction between the "immutable and immaculate Divine Ideal standing as if suspended in midair (*shariah*)" and the human attempt to understand and apply the ideal.⁸² *Shariah* therefore becomes a symbolic construct for the divine perfection that is unreachable by humans.⁸³ Qutb distinguished between the fixed and given *shariah* rules and *fiqh*, human interpretations that were variable and time-bound applications of them, as if they were, so to say, addenda to the main body.

The implications of this difference between the two authors are remarkable. Qutb's re-enchantment of the divine law re-enanted the social world so that it would be governed by its fixed rules. In his anti-hermeneutical stance, human agents would just implement God's unambiguous orders to discharge their duty of vicegerency. Abou El Fadl's agency, on the other hand, was inevitably "giving effect to [the Qur'an] according to [his] limited personal judgments and opinions," as he related from Imam Ali's

⁸¹ Ibid., 59.

⁸² Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge*, 31.

⁸³ Ibid., 33. He continues to lay out his conception of *shariah*: "Its perfection is preserved, so to speak, in the Mind of God, but anything that is channeled through human agency is necessarily marred by human imperfection. Put differently, Shari'ah as conceived by God is flawless, but as understood by human beings Shari'ah is imperfect and contingent. Jurists ought to continue to explore the ideal of Shari'ah and to expound their imperfect attempts at understanding God's perfection. As long as the argument constructed is normative it is unfulfilled potential to reach the Divine Will. Significantly, any law applied is necessarily a potential-unrealized. Shari'ah is not simply a collection of *ahkam* (a set of positive rules) but also a set of principles, a methodology, and a discursive process that searches for the divine ideals. As such, Shari'ah is a work in progress that is never complete."

argument against the literalist Khawarij.⁸⁴ *Shariah* then had to rely on “the interpretive act of the human agent for its production and execution.”⁸⁵

Abou El Fadl takes his emphasis on the human element in religion further by tackling the issue of God’s justice and reason’s ability to know right and wrong (*husn wa qubh*), which had occupied Rahman as well. Although Abou El Fadl does not openly affirm his agreement with the Mu’tazilite view,⁸⁶ he suggests that if an honest person experiences a fundamental conflict between a conscientious conviction and a textual determination, she can abide by the dictates of her conscience after exhausting all possible avenues toward resolving the conflict.⁸⁷ While opening up this space for a rationalistic ethics, he goes so far as to argue that “if a person honestly and sincerely believes that such and such is the law of God, then as to that person it is in fact God’s law.”⁸⁸

Abou El Fadl thus engages with the theological roots of a jurisprudential problem in order to expand the sphere of human reason and agency vis-à-vis revelation. This will be his main leverage to resolve Qutb’s *hakimiyyah* problem and affirm democracy. If God’s will is not as accessible and thus not clearly executable without the mediation of human inclinations, and if the pursuit of justice is at the core of vicegerent’s obligations,⁸⁹ then perhaps we should seek to regulate our own affairs and thus make our best effort to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁶ This was in response to Mohammad Fadel, who contended that “it is somewhat surprising, then, that Abou El Fadl would partially ground the basis for democratic life among Muslims on a heretofore discredited theological argument, according to which justice is independent of revelation.” Ibid., 82. Abou El Fadl simply quotes him as “after deciding that the rationalist argument is discredited, ...” without rejecting or affirming his agreement with the Mu’tazili position (Ibid., 116).

⁸⁷ Abou El Fadl, “Islamic Authority,” 132.

⁸⁸ Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge*, 33. He attributes this to the *musawwibah* school, in particular to al-Juwayni. In their view, there is no correct answer to the legal problem that God wants human beings to discover, no “objective truth,” if you will.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 117.

find the framework that best promotes human dignity and wellbeing.⁹⁰ Abou El Fadl's suggested paradigm shift, which takes justice as the defining force of the divine law in contrast to traditional understanding in which divine law defines justice,⁹¹ enables him to make the two key gestures. First, if the quest for justice should control and guide all efforts to interpret and understand the divine law,⁹² then democracy, by assigning equal rights of speech, association, and suffrage to all,⁹³ emerges as the best system to provide this framework. Hence, the ethical good of democracy expresses the special status of human beings in God's creation and enables them to discharge the responsibility of vicegerency.⁹⁴

In the second place, this shift will enable us to formulate God's *hakimiyyah* without threatening human agency or vice versa. If we consider human experience and intellect as irrelevant to our search for the divine will, then divine sovereignty will be an instrument of authoritarianism and obstacle to democracy. But if we search for God's justice, this effort will honor, as oppose to deny, God's sovereignty.⁹⁵ Therefore, both the duty of vicegerency and God's sovereignty are fulfilled only at the point where the human quest for justice is realized by a democratic order, the core values of which are the ideas of representative government, limits on governmental power, and safeguarding basic human rights.⁹⁶ Otherwise, as he makes his most radical proclamation, the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁹¹ Ibid., 21.

⁹² Fadel finds this too far from tradition, to which salvation and not justice carries the primal value. Mohammad Fadel, "Too Far from Tradition," in Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge*, 81-86.

⁹³ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 113.

pretensions to implement God's will in the name of an Islamic state will inevitably be tantamount to "idolatry"⁹⁷ for it purports to represent the unrepresentable.

After articulating between vicegerency, duty to justice (as an object of rational reflection), *shariah* as the Divine Ideal, and democracy as an ethical good, Abou El Fadl starts to detail his system. In his capacity as a jurist, he utilizes juridical concepts by reinterpreting them to fit into a democratic framework. In this secondary task, he seeks to show that among the interpretive possibilities of the tradition, some concepts resonate more strongly with democratic principles.⁹⁸ But only after setting the priorities right does he articulate his view on *shura*. Even when he upholds its Qur'anic value, he assigns more importance to the lawmaking process' moral commitments than to the procedure itself. Therefore, while he agrees that *shura* can be transformed into an instrument of participatory representation, he wants to limit it by a structure of individual rights.⁹⁹ On that note, just like Rahman, he revisits the "five necessities" (*al-daruriyat al-khamsah*), which I earlier referred to as part of *maqasid*, namely, the protection religion, life, intellect, lineage or honor, and property. While the juristic tradition reduced these to technical objectives, he argues, the broad values asserted could serve as a foundation for a systematic theory of individual rights in the modern age.¹⁰⁰ We find his justification quite similar to Rahman's.

Individual rights also constitute the basis for cherishing human diversity. This is where we can detect Abou El Fadl's theory of difference and pluralism. He clearly seeks a pluralistic vision and safeguards against turning difference into "otherness." He has

⁹⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 24.

already laid its ground by affirming that God vested divinity in every human being, regardless of religious beliefs. It is therefore incumbent on the vicegerent “to commit oneself to safeguarding and protecting the well-being of individuals is to take God’s creation seriously.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, the Qur’an does not differentiate between the sanctity of a Muslim or non-Muslim.¹⁰² He takes this to mean that both groups can be recipients and givers of divine mercy, which is a necessary corollary to justice. The measure of moral virtue on this Earth is a person’s proximity to divinity through justice, not a religious label.

Abou El Fadl’s justification of democracy on these grounds has become a subject of serious debate.¹⁰³ At the end of the day, he seems to have approached democracy as a free-standing ethico-political good that can be justified by diverse ontological commitments. His work can be characterized as reformulating traditional legal concepts on a rationalistic foundation in order to prefigure certain moral values that would match the moral basis of democracy. In this endeavor, he remains committed to *shariah* as the core value that society must serve.¹⁰⁴ However, his *shariah* has already been reconceived to give “human beings considerable latitude in regulating their own affairs as long as they observe certain minimal standards of moral conduct.”¹⁰⁵ Even then, if they choose not to

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰² “As the Qur’an repeatedly asserts, no human being can limit the divine mercy in any way, or even regulate who is entitled to it (Qur’an 2:105; 3:74; 35:2, 38:9, 39:38; 40:7, 43:32).” Ibid.

¹⁰³ The book contains responses by prominent scholars of the field, namely Nader Hashemi, Jeremy Waldron, Noah Feldman, Muqtedar Khan, Kevin Reinhart, Saba Mahmood, Bernard Haykel, Mohammed Fadel, David Novak, John Esposito, and William Quandt.

¹⁰⁴ Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

accept this as their core value, it is up to God's jurisdiction to decide their affairs in the hereafter without worldly repercussions.¹⁰⁶

Two major questions could be addressed as regards his ethical theory of democracy. First, does *shariah*'s status as society's core value violate the demands of pluralism and difference? Does this assign a certain *telos* to the state in disregard of those who do not subscribe to it? Even if Abou El Fadl's overarching goal is to provide all citizens an equal share in divinity and vicegerency, his conception of polity operates on *shariah*. How exactly can non-Muslims or secular Muslims enjoy full participation and citizenship in this picture? Does this polity have any limits that apply to those Muslims who seek to fulfill their obligation to live by God's law,¹⁰⁷ if the population – as most probably it will – comprises a good percentage of non-Muslims and secularist Muslims? If it is assumed that opening up *shariah* to human mediation through *fiqh* would suffice, one must inquire further whether this project does not substitute a *fiqh* state for a *shariah* state. Further, granted that he makes democracy an ethical good for which Muslims need to provide a framework in their search for God's will, where exactly do the others fit in their deliberative endeavor? Here we can see the same problem that we saw with Rahman, namely, the absorption of the political by the ethical-legal. He criticizes Yusuf al-Qaradawi for his assumption that if popular rule is granted, Muslims would naturally want *shariah*.¹⁰⁸ But how exactly do these two projects differ from each other?

In the second place, he continues to give the *ulama* a critical interpretive function regarding which Khan raises a provocative criticism against this on the ground of

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 36. In a certain sense, he might be interpreted as applying the doctrine of *irja'* (leaving the matter to God) for the collectivity of the Muslim community.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 121.

“tyranny of legalism”¹⁰⁹ or “intellectual imperialism of the Islamic jurists.”¹¹⁰ The latter squarely says that “an Islamic democracy is essentially a dictatorship of Muslim jurists” and “as long as the commanding authority of jurists remains in place and the jurists retain a monopoly on interpretation (Ijtihad), there can be no Islamic democracy.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Abou El Fadl does not “democratize” the interpretation of religion even to the extent of Rahman’s theory of consensus (*ijma*), which was more inclusive of individual believers as regards *ijtihad*.¹¹² His major reservation with taking this step has more to do with his concerns about the virtual anarchy with respect to the mechanisms of defining Islamic authenticity in the face of revivalist claims of direct interpretation of the text.¹¹³ Indeed, it is striking that he laments the loss of the traditional institutions’ authority to “marginalize” certain creeds as heretical aberrations.¹¹⁴

Khan extends his critique from jurists to the discipline of jurisprudence itself, viewing it as a challenge rather than an ally of Islamic democratic theory.¹¹⁵ He holds the colonial tendency of Islamic legal thought responsible for the underdevelopment of

¹⁰⁹ M. A. Muqtedar Khan, “The Primacy of Political Philosophy,” in *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 63.

¹¹⁰ M. A. Muqtedar Khan, “The Politics, Theory, and Philosophy of Islamic Democracy,” in *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Muqtedar Khan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 160.

¹¹¹ Khan, “The Primacy of Political Philosophy,” 64.

¹¹² Abou El Fadl responds that Khan and other liberal reformers end up discarding the interpretive communities of the past and Islamic law. He further justifies his position by arguing that the Qur’an itself challenges extreme egalitarianism by commanding Muslims to seek the guidance of those specialized people (Qur’an, 9:122 and 16:43). Abou El Fadl, “Khaled Abou El Fadl Replies.” But he seems to mistake Khan’s call for “democratization of interpretation” as vesting every Muslim with “competence” to be a “jurist.” In fact, Khan does not seem to elevate everybody to the level of a jurist, but rather to oppose the monopoly of jurist to interpret religion altogether.

¹¹³ Abou El Fadl, “The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly,” 47.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48. In fact his main target here is the “extremists.” However, the use of this authority to marginalize all sorts of novel ideas is an established fact in the history of Islamic theology.

¹¹⁵ Khan, “The Politics, Theory, and Philosophy,” 166. He relates the points of Muhsin Mahdi, a scholar of Muslim philosophy, which will also support my normative views on the subject: “[A]s a political philosopher he needed to go beyond jurisprudence and to attempt to understand the foundations upon which the Islamic religious community rested. He had to ask questions that the jurist was neither required to ask nor capable of asking: Why does a political community need to be a religious community? Why does the ruler or legislator of the political community need to be a prophet or the representative of a prophet? Why does a political community need to be governed by a divine law?” Muhsin Mahdi, *Al Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 40. Cited by Khan, “The Politics, Theory, and Philosophy,” 164.

Islamic political thought.¹¹⁶ Indeed, aside from the fact that he can most competently address this question from a jurist's point of view, one can find little explanation in Abou El Fadl's essay as to why the political theoretical question of "Islamic democracy" has to be tackled on juristic terms without any reference to philosophy (the tradition of *falasifah*).

At another level, Abou El Fadl's theory clashes with some concerns of Islamic authenticity. He opposes the siege mentality and supports the search for "moral universals that could serve as shared and common goals with humanity at large."¹¹⁷ In contrast to cultural relativists and purists, he maintains, powerful humanitarian ideas enjoy a mixed lineage.¹¹⁸ Still, this does not seem to go far enough to warrant democracy as an uncontested and neutral ethical good, whereas there is a long history of democratic theory with quite different articulations of democracy. In his conception, democracy means "ideas of representative government, limits on the power of government, and the safeguarding of basic and fundamental human rights."¹¹⁹ But to what extent, for instance, are deliberative, republican, or radical notions of democracy represented in this definition? And what provides the content of basic human rights?

He bases his response to Saba Mahmood's question as to why he prefers individual over collective rights with reference to the historical record: The rhetoric of collective rights has almost always been abused in order to justify authoritarian rule in the Muslim world.¹²⁰ This may be deemed an effort to justify, or at least an *ad hoc*

¹¹⁶ Khan, "The Politics, Theory, and Philosophy," 159.

¹¹⁷ Abou El Fadl, "The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly," 41.

¹¹⁸ Abou El Fadl, "Khaled Abou El Fadl Replies." He finds a more basic problem with modern Muslim discourses in the sense that they seem to be highly reactive and politicized (Ibid., 127).

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

explanation. But it does point, however, to the need to devise a more grounded formulation of a certain version of democracy, as opposed to some others, integrated with his onto-ethical commitments. One might even go further and ask why not formulate an “Islamic” version of democracy on its own foundations, one distinct from the liberal, deliberative, social, radical, or agonistic versions? He has already made some significant moves to articulate a unique onto-ethical constellation. So why not take it further down the road toward the political sphere by suggesting political principles, positions, and institutions that cohere with it, rather than taking an inarticulate version of democracy as a “freestanding ethical good.” If that would happen, we could definitely discern a coherent ontopolitical constellation, as was the case with the thinkers covered in the earlier chapters.

From this account of Abou El Fadl’s Islamic democratic theory, we can conclude that he takes some crucial steps to weaken the preceding strong ontologies. He does this especially by deconstructing the classical jurists’ traditional juristic concepts as well as by challenging the Islamists’ and revivalists’ strong ontologies on the basis of their notions of sovereignty and anti-hermeneutic stance. However, his theological and legal reflections do not offer a truly political theory of Islamic democracy, for his onto-ethical edifice remains parasitic on an inarticulate liberal democracy. Besides, with its legal-centric theorization, one might still wonder if this “democratic” *fiqh* state could pay enough heed to inter- and intra-religious difference when non-Muslim or non-jurist vicegerents remain subservient to the legal experts’ authoritative views. Under these circumstances, the Muslim side might find his democratic theory too liberal, while non-Muslims might find it still too theocratic. All in all, his theory remains within the

confines of the Islamist aversion to the secular state. Only with An-Na'im and Hashemi will we observe the crucial shift from the Qutbian paradigm in this regard.

Abdullahi An-Na'im: A Progressive View of Shariah under a Secular State

Abdullahi An-Na'im (b. 1946), the Sudanese-born law professor at Emory University's School of Law, is known for advocating human rights from within an Islamic discourse. He has also been the key promoter of the unique Islamic reform movement launched by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. The latter was a Sudanese religious and political figure who was executed by the Nimeiry regime in 1985 on apostasy charges, after which An-Naim moved to North America.¹²¹ An-Na'im is among the few Muslim scholars who have captured the attention of such prominent mainstream American political thinkers as John Rawls, who saw the former's work as an example that fits into his own framework of political liberalism.¹²² An-Na'im's preferred methodology for reforming *shariah* is based on his teacher's ideas and presented in his *Toward an Islamic Reformation*.¹²³ In his recent *Islam and the Secular State*, he pursues a different goal: to "promote normative standards and institutional conditions for free and orderly public debate and contestation of various approaches" for developing *shariah*.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Abdullahi An-Na'im, "Faculty Page," <http://www.law.emory.edu/aannaim/> (accessed May 4, 2013). He also describes his background on his faculty web page: "When he left Sudan in 1985, An-Na'im believed that his primary mission was to publicize and develop the main ideas of his mentor, Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. He started with publishing an English translation of Taha's main book, *The Second Message of Islam* (1987), and began to develop the legal and human rights implications of that methodology through an extensive scholarly program. The primary objective of his scholarship has been a combination of the development of a liberal modernist understanding of Islam and the promotion of an overlapping consensus over the universality of human rights among different cultural and religious traditions of the world."

¹²² Rawls cites An-Na'im as an example of a Muslim scholar who endorses a reasonable constitutional democracy from within a religious doctrine. See John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: With the Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 151n.

¹²³ An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, 1990.

¹²⁴ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*. Just as the Rawlsian elements in his work are striking, one can draw parallels between the sequels of Rawls's *Justice and Fairness* and *Political Liberalism* and An-Na'im's two aforementioned works. In the former one, he advocates a monological reform view of *shariah*. In the latter, on the other hand, he offers a framework for negotiation between competing views of *shariah*. He also refers to the primary

Being an unapologetic liberal,¹²⁵ An-Na'im furthers El-Affendi and Abou El Fadl's agenda of deconstructing the Islamic state as well as *shariah*, its governing ideology. Yet he attempts something of an unlikely combination: upholding his commitment to *shariah* as the Muslims' overarching normative framework while subscribing to the idea of a secular state. In fact, this work's uniqueness lies in his argument that a Muslim needs "a secular state in order to live in accordance with Shari'a out of [his or her] own genuine conviction and free choice."¹²⁶ Presented below is an account that first seeks to analyze the doctrinal and historical arguments he uses to negate an Islamic (viz., *shariah*) state. His reasoning for affirming the secular state is along the lines of Mill and Rawls's defense of liberty and formulation of political liberalism, respectively.

An-Na'im's proposed view of reform, which he adopted from Taha and elaborated in his earlier work, is close to Fazlur Rahman's historical approach that distinguishes between the revealed text's universal and historical aspects. Having made this distinction, An-Na'im could then set aside the historical ones.¹²⁷ But in the work

objective of his scholarship as "a combination of the development of a liberal modernist understanding of Islam and the promotion of an overlapping consensus over the universality of human rights among different cultural and religious traditions of the world." An-Na'im, "Faculty Page."

¹²⁵ "Muslims can be liberal in their own right, from an Islamic perspective, without having to satisfy preconceived notions of how they ought to be 'sufficiently Muslim,' whether in Western or conservative Islamic discourse." An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 269.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 268.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 2. It must be noted, however, that Taha's "reverse abrogation" and "first vs. second message" doctrines draw on a fundamental distinction between Makkan and Medinan verses that is not always the case with Rahman. He describes Taha's methodology in the following terms: "An Islamic reform methodology ... was proposed by Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, who argued for a shift in the basis of social and political aspects of Shari'a from verses included in the Medina phase of the revelation of the Qur'an (622–632) to those revealed during the Mecca period (610–622). ... [T]he rationale for this proposed shift is that earlier revelations represented the universal message of Islam, while the later ones were specific responses to the historical context of human societies at the time. Ustadh Mahmoud also demonstrated the temporary rationale for the notions of aggressive jihad, subordination of women to men, and subordination of non-Muslims to Muslims that underlie the *dhimma* system, as revealed during the Medina phase. The basic point here is that Islam was offered first through the peaceful propagation of its universal message during the Mecca period. But when that was shown to be unrealistic in the context of seventh-century Arabia, a more historically appropriate message was advanced during the Medina period, which sanctioned the use of aggressive jihad

under debate, he is rather more interested in how to develop a mechanism that would foster the free development of *shariah*. This has much to do with his conception of *shariah* as a dynamic, progressive framework that Muslims need to constantly renegotiate and reformulate so that it can respond to the circumstances and needs of contemporary life. It has to be, then, an understanding of *shariah* that “Muslims can actually live by instead of maintaining an unrealistic ideal that is honored only in theory but never in practice.”¹²⁸

An-Na'im makes his fundamental commitments to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and thus what he considers to be foundational sources is quite clear. He writes his book as a Muslim, not in a detached manner, and his primary audience is Muslims, whom he sees as bound to observe *shariah* as a matter of religious obligation.¹²⁹ He goes on to affirm what I have called the “Islamist axiom”:

They provide the articles of faith and doctrine that Muslims espouse, including the ritual practices they are supposed to observe and the moral and ethical precepts they are bound to respect. The Qur'an and Sunna are also where Muslims look for guidance in developing their social and political relations, legal norms, and institutions. In this foundational sense, Islam is about realizing the liberating power of a living and proactive confession of faith in an infinitely singular, omnipotent, and omnipresent God.¹³⁰

But then how does his project differ from Qutb's Islamism? Here his definition of *shariah*, which is closer to Abou El Fadl's conception, as well as his fundamental distinction between the spheres of religion and state, plays a critical role. He does not

and subordination of non-Muslims. Thus the chronologically later message of Medina came to be implemented first as Shari'a after the seventh century. Asserting that it is now possible to implement the earlier message of peaceful propagation and nondiscrimination, Ustadh Mahmoud calls for that shift to be achieved through a fresh concept and methodology of juridical reasoning (*ijtihad*). In this way, the methodology proposed by Ustadh Mahmoud is able explicitly to set aside those verses underlying the dhimma system as a matter of Shari'a, although they remain part of the Qur'an. Since the process of selecting which verses of the Qur'an are applicable and which are not was always the work of Muslim jurists, earlier choices can be replaced by new ones simply as a revision of what Muslims did in the past, not of the Qur'an and Sunna themselves.” An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 135-36.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 107. Clearly many thinkers, including Rahman and El-Affendi, are concerned about the moral vacuum resulting from the untenable ideal of *shariah* that is retained, despite repeated frustrations.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

consider *shariah* as identical with Islam, but rather as no more than a passageway into being Muslim and one that does not exhaust possibilities of experiencing Islam. It is “the totality of the duty of Muslims and any particular perception of it through a specific human methodology of interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunna.”¹³¹ As for the distinction between *shariah* and *fiqh*, which was quite instrumental for Qutb and Abou El Fadl’s reform projects, he brings both down to earth by arguing that they are products of a human interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah. In a clearer sense, any understanding of *shariah* is always the product of *ijtihad*.¹³² Hence, whether a proposition is based on *shariah* or *fiqh* does not make much difference in their susceptibility to human error and bias.¹³³ Concerning the second fundamental distinction, the one between state and religion, he presupposes that the state’s sphere is necessarily a human sphere, a product of human activity, and therefore secular. The sphere of religion, on the other hand, can only exist as an extra-state domain and can be deemed religious if and only if it is based on its adherents’ honest conviction.

Basing himself on these distinctions, his argument that the state should not enforce *shariah* can be summed up in three propositions: (1) The state is inherently secular, and any pretension on its part to embody a religion would only lead to creating a secular structure, (2.) *Shariah*, by its very nature, cannot be codified into a positive law for the state, and (3) No Islamic state has ever existed, and Muhammad’s religio-political formation in Medina can never be replicated.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Ibid., 10.

¹³² Ibid., 13.

¹³³ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 46.

Regarding the first point, his argument is that the state is a “human construct”¹³⁵ and thus inherently secular and political.¹³⁶ No human institution, and thus no state, can be inherently religious,¹³⁷ for the state, due to the very nature of its powers and institutions, requires a form and a degree of continuity and predictability that religious authority cannot provide.¹³⁸ In an Islamic context, whatever the state enforces in the name of *shariah* will necessarily be secular and the product of coercive political power, as opposed to a superior Islamic authority.¹³⁹ If such enactment and enforcement is attempted, the outcome will necessarily be the state’s political will and not Islam’s religious law.¹⁴⁰ The impossibility of codifying *shariah* principles as state law¹⁴¹ is basically due to the lack of generally agreed-upon standards or mechanisms for adjudicating among competing views of *shariah*. For this reason, whatever the state’s organs impose as official policy or formal legislation will necessarily be the view of those who control those institutions and betray the sense of religion. “*Shariah* as a state law,” then, is a logical contradiction that cannot be rectified by any efforts under any conditions. It is a goal that can never be realized and thus not simply a matter of improving upon a bad experience in any country.¹⁴²

And finally, none of the Muslims’ historical attempts to replicate Muhammad’s model of state have ever succeeded. Instead, the radically different results of the constant renegotiation between state and religious authority have only shown that there was never

¹³⁵ Ibid., 267.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 77.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴¹ An-Na’im also cites Rashid Rida as a precursor to this idea, for in his journal *Manar* he strongly affirmed that *shariah* cannot be codified as a state law. Ibid., 2.

¹⁴² Ibid.

an Islamic state, despite the general supposition that such a state had existed.¹⁴³ Thus one must dispel the “dangerous illusion of an Islamic state,” the romantic notions of Islamic states and pious rulers popularized by “the propaganda of Islamists groups based on the ideological views” of such thinkers as Mawdudi and Qutb.¹⁴⁴ Instead, we must come to terms with the fact that *shariah*, as a matter of religious obligation, can best be achieved when the state is neutral regarding all religious doctrines. This alternative would call for legitimizing and implementing the principles and institutions of constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship in Islamic societies.¹⁴⁵

One might get the impression from the above that An-Na'im deduces a justification of Western secular state that leaves no room for religious expression in the public sphere. In fact, he is careful to use “secular state” instead of “secularism” not just because he wants to avoid the negative perception of secularism among Muslims,¹⁴⁶ but also because he pursues a formula whereby secularism can separate Islam and state while mediating between Islam and politics.¹⁴⁷ Here he draws on another distinction: state and politics. He contends that a Muslim, or any other person for that matter, cannot separate his religious and political selves.¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, rather than operating in distinct realms,

¹⁴³ Ibid., 106. He quotes Ira Lapidus at length to support his narration of the historical relationship between state and religious authority: “The upshot of their theorizing was that the state was not a direct expression of Islam, but a secular institution whose duty it was to uphold Islam; the real community of Muslims was the community of scholars and holy men who carried on the legacy of the Prophet in daily life” and “It is clear that the models of relations between religious and state authorities ‘vary across a wide spectrum from a high degree of state control over a centrally managed religious establishment, to a more independent but co-operative relationship (as in the Saljuq case), to full autonomy and even open opposition to state policies.’” Ibid., 65-66. He then concludes: “The historical reality is that there has never been an Islamic state, from the state of Abu Bakr, the first caliph in Medina, to Iran, Saudi Arabia, and any other state that claims to be Islamic today. This obvious reality is due to the incoherence of the idea itself and the practical impossibility of realizing it, not simply to bad experiments that can be rectified in the future.” Ibid., 280.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 275. He quotes Ashis Nandy on this point: “If you are seriously committed to democracy, you cannot in the long run stop people from bringing their entire self into politics. For no one consistently divides one’s religious and political selves in the way the theory of secularism demands. That’s not psychologically feasible. There is no empirical

politics and religion inform each other.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, secularism cannot replace religion for believers, as it lacks “independent motivating power.”¹⁵⁰ Besides, since they will inevitably assert their religious convictions politically, it is better to acknowledge and regulate this reality than to deny it.¹⁵¹

In fact, there is a proper channel by which Islamic principles can be carried over to politics and even propose policy or legislation stemming from them: “civic reason.”¹⁵² In this setting, policy matters are discussed in free and open public debate based on reasons that are “accessible and convincing to the generality of citizens regardless of their religious or other beliefs.”¹⁵³ Thus, *shariah* principles can play a positive role in public life without being forcibly imposed upon people’s private lives via state institutions.¹⁵⁴ This is a formula for enabling Muslims to carry Islam into politics without imposing it on others.

Aside from mediating relations among different religious or non-religious communities,¹⁵⁵ secularism is also good for religion, and not just because it can only survive thanks to the liberties granted by a secular regime when it is a minority religion. Here, in quite a Millian fashion, An-Na’im formulates *shariah* as being in need of free

evidence—in psychiatry, psychoanalysis, or psychology—that a healthy, normal person can constantly live with a divided social and ethical self. At crucial moments, he or she has to bring his or her deepest beliefs into public life, to reduce cognitive dissonance.”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. He also asserts that secularism cannot provide cross-cultural foundations (Ibid., 42).

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵² Ibid., 7. As it is obvious, he draws on Rawlsian public reason, supported by his proviso.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 29-30. I mean reasons that can be publicly debated and contested by any citizen, individually or in community with others, in accordance with norms of civility and mutual respect. Civic reasons and reasoning processes are required for the adoption of public policy and legislation in a democratic state because they are publicly accessible to and publicly contestable by all citizens. (Ibid., 85). His preference for civic reason instead of public reason is not due to his aversion of direct borrowing from Rawls’s “Western” concept, as he does not subscribe to such distinctions when the concepts express “human condition” (Ibid., 98). However, his notion is wider than Rawls’ three specific fora of public reason and also draws on Habermas’ deliberative space. He also notes that civic reason is a tentative and evolving concept (Ibid.).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

debate and dissenting views for its own progress. His views echo those of Rahman as regards the centrality of *ijtihad* and *ijma* to religious development, although he is not quite in favor of activating the *maqasid* as a legislative tool.¹⁵⁶ *Shariah* is whatever any group of Muslims accepts as being part of *shariah* through their consensus, which is this body of law's most foundational source and methodology.¹⁵⁷ After all, there is no pope or any other person or group with the authority to establish *shariah*, so any understanding of it is always going to be the product of *ijtihad*.¹⁵⁸ Therefore *ijma* and *ijtihad* have more foundational roles than what is generally assumed and can form the basis of a more dynamic and creative development of *shariah* both now and in the future.¹⁵⁹

As a corollary, just like Rahman and Khan, he affirms that *ijtihad* cannot be monopolized by any group: "[A]ny restriction of free debate by entrusting human beings or institutions with the authority to decide which views are to be allowed or suppressed is inconsistent with the religious nature of Shari'a itself"¹⁶⁰ Along the same lines, freedom of dissent and debate are essential for *shariah*'s development because it is necessary for a consensus to emerge freely.¹⁶¹ This provides the foundations of constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship for all. An-Na'im highlights these three overarching political principles because together they constitute the basis of his integrated framework. More specifically, they regulate secularism's practical approach to negotiating the tension

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 293.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14. He assigns this as a duty for everybody and only narrowly qualifies it, unlike what Abou El Fadl suggests: "All Muslim men and women have the religious obligation to learn enough to decide for themselves and to express their views on matters of public concern. It is just that those with the most knowledge of the Islamic sources and methodology will be more authoritative and persuasive than those who lack such knowledge." Ibid., 19.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 31. These processes of *ijma* and *ijtihad* are never-ending processes in this dynamic and progressive formulation of Islam: "From an Islamic point of view, no human authority was or is entitled to declare that *ijtihad* is not permitted, though there may have been consensus on this matter among Muslims. There is nothing, therefore, to prevent the emergence of a new consensus that *ijtihad* should be freely exercised to meet the new needs and aspirations of Islamic societies." Ibid., 15.

between the state's religious neutrality and the connectedness of Islam and public policy.¹⁶² In fact, this is the truly Islamic solution to the problem of Islam and politics, unlike the pretensions of an Islamic state, which is no more than a postcolonial discourse that relies on European notions of state and positive law.¹⁶³ Therefore its pretensions to enforce *shariah* as state law actually promote a European, positivistic view of law and a totalitarian state model that seeks to remake society in its own image.¹⁶⁴

This last point is of particular importance, because many liberal Muslims are well aware of the problem of cultural legitimacy and Islamic authenticity, especially when they speak in liberal terms and from within Western institutions. An-Na'im gives the claims of cultural legitimacy and the need for recognition of identities and primordial attachments their due, although he is well aware of their dynamic and contested nature. He insistently makes his claims as a Muslim who speaks from within Islam, because he asserts that presenting and adopting alternative perspectives can be achieved only through a coherent internal discourse in the culture.¹⁶⁵ He seeks a cultural change grounded in the culture of communities themselves so that it will be legitimate, coherent, and sustainable.¹⁶⁶ Even then, his proposed reform project never gives guaranteed outcomes because the paradoxes he addresses can only be mediated through practice over time, rather than by theoretical stipulation. In reality, his goal is to search for the most conducive conditions so that this mediation can continue in a constructive fashion, instead of hoping to resolve the paradox once and for all.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² Ibid., 14.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 28.

An-Na'im seems to have taken crucial steps toward solving some of the major problems connected with Islam and politics. He even attempts to respond to many Islamist concerns. Instead of advising them to give up their quest for living by *shariah* or pursuing the political consequences of Islam by carrying it into political sphere, he simply invites them to look at matters from a different perspective, one in which "the political" operates on purely human dynamics because all that is out there is human. In one sense this is a remarkable advance over his predecessors because, as I pointed out earlier, conceiving "the political" as simply a projection of the onto-ethical sphere has been a major problem for Islamists and such figures as Rahman. His theory also seems to make significant advances over Rahman and Abou El Fadl's ambiguous deliberative models, for his clear distinction between the religious communal deliberation among Muslims on *shariah* and the political deliberation of all citizens, regardless of religion, on political issues. However, granted that he could enlist support for "secularism" or at least for the "secular state" among Muslims, introducing Rawls will still invite the same critiques of Rawls against his "civic reason."

I touched on Connolly and Stout's challenge to political liberalism and its liberal secularism in the first part of the dissertation.¹⁶⁸ In effect, an-Na'im subordinates Muslim demands for inclusion in the public sphere to this framework of political liberalism and liberal secularism. Thus, he practically asks them to impose self-restraint while formulating their Islam-based political principles and even to reformulate them along "liberal" lines. His liberal definition of politics aside, to what extent his understanding of constitutionalism, human rights, and citizenship are amenable to non-liberal foundations

¹⁶⁸ See page 41 of this dissertation.

is an issue of concern in its own right. If the scope of civic reason is not limited to the Rawlsian ones of constitutional essentials or matters of basic justice, then in which specific fora does he expect Muslims or non-Muslims to restrain themselves from arguing on the basis of religion? In terms of my dissertation, how can non-liberal and Muslim foundational narratives or mythoi find space in this model vis-à-vis liberal ones?

Further, his consensus model will definitely be prone to the familiar critiques of various agonistic and radical democrats. What is the extent of the consensus he is pursuing among citizens of different belief systems, and will it involve moving from the ethical sphere to the political sphere, thereby leading to labeling dissident Muslims “extremists” and not simply as those who do not want to buy into a liberal state?

As regards authenticity concerns, An-Na’im definitely makes crucial efforts to acknowledge the significance of cultural legitimacy. However, his most daring suggestions concern the most volatile issues for politically active Muslims, namely, secularism and liberalism. Most Muslims, including Islamists, might be persuaded by his suggestion of abandoning the construct of an Islamic state that imposes *shariah* on everyone. However, replacing it with a “secular state” does not seem likely to garner the support needed to create the conditions conducive to producing a reformed *shariah* and polity. As he also acknowledges (and Hashemi addresses more elaborately below), the entanglement of liberalism and secularism with colonialism and authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world has done the most to tarnish its image. By equating “human” with “secular” and affirming the human sphere only through a secular state, without leaving room for any alternative formulation, he seems to expect too much from Muslims.

All in all, I maintain that An-Na'im promises to carry the *islah* movement into the properly political sphere in a genuine cross-cultural conversation with the liberal discourse. The remaining issue is whether his "liberal" framework will impede the political success he is seeking for his theoretical reflections.

Nader Hashemi and a Political Theology of Islamic Liberal Democracy

Hashemi, another American-based scholar and author of *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy* (2009) is a good example of political theorists who break the monopoly of jurists or juridical reasoning when speaking of religion in the public sphere. Also, if one wants to see an update to Binder's argument for "Islamic liberalism" as a precondition for political liberalism in Muslim societies, perhaps his work would be among the best ones to consult. On that note his thesis opposes El-Affendi's argument, which underplays theological reform in favor of the political processes for democratic transition and consolidation of Muslim societies.¹⁶⁹

As a conscious comparative political theorist whose work is strongly grounded in comparative politics, Hashemi, unlike Abou El Fadl, does not leave the "democratic" component of "Islamic democracy" inarticulate. He decidedly makes the case for "indigenizing Muslim secularism and advancing liberal democracy"¹⁷⁰ based on a comparative analysis of Christian Europe and the Muslim world. This comparison points out the correlation between reinterpreting religious doctrine and liberal-democratic development. Challenging the commonplace thesis on the structural incompatibility

¹⁶⁹ Yet Hashemi's argument for the existence of a de facto Muslim theory of secularism in countries like Turkey signifies their common emphases on the transformative value of pragmatic and political processes Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 157.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

between religious politics and liberal-democratic development, he makes the case for a religious-based theory of secularism. Among his major arguments is that “in societies where religion is an overriding marker of identity, the road to liberal democracy, whatever other twists and turns it makes, cannot avoid passing through the gates of religious politics.”¹⁷¹

His argument develops out of the comparison he draws between the religious-political histories of Christianity and Islam. He observes that both religions spawned radical protest movements (Puritanism and Islamism, respectively) at approximately the same time of their respective histories, which is significant enough to merit a comparison.¹⁷² In this sense, fundamentalism was never “a function of the unique peculiarities of Islamic civilization”¹⁷³ and all of the major religions at some point passed through periods of militant religious piety.

This is a key point because from then on he seeks to expose Puritanism’s role in the development of secularism and liberalism. He specifically rests on Michael Walzer’s argument that English Puritanism had a proto-modern character and was an ideology of the transition period. In that sense, the revolutionary activity of the Calvinists was just as important to the modern state’s formation as the rulers’ sovereign power. Such decidedly illiberal and fundamentalist ideologies were paradoxically vital to the West’s long-term modernization and democratization.¹⁷⁴ In short, political modernization did not in itself

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷² Ibid., 31.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷⁴ Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 1-10. Cited by Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 49.

generate liberal democracy in a straightforward manner, and the development of secularism was in no way a smooth process.¹⁷⁵

Next, Hashemi attends to the doctrinal transformations involved in these macro sociological processes. His favorite case here is “John Locke’s political theology,” which has recently gained a larger emphasis in political theory.¹⁷⁶ Locke became involved in religious exegesis and theological arguments while writing his polemics against Robert Filmer on the nature of political authority. The striking fact here is that the debates centered around “how the will of God is to be interpreted,”¹⁷⁷ a quite familiar issue in my ontological narrative. In Locke’s novel reading of Christianity, Hashemi maintains, reason and revelation appeared as complementary lenses.¹⁷⁸ He was also distinctive due to his emphasis on ethics at the expense of ritualism, his perception of the Church as a voluntary society of members, and his contention that God does not prescribe a form of government.¹⁷⁹ Most significantly, he laid the ground for these arguments by defending an autonomous sphere for human discretion via repeatedly stating that “[t]he Scripture says not a word of it.”¹⁸⁰ One can continue with examples from Hobbes, who defended the sovereign’s decisive will to prevent conflict over the clashing interpretations of God’s Will.¹⁸¹ In short, from Locke up until Mill, certain doctrinal transformations corresponded

¹⁷⁵ Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 64-65.

¹⁷⁶ For instance, he quotes Shapiro as he says: “Locke is something of a hybrid figure. He makes arguments that endure as defining features of political argument in the modern West, yet he does so in ways that reflect and embody premodern concerns” Ian Shapiro, “Introduction: Reading Locke Today,” in *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, by John Locke (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), xiv. Cited by Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 102.

¹⁷⁷ Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 69.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-84.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 108. He also relates that Hobbes asserted that “every man became a judge of religion, and an interpreter of Scriptures to himself.” *Ibid.*, 35.

with a political development that necessitated freedom from religion and that discredited the old opinions on religion, morals, and politics.¹⁸²

Hashemi draws two major conclusions from his survey of the theological transformations intrinsic to modern political theory during the processes of modernization and secularization. First, secularism, as a concomitant of liberal democracy, is not a given but rather a deeply contested concept that has (and continues to) evolved historically.¹⁸³ As Alfred Stepan argues, an extraordinarily broad range of concrete patterns of religion-state relations would meet the minimal definition of democracy. This process, which is better conceived as “twin tolerations,” also insinuates that liberal democracy can accommodate more than one model of secularism.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, “while liberal democracy necessitates a form of secularism, the boundaries between religion and state are much more flexible and fluid than is generally appreciated.”¹⁸⁵ Second, in a broader sense, a reinterpretation instead of a rejection or marginalization of religious norms, especially with respect to government, is a precondition for liberal-democratic development. In other words, Muslim democrats can learn a great deal from Locke as regards their own struggles for democracy and human rights.¹⁸⁶

Hashemi appears as a Muslim political scientist who is indisputably committed to “liberal” democracy and openly subscribes to secularism as a precondition of democracy. Nonetheless, he takes secularism as an essentially contested concept that has a bad image in the Muslim world due to its historical association with colonialism and authoritarian secularism. As a result, Muslim reformists face the dilemma that “liberal democracy

¹⁸² Ibid., 109.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 131.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 69.

necessitates a form of secularism to sustain itself, yet simultaneously secularism suffers from ill repute.”¹⁸⁷ Taking it upon himself to reconcile Islam, secularism, and liberal democracy, he proposes to achieve this task by reconceiving Islamists as the Muslim equivalents, so to say, of English Puritans, who could act as agents of reform that would, in the long run, lead to an indigenous version of a secularized Islam. The unique socio-historical processes of Muslim societies, then, will hopefully bring about liberal democracy.

Hashemi explores why secularism has such a negative reputation as well as several indicators of doctrinal and sociological transformations that would prepare the ground for liberal democracy in the Muslim world. He notes that modernization, as experienced in the West, was an indigenous process that developed democracy, human rights, and pluralism, whereas in the Muslim world it meant dictatorship, corruption, repression, and social injustice. Further, religious reform preceded political secularization in the West, whereas secularism in the Muslim world, due to the dominating fact of Western imperialism, was imposed from above as a repressive ideology.¹⁸⁸ As a result, secularism, colonialism, and authoritarianism were experienced as interconnected phenomena. The message received was that “secularism” was a punitive ideology designed to damage the Muslims’ human and civil rights.¹⁸⁹ Since secularization resulted in the autocratic modernizing state suffocating secular civil society, all oppositional

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 134-40.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 142.

activity was forced into the mosque, which inadvertently contributed to the rise of political Islam.¹⁹⁰

Hashemi's description of Islamic movements, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), parallels many elements in my analyses so far. For example, he emphasizes their modern character within the context of modern nation-state.¹⁹¹ He finds it significant that the Islamist organizations, which sought to displace the existing order,¹⁹² have transferred religious authority from officially sanctioned individuals to ordinary citizens.¹⁹³ Hostility to the ulama and the individualization of interpreting religion, which have characterized my account of the reform movement from Banna onward, were, he believes, crucial steps that led to the "objectification" of the religious conscience. He also refers to the Islamists' social justice agenda alongside their sensibilities concerning Western interventionism, a just global political order, issues of redistribution, and the political dominance of elite groups as being among the factors that would reveal Islamists to be proto-modernizing agents.¹⁹⁴

Hashemi interprets the processes that Bayat earlier called the "post-Islamist" condition as an indigenous theory of Muslim secularism in the making, based on his analyses of several doctrinal and sociological transformations in Turkey, Iran, and Indonesia.¹⁹⁵ Especially in the case of Turkey's JDP, he observes an internal or *de facto* secularism as an important background development that has contributed significantly to the consolidation of democracy there. Turkish democracy, then, is the result of a gradual

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 139.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁹² Ibid., 53.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 134.

internal ideological transformation within religious-based parties and among Muslim intellectuals. He maintains that these groups have effectively reconciled their political theologies with secularism, albeit a secularism of a different sort.¹⁹⁶ In conclusion, as long as a political theory of secularism that is compatible with the core requirements of liberal democracy and their own political theologies is in the making, we can foresee a genuinely democratizing Muslim world.

Hashemi's central emphasis is on Islamism's sociological impact, rather than its doctrinal orientation, as a more important element in Muslim societies' long-term political development. Although doctrinal transformation acquires its importance in this model only as an explanatory variable among a host of factors, it is still significant that he has a political ontological understanding in which theological figures prefigure political positions. Interestingly, the connections between "the theological" and "the political" that he observes in certain canonical thinkers would lend themselves to a quite fruitful political ontological analysis, one that would be comparable to the one I have made for the *islah* tradition. In that sense, my analyses would provide further support to his theses. In addition, strong parallels exist between my approach to the *islah* movement, in terms of its emancipatory elements, and his reading of Islamism's paradoxically modernizing elements.¹⁹⁷

However, at some points his analysis raises concerns that are relevant to my approach. To begin with, Hashemi makes no distinction between Islamism and fundamentalism. Thus he does not distinguish between literalist/strict revivalist and the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 155.

¹⁹⁷ Muqtedar Khan had earlier pointed out striking parallels between Sayyid Qutb and John Locke in M.A. Muqtedar Khan, "Syed Qutb - John Locke of the Islamic World," *Brookings*, July 28, 2003, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2003/07/28islamicworld-khan> (accessed May 3, 2013).

reformist, more emancipatory movements. My analyses revolves around this distinction and do not equate Islamism with a literalist Wahhabi movement that is more interested in reviving early Islam's doctrinal purity in a formalist manner as opposed to a sensibility toward social justice and human freedom. In fact, Hashemi does stress the Islamist movements' emancipatory dimensions, but takes them as universal givens in all sorts of revivalist and reformist movements.

Even further, his notion of democracy is not ambiguous, as he clearly draws on a liberal democracy as developed by Locke, Rousseau, and Mill. His conception of democracy is more robust than Schumpeter's and more modest than participatory or deliberative definitions. In this respect, he adds constitutional guarantees for basic rights and liberties to Dahl's polyarchy.¹⁹⁸ But he does not show the same degree of interest in democracy's contested and variable nature as he does with secularism. Even with secularism, although he leaves room for its indigenous formulations, this process' endpoint is incontestably a liberal democratic one. In that sense, he continues to hold on to a liberal universalist view that takes liberal democracy as the *telos* of human political development.

As I have disentangled different notions of democracy in chapter 3, my project clearly takes issue with those Islamic democracy theories that take (liberal) democracy as a given and thus fail to unpack it. Indeed, why not deliberative democracy, for instance, and why liberal democracy, given that almost all earlier reform thinkers drew upon *shura* as an important deliberative principle of Islamic government? Granted that theological transformations do indeed lay the ground for a Muslim version of "twin tolerations,"

¹⁹⁸ Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 6-7.

could they also lead to an indigenous version of democracy that would be distinct from liberal ones? He makes a clear effort to contest the unitary notions of secularism and also sympathizes with the Islamists' authenticity concerns in regard to secularism.¹⁹⁹ But the authenticity concern about democracy, which has preoccupied Muslims to a similar extent as with secularism due to the Qutbian paradigm, has not been addressed that much. Hashemi leaves this fundamental part clearly undertheorized.

But does not one also have to question the comparative analyses? He takes the age-old macro-level construct of "civilization" as a unit of analysis. Placing this construct's intrinsic problems to one side, one might argue that his assumption of "civilizational lag" needs a stronger case than the rough analogy we see here. For instance, does this apply to Judaism as well; did it also witness similar puritanical reform movements in the same age as did Christianity and Islam? Did it lead to a liberal democratic outcome? If it did, would it be then a matter within Abrahamic religions or does it also apply to Confucianism, Hinduism, or other Asian religions?

In conclusion, Hashemi makes important advances by underlining the significance of political theological variables in political development, specifically democratic development from a comparative politics perspective. It definitely parallels my general framework by emphasizing the connection between the ontological-theological and the political. However, as regards seeking a truly doctrinal and not just a pragmatic and *de facto* secularism in Muslim societies, especially as a precondition of democracy, his model seems to be less attractive than alternative that might have more authentic political solutions to Islamism from within Islam.

¹⁹⁹ Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, Liberal Democracy*, 41, 130.

7.3 The Liberal *Stimmung* as a Contentious Arena of Islamic Reform

We could associate many more thinkers and scholars with the liberal *Stimmung* writing in the areas of pluralism, democracy, Islamic state, political authority, gender justice, and Qur'anic hermeneutics.²⁰⁰ If we take stock of this collective endeavor, it becomes clear that this movement's participants have collectively deconstructed many traditional and modern constructs, especially on politics and gender, and pushed the *islah* agenda further, rather along the lines of the earlier Rational Salafi *Stimmung*. In this section, I will first present what could be considered the common accomplishments of the *islah* tradition with a particular focus on the Liberal *Stimmung*. This account will reveal that the current efforts to transcend the Qutbian paradigm appear in many different and contentious forms that cannot be restricted to Liberal Islam. I will pay particular attention to Mahmood, Esack, and Dabashi's critiques,²⁰¹ for all of them point to some critical sensibilities, countercurrents, or even a nebulous alternative strand in which some "Progressive Muslims" also participate.²⁰² Although my analysis of this alternative strand will not be comprehensive, its critiques and arguments will parallel my normative commitments in certain ways while I begin to develop a prolegomenon for an alternative proposal for the future of *islah*.

²⁰⁰ For some exemplary collective works, see Safi, ed. *Progressive Muslims*; M. A. Muqtedar Khan, ed. *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe, eds., *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Kurzman's (1998) abovementioned work and John Donohue and John Esposito, *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). These are also among the important anthologies that bring together many selected writings of this trend.

²⁰¹ Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006); Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London: Routledge, 2008); Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam." See also Ebrahim Moosa, "Islamic Reform or Designer Fundamentalism?," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 1 (2006).

²⁰² See, for instance, Shabbir Akhtar, *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (London: Bellew, 1991); Farid Esack, *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 1996); Farid Esack, "Muslims Engaging the Other and the Humanum," *Emory International Law Review* 14 (2000); Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam"; Ebrahim Moosa, "The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2003).

The first notable gain of the *islahi* strand of contemporary Muslim political thought is, in my view, its members' growing proclivity to recognize "the political." Earlier figures, including Qutb and Rahman, generally approached the political sphere as parasitic on the onto-ethical sphere, that is to say, as its projection on the political, thereby confirming Roy's diagnosis of an Islamist paradox. As the preceding section testifies, there has been an increasing awareness of the political sphere's distinctive character, one having its own dynamics and nature, as opposed to a simplistic view that reads the normative/ideal into the real. This is not to say that those thinkers who have recognized "the political," think through the terms of my project, by which I mean through a conception of ontopolitical constellation where the political folds back on the background sources. Yet they understand the current challenge with a more political insight. As El-Affendi most clearly exemplified, the goal is now more about how to realize Islam's ethical goals in the political sphere, which is defined by its own human (secular, in An-Na'im's vocabulary) dynamics, without submitting to a Hobbesian or Schmittean politics. In any case, the current discourse is characterized by a better recognition of the distinct ontology of the political in my terms.

On a related note, one of their major contributions to the current stage of *islah*, as an extension of Rahman's hermeneutic turn, is their strong emphasis on the role of human agency and human mediation in religion and politics. The diasporic Muslims' far more informed engagement with Western social sciences and humanities, as well as their scientific and analytical tools, have been critical to this development. This new generation of scholars has furthered Rahman's pioneering role by working out a Euro-American Islamic academic discourse that is in many ways theoretically more

sophisticated than its counterparts in the Muslim world. Through the new hermeneutic turn, they established a fundamental distinction between religion and the human understanding of religion in order to defy especially the modern literalist approaches that were disempowering the Muslim individual.²⁰³ After laying this groundwork, they began to deconstruct those major concepts that Islamist strong ontologies had enchanted (e.g., *shariah*, the Islamic state, and God's sovereignty) and challenge traditional authoritarian interpretations by deploying fresh new interpretive techniques.²⁰⁴

Yet again, among the most important moves to empower the individual as a responsible, active agent in her relationship with God is to redefine vicegerency (*khilafah*) as a common trait of the whole *islah* movement. I have discussed how, despite all other points of divergence, the importance of individualizing vicegerency unites Qutb with Afghani and current reformist thinkers against the traditional orthodoxy that assigned this role to the caliph.²⁰⁵ This is indeed a tremendous move, for entrusting both the individual Muslim and non-Muslim with the role of developing life, contributing to human progress, and establishing justice elevates them above their historically subservient position vis-à-vis political authority.

²⁰³ I suggested in chapter 5 that Qutb has a mixed record on this point. He carried on the individual empowerment in a number of ways, while joining with some revivalists to make individual Muslims passive receivers of Qur'anic injunctions as opposed to active interpretive agents in certain respects.

²⁰⁴ For a good example that challenges the medieval and modern interpretations perpetuating passive obedience, see Asma Asfaruddin, "Obedience to Political Authority: An Evolutionary Concept," in *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. M. A. Muqtedar Khan (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

²⁰⁵ For instance, Abu Yusuf (d. 798) believed that the source of political authority was God's choice, by which the caliph became a vicegerent of God on Earth. He then inferred that it was the subjects' duty to obey their caliph (imam), because he was like a shepherd of his people. Muhammad Khalid Masud, "The Changing Concepts of Caliphate: Social Construction of Shari'a and the Question of Ethics," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought: Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, eds. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 190.

This new perspective is most significant in the instance of individualizing the interpretation of religion (*ijtihad*). It is now a widely shared gesture, excluding scholars such as Abou El Fadl,²⁰⁶ that represents another form of liberation, namely, a liberation from the ulama's unquestionable authority through *taqlid* (imitation). While a quite empowering gesture in its own right, another important consequence is the Muslim individual's enfranchisement in regard to religious and communal/political affairs. This is largely the result of the reformist scholars' reactivation of *shura* and *ijma*. Even though unresolved issues concerning the scope and content of these deliberative processes still remain, their "democratization" and opening to mass participation, as opposed to retaining their narrow non-binding counsel-seeking character, is a tremendous gain for indigenous democratic thought.

Rida's modern construct of an "Islamic state," which served as an essential institution for most Islamists throughout the twentieth century, has been under serious attack for several decades now, especially by liberal Muslims. Its bad reputation has more to do with the fact that most Islamist political actors adopted it in the form of an ideological state that would impose *shariah* on an unwilling Muslim population through a top-down revolution. Nonetheless, by dislodging the ideal of resuscitating the Sunni caliphate, along with its heavy historical baggage, it is still significant that an Islamic state represents a conceptual break with the past as well as a reform. It therefore provided all Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'i alike, with a united goal and a common forum to work out a new conception of the state.

²⁰⁶ He is especially concerned about the anarchy of the unbridled "Salafabi" quest for religious authority and uncontrolled religio-political action, including religious violence.

Last but not least, the end of the civilizational discourse is a recent gain of the *islah* movement, even though this concept had exerted an empowering and motivational influence for the colonized Muslim educated class. Its pioneers, most prominently Afghani himself, introduced it as a defensive discourse. But except for the vague reference to civilization by Hashemi, reviving Islamic civilization is no longer a grand project, although one can find occasional references to the essentialist binary opposition of Islam and the West.²⁰⁷ During Orientalism's prime, it appeared to be a byproduct of a siege mentality and a defensive rhetorical tool of Islamic apologetics used to prove that they were also civilized. However, "'the West,' as a civilizational category has long since ended ... [and] ... as the iconic referent of the European Enlightenment modernity, has self-destructed in what is now code-named postmodernity."²⁰⁸ Although the current reformists have offered many divergent responses to the Muslims' centuries-long quest for authenticity, which often took an essentialist form, civilizational discourse in general sounds more like an outmoded way of trying to talk with a dead interlocutor.

The particular issue of Islamic authenticity had been formulated most archetypically by Qutb in such a way to disallow any "foreign infiltration" or "patch." There seems to be a wide range of attitudes now that attempts to transcend his paradigm. Nonetheless, the common concern to acknowledge this idea's moral power over Muslims is also discernible. Either for the sake of articulating a more coherent Islamic discourse or to offer a politically more viable formulation of democracy, many current Liberal Muslims seek to "indigenize" "Western" ideas. As the previous section showed, this

²⁰⁷ Thus, Hamid Dabashi harshly critiques Tariq Ramadan and Abdolkarim Soroush because he sees them as still stuck in this binary opposition and as talking to "an interlocutor long since dead." Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology*, 13.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

mostly takes the form of reformulating ontological-theological foundations as well as Islamic legal premises and concepts to justify such political ideas as democracy, secularism, pluralism, constitutionalism, human rights, and equal citizenship. Suggestions to overcome the siege mentality in order to seek moral universals along with Muslims' Western conversation partners were another response, as Abou El Fadl suggested. Alternatively, neutralizing such Western concepts as secularism and then rendering them contestable is also observable among liberal Muslims' discursive strategies.

But at this point we start to run into a contentious field, one that reveals a host of countercurrents or alternative sensibilities to liberal Muslims. To begin with, their ability to make credible arguments for the larger Muslim world is a genuine problem, for they are writing from the metropolitan spaces of colonialism or the current centers of hegemonic relations.²⁰⁹ This is especially the case in their attempts to indigenize liberal democracy and secularism. Many liberal Muslims do not deny these hegemonic relations and often criticize American policies in the Middle East. But they are more interested in overcoming the siege mentality that distracts Muslims from focusing on their internal problems. In most cases, however, their occasional critiques do not translate into an elaborate theory of resistance and liberation that can be an integral part of their theories of democracy.

²⁰⁹ Hashemi touches on the problem of credibility in another context, but one that is still relevant to the same point: "[I]n the aftermath of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, even in previously friendly parts of the Middle East, a U.S. affiliation is now viewed as 'radioactive,' and any ties to the United States 'would damage the credibility of legitimate activists.' They observed: 'on a recent trip to Syria, Bahrain, and Jordan, reformers told us, with great distress, they can no longer even use the words 'democracy' and 'human rights' in their communities, let alone work publicly on U.S.-funded democracy promotion projects.'" Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 142. An-Na'im also refers to this issue in more theoretical terms: "The proponents of change must not only have a credible claim to being insiders in the culture but also use internally valid arguments to persuade the local population. In this way, the presentation and the adoption of alternative perspectives can be achieved through a coherent internal discourse in the culture." An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 25.

One of the most striking challenges against liberal Muslims in this regard is Saba Mahmood's critique of Abou El Fadl's justification of democracy, which is based on his unquestioning idealization of liberal democratic theory.²¹⁰ In another piece, she develops her point into a more comprehensive account of secularism and liberal democracy in this discourse, particularly the relationship between liberalism and empire in the current context. As the United States has embarked upon "an ambitious theological campaign aimed at shaping the sensibilities of ordinary Muslims," she contends, the government has found "an indigenous ally in the form of moderate or liberal Muslims who, in the opinion of State Department planners, are most open to a 'Western vision of civilization, political order, and society.'"²¹¹ As a result, even though they are well aware that the envisaged reform's success depends more on practical politics than on theoretical speculations, their political leverage is severely limited. In other words, the diasporic Liberal Muslims' reform efforts are thwarted by their credibility problem with the rest of the Muslim world. This is especially the case when they speak for not just democracy, but also for liberalism and secularism from within the academic establishments of the United States and western Europe.

But one can also take issue with the ambiguous or undertheorized nature of their conceptions of liberalism and secularism. Khan rightly brings up the point that "when we

²¹⁰ More specifically she says: "I believe that the reason [certain] questions are seldom pursued is the hegemony that liberalism commands as a political ideal for many contemporary Muslim intellectuals, a hegemony that reflects the enormous disparity in power between the Anglo-European countries and what constitutes the Muslim world today. Indeed, the idea that the liberal political system is the best arrangement for all human societies, regardless of their diverse histories and conceptual and material resources, is rarely questioned these days. One would think that the proponents of pluralism and diversity, such as Abou El Fadl, would want to explore some of the contrasting ways in which the questions of difference have been imagined and politically instituted within different nonliberal traditions." Saba Mahmood, "Is Liberalism Islam's Only Answer?," in *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, eds. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2004), 76-77.

²¹¹ She is careful to point out that many of them are indeed critical of American policies in the Middle East. However, "U.S. strategists have struck a common chord with self-identified secular liberal Muslim reformers who have been trying to refashion Islam along the lines of the Protestant Reformation." So, it is rather a "fortuitous coming together of political objectives and an indigenous social formation." Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," 329.

talk of ... democracy it is important to clarify which democracy – liberal, radical, socialist, deliberative?”²¹² Most current attempts to Islamize democracy do not spend as much effort to engage with theories of liberalism, secularism, or democracy as they do to adapt Islam to an undertheorized version of them. Even further, many of these democratic theories restrict themselves to a limited notion of democracy as a “set of ontic institutions” (in my dissertation’s terms), without any inquiry about what it could mean as an ontological category. Even in its limited sense, their version of democracy provides no concrete sense of social justice, freedom, equality, and political participation to constitute an integrated theory, let alone having a theory of hegemony and resistance. Arguably, the appeal of the post-Afghani Islamist theorists has resided in their ability to offer full-fledged ideologies that responded to the Muslim masses’ sense of sociopolitical injustice and their need for recognition and empowerment.²¹³

Given this, can one say that the problem with liberal Islamic democratic theories is the missing dimension of a liberation theory? Do other current examples of reform make up for this gap? Indeed, some contributors to *Progressive Muslims* discuss justice, liberation, and pluralism in a conscious manner in order to develop an Islamic version of liberation theology. Farid Esack (b. 1959), the South African scholar of Islam renowned for his association with Mandela and anti-apartheid activism, and Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951), the Iranian-American professor of Iranian studies at Columbia University, have both authored works with this goal in mind. Esack develops a “progressive critique of liberal Islam” in which he charges it with functioning, in effect, as an “ideology of and

²¹² Khan, “The Politics, Theory, and Philosophy,” 158-59.

²¹³ It might be argued that even the quests for authenticity had something to do with their search for emancipated knowledge, apart from a demand for purity.

for the bourgeois, struggling to secure freedom as an individual and ahistorically.” He finds some of their attitudes akin to the beginnings of a “theology of accommodation,” in which religion is used to buttress the oft-unstated ideological assumptions of the dominant classes and corporate interests. For progressive Muslims, on the other hand, real peace follows the creation of a just world and thus they cannot acquiesce to a new corporate-dominated world.²¹⁴ In fact, he develops his liberation theology through a new Qur’anic hermeneutics that draws on Rahman as well as other Christian and Muslim scholars and theologians of liberation.²¹⁵ Among his objectives is to show that one can remain faithful to the Qur’an and work with non-Muslims to establish a more humane society, and that rethinking and reshaping religion can facilitate a universal struggle for justice and religious pluralism.²¹⁶

Dabashi is a unique figure for my dissertation, because his project is quite in line with my overall concerns. His major goal is to formulate a new mode of Islamic liberation theology that joins with other modes of revolutionary resistance to the predatory empire.²¹⁷ Strikingly, he grounds himself on Vattimo’s “weak thought.” Islamic ideology enters this framework as a mode of liberation theology that “ultimately failed to emancipate itself from the limited imaginary of Islamic law and replicated its nomocentric rigidity.”²¹⁸ The only way for an Islamic liberation theology to partake in the global resistance against any empire is,

to be party to a global conversation, safeguarding its theological monotheism by placing it within a heterogeneous, multifaceted, and syncretic theodicy that instead of trying to

²¹⁴ Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” 85. He then sees 9/11 as the clash of two fundamentalisms, the vicious fundamentalism driven by religious individuals against a market fundamentalism (Ibid., 88).

²¹⁵ Esack, *Qur’an Liberation and Pluralism*.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 13-14.

²¹⁷ Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology*, 10.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

rationalize and thus dismiss the existence of alterity, incongruity, and choice in the world, it in fact embraces its ideological rivals and theological alternatives.²¹⁹

For him, the major novelty of our time is the collapse of binary oppositions along with the demise of civilizational thinking.²²⁰ He credits Afghani as the major figure who started that line of thinking and actually “set the discourse for almost two centuries of incessant re/formulations of an ‘Islamic Ideology,’ in direct and dialectical conversation with European colonial modernity.” He thus provided Muslims with a legitimate liberation theology that was compatible with their contemporary historical predicament.²²¹ Sayyid Qutb, in his turn, reformulated Islam as a moral domain for legitimate defiance against injustice, which would be tantamount to his own version of liberation theology.²²² Paralleling my distinctions, Dabashi separates these historical revolutionary movements from the mode Islamism identified with the events of 9/11.²²³ Basically his liberation theology, reformulated as a liberation theodicy, will be the legitimate successor of those devised by Afghani and Qutb but will not fall into the trap of “an absolutist, puritanical, and totalistic disposition.”²²⁴ It will be designed “to liberate humankind from everything that dehumanizes it.”²²⁵

²¹⁹ Ibid. He rephrases it at another place as “At the end of Islamic Ideology, a new Islamic liberation theodicy awaits its long and languorous history. This promise carries the limits of Islam as a liberation theology to its far more emancipatory domains of a theodicy yet to be articulated, written, and promised, on a location where Islam willingly embraces its shades and shadows of doubt, welcomes its others and alternatives, and helps in the making of a global liberation movement beyond color lines and gender apartheid.” Ibid., 168.

²²⁰ “Civilizational thinking had a very short but crucial role in the course of the colonial encounter of Muslims with European modernity, but that it has now effectively exhausted its uses and abuses in facilitating the operation of the globalized capital.” Ibid., 34.

²²¹ Ibid., 41.

²²² Ibid., 43.

²²³ Ibid., 9.

²²⁴ Ibid. But his real favorite is Ali Shariati, and especially Malcolm X: “Thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Tariq Ramadan have brought the revolutionary projects of Ali Shari’ati and Malcolm X to a false, premature, and forced conclusion by either subjecting them to a scholastic hermeneutics (Soroush), or thinking the locus of the encounter shifted to a vacated neighborhood in “the West” (Ramadan), or above all once again refetishizing (both Soroush and Ramadan) “the West,” a colonial concoction that had been all but surpassed in the works of Ali Shari’ati and which had never been even a factor in the more advanced project of Malcolm X. In thinking through the emerging

We can conclude that the efforts to define the current stage of Muslim reform constitute a contentious field. One perspective seeks to surmount the encumbrance of Islamism and its constructs (an enchanted *shariah*, Islamic state, and God's sovereignty) so as to defend a "liberal democratic" framework, while another one critically embraces that legacy to push it toward more generous understandings of liberation, justice, and pluralism. Against this backdrop of a contentious field, I will now turn to a prolegomenon to my vision of the future of *islah*.

7.4 Prolegomenon to a Proposal on the Future Direction of *Islah*

The year 2011 appeared to be the high point of post-Islamist democratic development. A genuine sense of optimism prevailed when the authoritarian secularist Arab regimes were toppled and the first free elections began to be held in the aftermath of Arab revolutions. "Moderate Islamists" seemed to be promising agents of democratic transition, and a possible consolidation of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa seemed to be just over the horizon.²²⁶ The Turkish "Muslim democrats" won the third consecutive elections following a massive wave of democratic reforms and the effective end of military tutelage over democratic institutions. El-Affendi's formula that "prodemocracy coalitions" would remove the most contentious theological-political issues from the table

terms of a new liberation theodicy, we need to cross over the recent works of thinkers like Soroush and Ramadan and go back to those of Ali Shari'ati and Malcolm X and resume a conversation with their unfinished projects." Ibid., 100.

²²⁵ Ibid., 257. His ultimate vision of liberation theology qua liberation theology is capped in these words: The only liberation movement against the terror of a globalizing empire that will be meaningful and mobilizing will have to be cross-cultural and global precisely in the same way that the empire it must oppose and the capital it must curtail are global. That liberation movement will have to account for the existence and accommodate the inclusion of the non-Islamic and as a result be more than a liberation theology but a liberation theodicy that at once recognizes and celebrates diversity. The only way that the innate paradox at the heart of Islam can be put to work for a permanent good is for Islam no longer to be triumphalist but tolerant, and in that tolerance not just to resist the abuse of power but also the temptation of power." Ibid., 252.

²²⁶ David Rohde, "Trust Tunisia," *Reuters*, October 24, 2011, <http://blogs.reuters.com/david-rohde/2011/10/24/trust-tunisia/> (accessed May 8, 2013).

and bring about democracy seemed to have been proven correct. A quest for “Islamic Reformation,” a concept that wrestled with the question of “whether liberal democracy can be given a truly Islamic basis,” no longer seemed relevant.²²⁷ Looking back from 2013, there seem to be more signals of authoritarian leanings in most Islamist-led Arab countries, as well as in Erdoğan-led Turkey, than indications of democratic consolidation. Has “post-Islamist democracy” perhaps exhausted its own resources for further democratic development and started to move toward an impasse? Or perhaps we really need a more genuine political theological reform.

In an attempt to answer this and related questions, I now propose some modest steps for the future direction of *islah*. The relationship between ideas and politics is a complex one, and one can hardly argue for a linear and one-way determination of political change by instant ideational transformation. Islamic political philosophy, which generally lagged behind other traditional Islamic disciplines, still has a long way to go in its theory of governance and authority before it can respond to contemporary circumstances on the basis of its foundational sources. While it would be a residual effect of Orientalism to assume that an advanced political theory of Islamic government is necessary and sufficient for political development in the Muslim-majority countries, the ideas held by religious constituencies definitely have to be factored into any political scientific analysis due to their ability to explain Muslim political behavior.²²⁸ The following lines are part of my effort to join the debate that would, in its own way, form the background ideational circumstances of political change.

²²⁷ El-Affendi, “The Elusive Reformation.”

²²⁸ Yet again, the Muslims’ political behavior cannot be reduced to the religious doctrines prevalent in their countries. The oft-mentioned “moral vacuum” caused by the unbridgable gap between unsustainable elusive ideals and pragmatically driven politics calls for further political theoretical reflections.

The ontological narrative of the second part of my dissertation and the normative terrain of the post-foundational political ontology I laid out in the first part will constitute the contours of the prolegomenon to my proposal for reform. Perhaps amidst the thorny debates on democracy, a better place to start would be the initial lines of this chapter: “How can a committed, practicing Muslim who wants to ground his ethico-political action on a Qur’anic, theistic foundation carry out his vicegerency for a just world on an equal footing with his fellow dialogue partner who draws on different ontological commitments but is a willing participant in the quest for a just political arrangement?” In my attempt to answer this question, I will focus on my ontological narrative’s major concepts and ideas and probe how they could be reformulated in the normative terrain laid out in the first part of my dissertation.

Vicegerency and the Duty to Justice

For an Islamic political ontology, as well as the views of almost all of the thinkers I have covered, the basic definition of a human being is God’s vicegerent. Individualizing it and then extending it to everyone, regardless of their existential faith, has been espoused even by the more purist Qutb. This mission envisages, in part, material progress on Earth in the sense of taking care of its resources in a way that all creatures, not just humanity, will benefit. While it is already a major enchanting gesture for a Muslim that participating in human development is tantamount to fulfilling one’s divine mission, submitting to God (the dynamic sense of Islam) makes one part of the universal harmony. It thus completes the sense of enchantment in an overbearing manner. While such a quest for harmony would raise a caution flag for Connolly, some countercurrents might also be imagined that might act as a check against the demand for purity as well as against the urge to turn

religion into a “strategy of earthly power.” For most Muslims, faith (*iman*) is taken as a never-ending and never-assured endeavor. One can never be sure of her faith and whether she will be among the saved just because she follows Islam.²²⁹ She must be in constant guard of her relationship with God (*taqwa*). This lack of assurance can serve as an ontological resource to cultivate an ethics of humility and sympathy toward non-Muslims and could create a safeguard against a sense of moral supremacy.²³⁰

Among the vicegerents’ most fundamental missions is to establish a viable social order on Earth that is just and ethically based.²³¹ The reform tradition states that this mission has been assigned to each individual and is therefore an individual responsibility.²³² Every human being, then, is an active ethico-political agent of justice who cannot delegate his duty to the political authorities. Individual responsibility presupposes that God has ingrained an individual sense of justice into every human soul, which can also be understood as “universal guidance.”²³³ For a Muslim who views

²²⁹ This is known as the doctrine of *khawf wa raja’* (the constant state of being in between fear and hope). This idea is well-grounded in some basic texts of Islam. For instance, Ibn Abi Mulaika said: “I encountered thirty Companions of the Prophet; every one of them fears hypocrisy for himself and Al-Hassan Al-Basri used to say about it: No one fears it but a believer and no one feels safe from it but a hypocrite.” (Bukhari). It is also attributed to Omar that he said (from Yahya ibn Abi Kathir): “If it were announced from the heaven: ‘O people! You are all entering Paradise except one,’ I would fear to be he; and if it were announced: ‘O people! You are all entering the Fire except one,’ I would hope to be he.”

²³⁰ As one will never be sure that he has, as a practicing Muslim, secured a place in heaven while the non-practicing Muslim is in a lower moral position. One’s “hidden idolatry” may lead him to an eternity in hell. Therefore, whenever a Muslim scorns a non-Muslim, he can be warned that he cannot be sure that his faith is free of any idolatrous beliefs or manners.

²³¹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, “The Creation of a Just Social Order in Islam,” in *State, Politics and Islam*, ed. Mumtaz Ahmad (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986), 120.

²³² “O David! Behold, We have made thee a vicegerent on earth: judge, then, between men with justice and do not follow vain desire...” (Qur’an 38:26) is a clear example of the duty to justice as the result of vicegerency, although the main interlocutor of the verse is a Prophet.

²³³ I have borrowed this idea from Sachedina’s distinction between universal and moral guidance. According to him, while guidance is a fundamental feature of the Qur’an, God gives guidance not just by the Qur’an (moral guidance), but also by ingraining this sense of justice in the human soul (universal guidance). The former is basically to make up for the weakness of the latter. Thus, “universal guidance treats all human beings as equals and potential believers in God before they come distinguished through more particular guidance as believers, unbelievers, hypocrites, and so on” (Ibid., 124). In sum, for Sachedina “justice is a moral prescription which is the result of a common human nature and is regarded as independent of particular spiritual beliefs, even though all practical guidance regulating interpersonal human relations springs from the same source, namely, from God.” Sachedina, “The Creation of a Just Social Order,” 119.

vicegerency in this way, universal guidance and the duty to work for justice can quite smoothly become the source on the basis of which to foster collective work among people who hold different beliefs and philosophies, just as the oft-cited Qur'anic verse proclaims: "To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah willed, He would have made you one nation; ... so strive as in a race in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ"²³⁴

Qutb's conception of a vanguard (*tali'ah*) may pose a challenge to this understanding in terms of its relationship with vicegerency. Indeed, his envisaged vanguard seems to refer to a select Muslim group that has taken this obligation upon itself as a specific mission to engage in creedal training and ethico-political work. As I pointed out in chapter 5, this conception's major drawback is its disregard of the vanguard's fallibility and the possibility that its members' self-assurance could give rise to a sense of self-righteousness. Indeed, what guarantees that this vanguard is so free from *jahiliyyah* that it can guide others? In this sense, we might need a more robust ethics of engagement with the "other" than Qutb's suggestion to "mix with discretion, give and take with dignity, and speak the truth with love." These virtues, which assume a patronizing mode, may not be enough to create the necessary ethics of engagement with the "other."

²³⁴ Qur'an, 5:48. For Sachedina's work that draws on the former idea as well as this verse to develop a theory of religious pluralism, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Religious Interpretation and Communal Deliberation

The much debated role of human agency and reason in ethics and religion has to be a crucial part of any Islamic political ontology. Reactivating the debate on *husn wa qubh* (good and evil) and its linkage with *ma'ruf wa munkar* (accepted and rejected, or good and evil) was a move of tremendous import for Rahman. The mission of human development and the establishment of justice, both of which are engendered by a universal sense of justice, require us to conceive of the vicegerent as a reasoning agent in a certain manner. The vicegerent is the one who always contemplates what a just God must have ordered as his basic message in the Qur'an and how *shariah* can be interpreted and implemented in one's daily life, as required by Islam's general objectives. In that sense, a vicegerent's duties have to be accompanied by her right to participate in interpreting the religion.

This will certainly alert the traditional scholars and even some contemporary scholars, including Abou El Fadl, who are afraid of extremists who engage in a self-styled dispensation of justice via authoritarian interpretations of religion and their subsequent violent implementation. However, just as *fiqh* is always an already mediated body, any person's practice of religion is always based on his own interpretation of religion based on those elements he has selected from a range of scholarly interpretations. As allowing the jurists to maintain their monopoly over religious interpretation is out of question, one can simply systematize and theorize the interpretation's dialogical and collective character by *ijtihad*, *ijma*, and *shura*. As long as individual believers make a collective deliberative effort to determine what God requires from them in a particular situation, and with due regard for the religious scholars' technical expertise, religious

progress, rather than extremism, should be the more likely result.²³⁵ Some might distrust this collectivity because of their own “vain desires” or ignorance of religious principles. But as long as those involved in this collective undertaking refer to the Qur’an as their main point of reference, one should expect a definite range of interpretations within certain parameters. Moreover, it is unlikely that they will reach *ijma* on something other than monotheism or abolish the Qur’anic injunctions on social justice.

Naturally, such a communal deliberation (*shura*) includes political dynamics and therefore requires a background framework that guarantees certain constitutional rights and liberties, especially freedom of speech. One might capitalize on this to develop a detailed framework of rights, liberties, constitutionalism, and so on, as An-Na’im does. But as this process is still at the ethico-legal level, it should not be identified with “the political” at the level of government or basic institutions.

A Polity for Muslims

As for the sphere of government or basic institutions, many formulations of “Islamic democracy” operate on an assumption of all-Muslim polities, despite the fact that no such polity exists anywhere in the world. Extending *shura* to all spheres of collective life as a principle of self-government might guide Muslims to contribute to democratic theory, even if they do not call it democracy due to their concern for authenticity.²³⁶ But this concern should not stop them from engaging in a theoretical conversation with different

²³⁵ In that sense, the problem is literalism than rather individualizing *ijtihad*. Some Wahhabis will always be part of the deliberative crowd; however, they will also have to subject their interpretation to rational processes of general deliberation and will, and feel the need to resort to rational argumentation to convince the rest of the Muslims. As long as the free and public deliberative processes are present, one does not need to fear the anarchy of interpretations.

²³⁶ One might recall Hofmann’s reference to *Shuracracy*. As long as Muslims and non-Muslims come together in a collective decision making process for a just political arrangement, names should not matter. Mainstream theorists, for example, can simply take such efforts as contributions to democratic theory. Murad Hofmann, “Democracy or *Shuracracy*,” in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. John Esposito and John Donohue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

strands of democratic theory, as long as they do not take a particular one as the only theory of democracy. The key here is separating their communal affairs from the overall political process of the polities in which they live. In other words, at the very least they have to come to terms with the “fact of pluralism.” Pluralism must include not just people of other faiths and philosophies, but also non-practicing Muslims. Numerous traditional and modern experimentations with imposing religious rules on reluctant populations must have made it clear by now that an imposed virtue is an oxymoron and counterproductive.

Moreover, by now Muslims must have recognized that the concept of an “Islamic state,” defined as a state that codifies *shariah* as its official ideology, was an application of the nation-state imaginary to a religion. Even Qutb, as a theoretician of an Islamic state, does not pose a serious problem, unlike the common perceptions, as my analysis has sought to demonstrate. He wrote that an Islamic state could be demanded only after the success of a long-term creedal training and bottom-up process that sought to gain the people’s consent. Accordingly, he would not condone the subsequent self-styled Islamic or theocratic states in Iran, Sudan, or Afghanistan. The problem with this notion of Islamic state (or we would rather call it an “Islam-state”) is that its adoption of the unitary imaginary of the modern secular notion of nation-state inevitably violates “difference.” In this respect, An-Na’im is quite right that if the overriding concern is authenticity, then this imaginary is evidently a “foreign import.”

Nonetheless, as An-Na’im has recognized, if the Islamists’ central concern is truthfully recognized, it can help to work out a more viable political model. The central Islamist axiom is not necessarily state-centered; rather, it is about acknowledging that Islam’s foundational principles inform the political sphere. Given this, we could conclude

that the objective is not a specific model of state, but rather a form of state that would accommodate their wish to practice *shariah* in the political sphere. In this sense, their view reflects their aversion to a schizophrenic world in which their ontological and ethical selves are eternally separated from their political self and in which the normative framework to which they are subjected in the political sphere is totally different from the one in which they conduct their private lives.

However, recognizing “the political” does not require taking it as a “secular” sphere. It is a human sphere, just like the ethical one, and the state is a “human” community, as Weber famously defined it.²³⁷ This simply means that Muslims do not have to reduce the sphere of the state to an either/or proposition between an Islamic and a secular state, which would, in effect, push them to monopolize it. As an alternative, the very same sphere that they share with others can simply be *in accord with* their principles without imposing a specific set of rules on everybody. “Islamic state” would then simply mean, as El-Affendi remarks, “a state for Muslims.” We can define it as a state in which Muslims can practice Islam in the private and public spheres as well as retain their Muslim identity in the political sphere by keeping open the proper channels to carry Muslim values over to politics.

The Question of Authenticity and Dialogical Engagements with the “Other”

Up to now I have sought to remain within a discourse internal to Islam without referring to any specifically “Western” values or concepts to justify my points. I deem the Muslims’ quest for authenticity legitimate, as long as it is properly formulated.

Recognizing this claim will secure the cultural legitimacy and internal coherence that

²³⁷Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” *Anthropological Research on the Contemporary*, <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2013).

liberal Muslims also pursued. The question of the “Islamicity” of borrowed concepts, frameworks, and systems of thought has occupied Muslim thought ever since Islam’s earliest ages. This included the debate on the Islamic authenticity of philosophy itself.²³⁸ The significance of these concerns represent part of the reasons why I have formulated this chapter’s question not as “how” to justify democracy on the basis of Islam’s foundational sources, but as “how” a Muslim can discharge her vicegerency on an equal footing with those who draw upon different ontological commitments in their deliberative quest for a just political arrangement. Such a question develops within an Islamic discourse. Nonetheless, even while affirming an authentic discourse one might still call upon Muslims to engage in theoretical and political conversation with other philosophical traditions and adherents of other “existential faiths,” respectively.

The dialogical engagement I have endeavored to present here is intrinsic to the comparative political theory project itself. In fact, it was implicit even in Qutb’s work, for he continued to affirm the principles of the French Revolution despite his radical quest for Islamic authenticity. His theory of liberation probed how we could be free in our servitude to God. His dialectic of freedom, in which human beings are to be liberated from external and internal hurdles so that they can be in an unconstrained relationship with God, can be taken as an example of Muslims joining the worldwide theoretical conversation on human freedom. In other words, such a dialogical theoretical context facilitates similar involvements of Muslims in other theoretical debates, such as pluralism, difference, and self-government. It also enables them to embrace the anti-paternalism of liberalism without being obliged to subscribe to the whole tradition itself.

²³⁸ One might remember the debate between the *Falasifah* and Al-Ghazali, as well as Ibn Rushd’s final treatise, *Fasl al-Maqal*, where he justifies philosophy within a Qur’anic framework.

This dynamic gesture can also be reinforced by resuscitating certain elements within the Islamic philosophical tradition. For instance, in our agreement with El-Affendi, we can simply draw on the shift made by Ibn Sina when he affirms the “just city” (*al-madinah al-‘adilah*) as the ultimate goal of political science, in contrast to al-Farabi’s “virtuous city” (*al-madinah al-fadilah*).²³⁹

I advocate this dialogical principle here as both a deliberative political principle within a polity and a conversation among different “*traditios*,” as Coles suggested. However, this should not be taken as presuming a consensus-based model of politics.²⁴⁰ Drawing on this dissertation’s normative ground, I take it as a setting in which each conversant, including political liberals, carries his existential faith, foundational narrative, and *mythos* into politics. The challenge, then, is to recognize this in our agonistic engagements with each other. This is an example of where concerns about authenticity are channeled through a proper acknowledgement of the common human sphere, in which we try to make sense of our collective experience of politics in human terms.

Here I am also attempting to open up a legitimate space for non-religious discourses while deliberating on human problems. More specifically, I am developing Khan’s point that undermines the “tyranny of jurists.” As I have engaged here in normative reflections on the Muslims’ political problems not as a jurist but a student of

²³⁹ Miriam Galston, “Realism and Idealism in Avicenna’s Political Philosophy,” *The Review of Politics* 41, no. 4 (1979): 564. Galston’s interpretation here is directly relevant to the debate on an Islamic state imposing virtue, as well as to Roy’s paradox: “The goal of political life so conceived is a less complete actualization of individual potential than is indicated by ‘human excellence’ or ‘true happiness,’ and it must be supplemented by individual efforts in the private sphere. Accordingly, one major consequence of Avicenna’s formulation of political goals in these terms is the emergence in his philosophy of a science of ethics with greater independence and dignity than the ethics of Alfarabi. There are, then, two core changes that distinguish the political philosophy of Avicenna from that of Alfarabi: the virtuous individual replaces the virtuous city as the highest concern of practical philosophy and, concomitantly, the just city (*al-madinah al-‘adilah*) replaces the virtuous city as the ultimate goal of political science. These changes, in turn, lead Avicenna to reexamine the qualifications necessary for political leaders and to reject the Platonic identification of philosophers with kings.”

²⁴⁰ For further elaboration of this point, see Chapter 3, fn7 on page 104 of this dissertation.

political theory, I am reclaiming political philosophy's autonomy from jurisprudence.

This is, indeed, the neglected dimension of most recent discussions on Muslim political theory. As much as Islam is under debate here, it must be recognized that the debate on grasping the "political" is a common human discourse for everyone, regardless of religion.

The Question of God's Sovereignty and Shariah

Should Muslims give up on an Islamic form of politics or, more specifically, on the idea of God's sovereignty through *shariah* on Earth? A resolution to this paradox can be offered even from within the Qutbian paradigm, through his theory of *mulk*. To reiterate an earlier concept, *mulk* means both property and sovereignty in Arabic. Qutb shared the Lockean notion that God held absolute possession of all earthly property and considered human beings as exercising conditional ownership as his trustees. Just as the economic sense of *mulk* (property) posed no particular problem for human ownership, the political sense of *mulk* (sovereignty) must not constrain those citizens who want to exercise their political sovereignty. In other words, both senses of God's *mulk* can be easily reconcilable for those Muslims who consider humanity to be God's trustees.

Moreover, as I have shifted the discourse to the political sphere, we should also recall chapter 2's discussion on the *ineradicable theological* in the political. Among others, I maintained that the messianic dimension was exemplified by Derrida's notion of democracy-to-come. As Hashemi noted, Muslim demands for *shariah* also resulted from their perception that it would solve rampant social problems.²⁴¹ In Islamist collective narratives, *shariah* refers to a lived reality (viz., the Prophet's time, or the "Unique

²⁴¹ Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy*, 164.

Qur'anic Generation" as Qutb terms it) and also a utopian moment where God's sovereignty, and thus perfect justice and happiness, would prevail. Most *shariah*-demanders take *shariah* law, especially its unpopular criminal laws, out of the scope of human rationality in order to re-enchant it to an ultimate degree, as if it were a magic wand that will, once applied, instantaneously solve social problems by God's will.

In order to overcome this predicament, apart from the current hermeneutic strategy of proving the human mediation of *shariah*, we might also recognize the messianic impulse and suggest a cognitive shifting. Since Muslims will never be able to implement a perfect application of *shariah* that will perfectly reflect God's will, they could choose to retain this idea only as a messianic moment, in the form of a *shariah-to-come*. Apart from a minority of zealots, many Muslims already object to reducing *shariah* to a set of criminal punishments and emphasize it as a way of life.²⁴² Therefore, without giving up the ideal of *shariah* as a state of perfect justice under God's *hakimiyyah*, Muslims can still retain its motivational value without chasing the impossible dream.

This shift in their future-oriented vision can be complemented by a parallel shift in their idealization of the past, the "unique Qur'anic generation." Sunni Muslims in particular, by constructing it as a lived utopia in history, not only had to create a unsubstantiated historical imaginary that called for superfluous apologetic literature, but

²⁴² For an interesting exchange of views on state enforcement of *shariah*, see, Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe, "Can the State Enforce Shari'a? A Discussion in Yogyakarta," in *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, eds. Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen, and Christian Moe (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009). A recent development on this issue occurred when Tariq Ramadan launched an international call for a moratorium on corporal punishment, stoning and the death penalty in the Islamic world on March 30, 2005. See Tariq Ramadan, "An International Call for Moratorium on Corporal Punishment, Stoning and the Death Penalty in the Islamic World," <http://www.tariqramadan.com/spip.php?article264&lang=fr> (accessed May 10, 2013). For Ramadan's review of the call and the responses he received, see Tariq Ramadan, "A Call for a Moratorium on Corporal Punishment: The Debate in Review," in *New Directions*, 163-74.

also sometimes got involved in futile revivalist attempts to replicate that historical experience. Noting the objectionable consequences of such revivalist political theologies of mythos, I suggest reconceiving that time period as simply a mythical founding moment, namely, “the political moment.” It will, then, take its part in the foundational narratives as a moment when the Lawgiver gives the law, but not as a moment of lived utopia to be replicated.

Islamism as a Liberation Theology

As I have repeatedly emphasized, along with many of the thinkers I have covered in this dissertation, Islamism is a complex phenomenon of different and sometimes conflicting sensibilities. Bayat objects to any analogies drawn between liberation theology and Islamism, for the latter has broader sociopolitical demands that are not particularly defined by social justice and the liberation of the dispossessed. Rather, Islamism sought to establish an “ideological community” to impose moral laws, which would uplift the poor only by a trickle-down effect.²⁴³ Indeed, this seems to be an accurate characterization of Islamist movements. Most of the Islamist political activism, as Bayat maintains, has signified a discourse on justice voiced by upwardly mobile overachievers whose access to economic and political power was curbed by authoritarian secularist regimes. But this was about the politics of Islamism. In contrast, as my analyses have sought to show, Islamist discourse as articulated in basic Islamist texts had striking parallels with Latin American liberation theologies.

One of the major goals of my ontological narrative has been to point out two distinct moments of Islamism in general, with a particular focus on Qutb. Whenever the

²⁴³ Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic*, 8.

Salafi demand for a return to original Islam (the revivalist goal) tilted toward an “a-rational” and often irrational demand for purity, as in Wahhabi literalism, it carried the potential of leading to violent puritanical outcomes. Alternatively, whenever it remained faithful to its Rational Salafi roots, which retained a space for rational reflection on the “spirit of Islam,” it resembled other emancipatory revolutionary ideologies. As I argued earlier, the more one can reclaim Qutb’s reformist and emancipatory moments, the less subsequent Islamist generations need to see him as an encumbrance in their attempt to develop a contestable and pluralistic vision. A more politically viable path for Islamists who are in search for new directions, I believe, is to take the *islahi* line further and deemphasize those strict revivalist elements. If one has to factor the moral power of ideas into an analytical model of Muslim politics, an internal discourse that reclaims, subverts, and reforms the Qutbian legacy might lead to a more genuine political transformation.

The Exhaustion of Civilizational Discourse and the New Radical Direction

I believe that Dabashi and Esack have taken crucial steps in this direction, as opposed to the less likely solution of indigenizing secularism and liberalism for Muslim societies. So, if we follow Dabashi’s suggestion, it is high time to include the Muslim’s “other” and alterity into his definition of self for a more generous sociopolitical formation now that the civilizational discourse, which represented the high point of the Islamist apologetic discourse, has been deconstructed. Looking back on it now, it seems to have incurred a quite trivial intellectual accomplishment as compared to the political and motivational power it used to mobilize intellectually minded Muslims. As recent social theory has deconstructed the foundationalist and essentialist categories of culture and civilization, no gain can be expected from insisting on the outmoded civilizational thinking.

At this point, in order to address the dissertation's major normative goals in the context of comparative political theory, we can revisit the normative conclusions of the first and second parts to develop a more integrated proposal for the future of reform. The new ontological ground of the genre of post-foundational, weak ontological political theory also provides a space for Muslims in a cross-cultural dialogical context. The question now is less about whether one has faith in God and whether she affirms a text as God's authentic word, and more about how she conceives of the relationship among God, the revealed text, and herself as a Muslim. I am not suggesting a total subscription to weak ontology as the sole ground for a reformed Muslim political ontology, but rather that we take stock of this new genre in order to reconceive this basic God-text-human relationship in a conversational mode. Also, I do not propose to develop an Islamic democracy on weak ontological grounds, but rather to go beyond thorny issues and pursue alternative reformulations that would still respond to the expectations of a democratic order in the Muslim world. In short, I ask "How can Muslims reconceive their fundamental relationship with God, text, and other people and creatures on Earth so that they might prefigure and work for more generous ethico-political formations, those that pursue human liberation and justice as well as give difference and pluralism their due, as a collective effort with others who work for the same goals but within alternative political ontologies?"

My dissertation's overall orientation is a suggestion that Muslim political thought enter into a dialogical engagement with post-foundational political ontology, critical political theology, and radical democracy at this particular point in time. This calls for, first of all, a political ontological conception where one is conscious of the entanglement

of the ontological, ethical, and political spheres. This conception is to be accompanied by a quest for more generous ontopolitical constellations. On the theological side, this orientation calls for conversing with critical political theologies that prioritize human liberation and social justice rather than accommodating power structures. On the other hand, the theological concepts of messianicity, mythos, and theodicy can help Muslims reimagine certain traditional concepts in a fresh political sense.

Finally, I suggest a theoretical conversation between those Muslims who are trying to theorize a free, just, and self governing polity and conceptions of radical democracy. This will be one that is informed by a post-foundational ontology and that pays attention to the ineradicable theological elements in the political. In chapter 3, I clarified how radical democracy has a more robust understanding of “the political” and signified more generous concepts of difference, including the non-Western, in addition to its clearer commitment to social justice. This end product will not give in to the temptation to turn the “different” into an “other” that threatens our demand for purity and harmony. Instead, it could find a place in our ontopolitical imaginary that we celebrate as part of a universe defined by the elusiveness of being and the messianicity of perfect harmony. Then a political theodicy that ascribes evil to a missing interlocutor, i.e. the grand civilizational “other” (the West), or to those irreligious people who in fact do nothing to threaten Muslims’ way of life but to disbelieve in their own way, must be abandoned. Perhaps the urge to create such a political theodicy could be overcome by restricting our conceptions of evil only to those very demands for purity, harmony, and totality in political life. A progressive quest that develops an authentic Muslim discourse

with an orientation toward social justice, anti-imperialism, and anti-authoritarianism, as well as more generous dialogical relations and solidarity with the non-Muslim “other” in the work for justice, might then mark the future direction in our broader desire for free, just, self-governing societies.

Concluding Remarks

If we go back to the initial question once again, I contend that in spite of its remarkable achievements that have moved the *islahi* trend even further along, the discourse of liberal Muslims might have taken some wrong turns. A conception of democracy that necessitates secularism and liberalism, while simultaneously sidelining most of the emancipatory elements found in the earlier version of Islamism, may have difficulty securing a social support base in countries where social inequalities remain rampant and secularism remains anathema. In this final chapter of my dissertation, after giving an account of the democratic theories of four major liberal Muslim figures, I have sought to provide a general evaluation of the liberal *Stimmung* as well as to detect another strand of thought that criticizes the better known liberal discourse. This discourse contains certain emancipatory sensibilities of the earlier Qutbian paradigm while subverting certain other elements that are more strong ontological.

In my own proposals that followed, I attempted to shift attention back to my original question, which did not necessarily try to ground democracy on an Islamic foundations but looked for a specific dialogical setting in which a just political arrangement could be obtained – an arrangement in which a committed, practicing Muslim who wants to ground his ethico-political action on a Qur’anic, theistic foundation can carry out his vicegerency for a just world on an equal footing with his fellow

dialogue partner who draws upon different ontological commitments. As I have pursued this goal, I have rearticulated many of the dominant concepts of *islah* in the normative terrain that I developed in the dissertation's first part. I have tried to present the prolegomenon to a new way of taking up these questions, to carry on these new debates in a different manner rather than providing finished monological speculations on Islamic democracy. Since I have undertaken this task as a student of political theory, my reflections should count as an example of thinking about politics from within Islam without any claim of mastery on the Islamic disciplines of study. I view this as part of discharging my duty of vicegerency in search for a just political arrangement in a double dialogue: one with the Muslim community as part of a *shura* activity, and another with the community of political theory on including Muslim voices for the collective search of self-government or just political arrangements. As such, my attempt has been only one *ijtihad* in this cross-cultural dialogical endeavor.

CONCLUSION

On the night of December 28, 2011, two F16 Fighting Falcons of the Turkish Air Force bombed a convoy crossing the Iraqi-Turkish border and killed thirty-four people. An interesting series of events then occurred. Turkish news agencies did not release the news until many hours after the international news reports had done so. Having acted on some intelligence that the group consisted of armed members of the PKK (the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party), the officials later realized that they had in fact killed unarmed civilians mostly from the nearby village of Ortasu (Kurdish original: Roboski) in the Kurdish township of Uludere. The Encü family lost twenty-eight members, mainly teenagers and a twelve-year-old boy. It later came out that they had served as a government-supported village guard family in its fight against the PKK, and they had been cross-border smugglers for generations with the implicit agreement of the security forces. On that night, their mules were laden with diesel fuel. After the incident, the families had trouble separating the mule and human remains from each other.¹

The incident, known as the Uludere (or Roboski) Massacre, was in many ways a turning point for Prime Minister Erdoğan's popular image. He had enjoyed a credible image with the Kurdish constituency, mostly because of the JDP's democratic reforms that recognized several Kurdish civil rights. In this case, however, Erdoğan neither accepted responsibility nor issued a formal apology, as demanded by the family and the public. Instead, he offered monetary compensation and had the JDP officials and their

¹ "Massacre at Uludere," *The Economist*, June 9, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21556616> (accessed May 12, 2013).

wives visit the victims' families, stating that these would be tantamount to an apology.² Families found the compensation offer humiliating and, likening it to "blood money," have refused to accept it.³ To date, the government has refused to reveal who gave the hit order and carefully arranged for a heavily censured parliamentary investigation report, which held no one responsible, to be issued right after the declaration of a government-PKK peace deal.⁴ While the peace process has helped restore more amiable relations between the Kurds and Erdoğan, the prime minister has still not regained his former level of credibility.

This was also a turning point in another sense. A new generation of Islamist youth, whose families mostly belonged to Erdoğan's constituency, was already disgruntled over the hardships generated by the JDP's neo-liberal development model as well as the rampant corruption and nepotism within its ranks. Banding together under new youth organizations with a particular focus on social justice issues,⁵ they began speaking against the JDP regarding Uludere. Among the several rallies and protest, one event was of particular significance. Mazlum-Der, the Islamist human rights organization, that has an uneasy relationship with Erdoğan, organized a rally demanding

² *Today's Zaman*, "Erdoğan Says Gov't Steps for Uludere Victims 'Amount to Apology,'" May 25, 2012, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-281424-erdogan-says-govt-steps-for-uludere-victims-amount-to-apology.html> (accessed May 12, 2013). It was also a significant signal of Erdoğan's authoritarian turn that Ali Akel, the veteran columnist of the pro-government Islamist newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, was sacked following his vocal request in his column that Erdoğan apologize for the killings.

³ Ahmet Görçüm, "Uludere Mağdurları Tazminatlara Dokunmadı," *Zaman*, December 27, 2012, http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika_uludere-magdurlari-tazminatlara-dokunmadi_2033497.html (accessed 12 May 2013)

⁴ Amberin Zaman, "AKP Report on Uludere Airstrike Condemned as 'Whitewash'," *Al-Monitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/uludere-massacre-kurdish-smugglers-peace.html> (accessed 12 May 2013). She says on the report that "On March 27, a parliamentary commission tasked with investigating the affair approved a draft report of its findings. It was rammed through with AKP member votes. Couched in determinedly vague language, the report claimed that the massacre was unintentional and put it down to "communication flaws" between civilian and military authorities. ...The report avoids naming those who were responsible for the decision. Not a single head has rolled."

⁵ Among the leading new youth movements to which Islamist youth have flocked, sometimes in alliance with their socialist counterparts, are "Labor and Justice Coalition," "Anti-Capitalist Muslims," "Mavera Youth Movement," "Free Initiative Platform," and "Free Declaration Movement."

justice in Uludere. This event, held in collaboration with other groups, took place on August 9, 2012, inside the courtyard of Istanbul's Fatih Mosque. Right before the rally, the police force momentarily disappeared and three men appeared, each dressed differently and carrying a different weapon. One looked like a bodyguard and pulled a gun; the other had the long beard, wore the garment of an ultraconservative religious order, and began waggling a large slicing knife; and the third was carrying a baseball bat. They chanted ultranationalist slogans and shouted at the crowd that they would not let the word "Kurdistan" be pronounced in the mosque's courtyard. This was in itself significant, because this was the very same place where ultranationalists had killed Metin Yüksel, an Islamist youth leader, thirty-three years ago.

The rally leader made repeated announcements to prevent any escalation and submitted to their demands to remove placards with "Kurdistan" on them. The raid ended without any serious injuries, except for three who were slightly hurt by the attackers. The police showed up again only after the attackers were all gone.⁶ Further investigations by Mazlum-Der confirmed that the three men were ex-cons and probably on the payroll of the police department, which uses such people for such operations, reminiscent of Mubarak's *baltagys*. This was a first because, under the JDP government, rallies have been directed mostly against the military or the "deep-state" (except those in the Kurdish provinces), and have almost never faced any serious police intervention. Since then the new Islamist youth have been becoming increasingly opposed to the JDP government, which has often faced charges of serious police brutality.

⁶ *Milliyet*, "Uludere İftarında Gerginlik," August 11, 2012, <http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/uludere-iftarinda-gerginlik/gundem/gundemdetay/11.08.2012/1579370/default.htm> (accessed May 14, 2013).

Why are the Turkish “post-Islamists” beating up their kids? Why are the kids so disgruntled anyway, especially since Erdoğan’s successful silent revolution toppled the military from its *de facto* power and significantly increased their own life opportunities? Why are they making such a big issue out of the conditions facing subcontract workers, refugees, homeless people, abused women, and street kids? Are there any parallels with the new generation of Egyptian youth, whose generational tensions with the MB old guard are now surfacing? Is there a new ideological formation, one that cannot be reduced to the relatively worn out dichotomy of Islamism vs. post-Islamism?

It is hard to keep up with the Middle East and Islamist politics these days. Politics is constantly challenging theoretical models and terms, and it is not always easy to tell which forces are on the side of democratic development. Islamists in power have not confirmed the secularists’ forebodings and paranoia of fundamentalism that secured decades of Western support for authoritarian rule. Yet neither have they shown any indication that their conception of democracy went much beyond seeking a popular mandate for their desired set of mostly conservative policies. Theories have mostly failed us at this juncture. Empirical theories have rarely predicted significant events or explained the region’s dynamics with any degree of accuracy. Normative theories, on the other hand, are quite uncertain with respect to their moral power to shape minds in the short or long run. Many would simply take them as giving moral leverage to the political positions of the materially driven sociopolitical actors who are pushing certain policy agendas.

This dissertation has analyzed a specific set of ideas and their complex relationship with the reality found in the broad geographical space in which most Muslims live. I did not really speculate on what exactly was the influence of the reformist ideas of the *islahi* line of thought on the way these lands' material reality has changed. Despite my belief that they have made certain material realities possible for certain people, I did not theorize how they had done so. Instead, I wanted to reveal how this intellectual tradition had evolved within itself and in constant interaction with Western ideas and the surrounding material reality. I took a certain idea, namely, democracy, and sought to develop a narrative of transformation. But, as many similar comparative theoretical works would concur, my theoretical journey across cultural borders, *theoria*, has only revealed a complex pattern of interaction among comparable ideas of self-government.

Ever since *shura* was offered as an equivalent to democracy in the mid-nineteenth century, Muslim thinkers have been debating whether and how these terms were related to each other. Either way, they had to make a fundamental decision about on what sources with their own political culture to draw upon in order to engage this novel concept of democracy. Among the elements of their political culture was a religion that posited a certain notion of deity, demanded adherence to a revealed text (the Qur'an), and held that a certain historical person's life (Muhammad) exemplified the behavioral norms for a model life.⁷ Therefore, how one related to these basic sources was of fundamental significance for one's concomitant political attitudes. If one takes these sources into

⁷ This is not to say that I assume Islam informs a Muslim's worldview and ideas in the most direct and determinate manner. My point is just about the inevitability of taking a position (affirmative, negative, a combination of different positions, or total indifference) toward these existents available in one's cultural repertoire, along with other cultural elements.

account, one gains a more interesting story about the trajectory of democracy as well as about Muslim political thought itself.

Chapter 1 explored some strains of contemporary thought how one's political affirmations are related to his bedrock commitments. The emerging genre of political ontology has affirmed the pertinence of ontology to our political reflections and seeks to render it in a more systematic fashion. Of particular importance for my project in this regard has been the formulations of political ontology outlined by White and Marchart, both of whom have helped me reimagine how one's thought can be grasped as an ontopolitical constellation. Here, ontological commitments would unavoidably prefigure one's ethical sensibilities and political affirmations, which would then fall back onto the ontological sources to renegotiate them.

It was also important to grasp the political level with its distinct ontology, and not just as a simple reflection of other spheres. Political ontology's recent formulations did not just show me a new way of looking at structures of thought, but also helped me conceive of a new normative terrain on which to think through these spheres together. Accordingly, a certain inclination towards what White called "weak ontology" would predispose one not to posit a direct and determinative relationship from the ontological to the ethicopolitical sphere, but rather to articulate more contestable ethicopolitical formations. Likewise, Marchart's post-foundationalism did not advise abandoning the well-worn idea of foundations altogether, but suggested new ways to look at it as an "absent ground." This could work against the potential of violence that is often observed between the idea of a stable ground and various intolerant or maximalist political positions.

In an Islamic context, where the issues of affirming God, a revealed text, and the Prophet are uppermost, ontological reflections inevitably took the shape of a theology. Chapter 2 therefore looked at how recent political theory has already turned its attention to dealing with how theological concepts have enjoyed an after-life in political theory. Affirming this view, I focused on three theological concepts: mythos, messianicity, and theodicy. These concepts not only reveal how “the theological” continues to play a role in even the most secularized minds, but also imply that a proper acknowledgement of them would enable one to address them properly and perhaps formulate them in more ethically generous ways. The other component of my account was the intellectual tradition of political theology. I took this strand of thought as a form of political ontology informed by the overarching ontological figure of God. Most noteworthy here were critical political theologies, in particular Liberation Theology. This trend sought to offer a more emancipatory political theological vision, one in which salvation was essentially linked to worldly liberation in the guise of active work for social justice and against imperialism. In my comparative endeavor, I found this theology to be particularly relevant to my discussion of certain moments of Islamism.

As my specific concern was the trajectory of Muslim responses to democracy, I deemed it essential to cover some of its current conceptions in chapter three. This was of crucial significance, since I had situated myself on a certain normative ground of political ontology and critical political theology and thus had to inquire whether this made certain conceptions of democracy more amenable to my previous commitments. I sought to disentangle the current composite of liberal-capitalist-democracy by presenting some recent radical democratic challenges to it. In the end, I maintained that radical democracy

offers a more robust notion of difference and is a more congenial interlocutor for post-foundational political ontology, as well as for non-Western theoretical conversations with the democratic tradition.

These gestures laid the ground for my move toward contemporary Muslim political thought: to present an ontological narrative that analyzed the transformations of the shifting political attitudes toward democracy through the ontopolitical constellations that I reconstructed for each thinker. I focused on the reformist strand of thought (*islah*), for it stood out by actively addressing self-government and, over the last two centuries, has had the most significant influence on the Muslim political scene. Accordingly, I started off with Afghani's reform project and analyzed how he developed an integrated theological and political reform program by drawing on eighteenth-century revivalism and the nineteenth-century Arab renaissance (the *Nahda*). He defended *shura*, which in practice at that time meant the struggle for constitutionalism as a solution for ending the Muslims' decline and putting them back on the civilizational track. Among his most significant accomplishments was his theory of human progress and civilization based on faith. I presented him as comparable to certain Enlightenment *philosophes*. The intellectual, theological, moral, and most, importantly, political dimensions of his reform project were motivated by his fundamental commitment to human perfection on the path of civilizational progress.

Afghani's reform project was carried on by his protégés in several countries, where they pushed a vibrant reform agenda for a more disenchanted understanding of Islam along with a demand for consultative and deliberative government. This legacy, however, had become far more variegated by the time Qutb, the focus of chapter five. For

some, the over-rationalized understanding of religion had turned into a conception by which Islam justified everything the modern world offered. Amidst multiple ideologies and through his ultimately bitter experience with Nasser's regime, Qutb undertook a major ontological clearance operation to erect, in essence, a strong ontology par excellence through his purificationist concept of *jahiliyyah* as well as an authentic and all-comprehensive worldview under God's *hakimiyyah*.

While noting the perilous potentials of this strong ontological edifice, I found Qutb's search for a formula to make each human being free in his servitude to God to be particularly significant. From this basic quest, he developed an Islamic political theology of liberation that has strong parallels to versions of Christian liberation theology. His rejection of democracy, on the other hand, can best be grasped at the ontological level. Otherwise he was committed to the principle of *shura*, which he understood as all Muslims being allowed to participate in their search for God's will à la Rousseau's "general will." I concluded that the more the subsequent generations could reclaim his thought's emancipatory elements and deemphasize its strict revivalist and anti-hermeneutic ones, the better the chance for the *islah* movement, particularly the Islamists, to move the reform in a more viable direction.

Thereafter, I concentrated on a new locus of Islamic reform, the diasporic Muslim discourse, which has become more relevant to mainstream political theory. In chapter 6, I analyzed Fazlur Rahman, one of the pioneers of the crucial shift to a liberal mood in contemporary Muslim political thought. While keeping on the Qutbian path of developing an all-Islamic *weltanschauung*, he shifted the focus from ontology to ethics. Moreover, he accomplished the hermeneutic turn within the *islah* tradition by means of

his historical approach. Although his thought sparked major controversies in certain parts of the Muslim world, he nevertheless provided some key features of the upcoming liberal *Stimmung*: the human mediation of *shariah* and the active use of reason through *ijtihad*, a reorientation toward Islam's *maqasid* (objectives), an emphasis on a just God and our rational ability to know the good (in contrast to the Ash'ari ethical doctrine), and an Islamic democracy in which all can participate in communal deliberation (*shura*) to reach a certain consensus (*ijma*).

I concluded my ontological narrative by surveying the reform movement's current stage, which is characterized by attempts from within Islam to justify democracy, pluralism, and sometimes even liberalism and secularism. While in many ways these took the form of carrying on Rahman's reform agenda, I sought to identify the different sensibilities present in current reformist writing. The thinkers I covered, namely, El-Affendi, Abou El Fadl, An-Na'im, and Hashemi, represented a clearly more liberal democratic stance with a particular focus on the political level. This contrasted with a more critical discourse that showed greater sensibility as regards hegemonic relations, market fundamentalism, and social injustice. The latter strand took issue with Liberal Islam's inadequate engagement with these concerns. Among them, I have found Dabashi's thought of particular relevance because he took a conscious stance to further the reform by drawing on Afghani and Qutb at the time when Islamic ideology and civilizational thinking are dissolving. More significantly, he takes further steps to reclaim the liberation theology intrinsic in Islamic ideology and to formulate an Islamic liberation theodicy.

This is the point I reached in my attempt to revisit my project's central normative questions. Against the backdrop of the new ontological and theological turns in political theory, as well as the more vibrant conceptions of democracy, pluralism, and difference within certain ontological imaginaries of radical democracy, I now have something to say for myself.

In essence, I have affirmed most of the *islah* tradition's major moves. For a Muslim, conceiving of each and every human being as God's vicegerent has an immense emancipatory potential that can also help cultivate a far more generous ethical relationship with one's fellow human beings and with the rest of the creation. I have tried to emphasize how taking the "caliphate" away from the Sunni rulers and extending it to all human beings was tantamount to the emergence of a far more engaged Muslim. This implied a human being who has taken charge of her religion through active reasoning (*ijtihad*) and deliberative (*shura*) processes, yet who is aware of her fallibility while working for human development and justice side by side with her fellow human beings. Placing this concept of the human being at the center, I have touched on such major concepts and issues of current Muslim political thought as *shariah*, an Islamic state, God's sovereignty, authenticity, civilization, and, last but not least, emancipation. In all of these instances I have offered various ways of thinking about these concepts, ideas for further deliberation instead of finished products to be applied.

All in all, my major contention is that the ongoing political reform in Muslim societies will be more viable if new ontopolitical constellations in Muslim political thought can be freely debated and made appealing to Muslim scholars and non-scholars alike. Rather than insisting upon a total break with the terms of the Qutbian paradigm and

evading the Islamists' major concerns, acknowledging some of them and engaging with them through an immanent criticism might result in more viable political options than just inviting them to buy into Islamic liberalism. Of course, major sociopolitical transformations might cause different outcomes. Perhaps Hashemi is right. Maybe ex-Islamists or post-Islamists will be genuine agents of modernization, especially if and when a certain level of economic development creates a Muslim bourgeoisie and a new religious consumer public whose paramount political option is liberal democracy. Or maybe El-Affendi's prediction that pro-democracy coalitions will eventually create democrats and a liberal democratic consolidation will come true.

I am not dismissing such possibilities, but rather asserting that some ontopolitical constellations may be more effective for a certain vision of self-government, one that has a more robust notion of liberation and difference, to take root in Muslim societies. This would be also a far deeper democracy from the viewpoint of radical democrats. It would be one that would possess a strong emphasis on social justice and egalitarianism, take a clear stand against hegemonic structures, and feature a specific deliberative setting in which people from different ontological commitments could come together in full awareness of their differing foundational narratives and *mythoi* without the pretension of creating a neutral and secular public sphere. In this setting, conversation partners would not be driven by a desire for total harmony, meaning that politics would be absorbed by the ethical sphere. The Muslims' *ijma*, for instance, would not be expected to gain all of the citizens' approval, and they would not be fixated on realizing this "goal" even among Muslims. In either case, no constituencies would be seen as immoral or unreasonable.

Getting back to the recent developments in Turkey, which is known less for its intellectual dynamism and far more for its political dynamism, we may be observing a different version of Islamist praxis in progress, one that might have parallels among the youth of Egypt or some other countries. One might consider these small groups as overrated when compared to the massive multi-billion dollar transnational religious communities or post-Islamist parties that directly affect the politics of many Muslim countries. However, at least in Turkey, those small-scale ideological groupings that are quite social justice oriented, more egalitarian, more participatory, less hierarchical, and more open to women's equal participation have no precedents. They might be reflecting an emergent mood that could have an ever-increasing influence on Islamism's ideological transformation in the years to come. Perhaps they will prepare the conditions in which the future of *islah* will take shape more along the lines of an Islamic liberation theology, a direction that I consider crucial for a more robust democratic development.

I embarked on this cross-cultural theoretical journey, *theoria*, in an attempt to give an account of the changing attitudes among Muslim thinkers toward democracy over the last century. By the end, however, my reflections have turned toward a normative quest to probe the ontopolitical means for Muslims to join the global conversation on how to achieve free, just, and self-governing political communities while recognizing God's sovereignty over all of creation and abiding by the *shariah*. Once they explore their own immense ontological resources for this ethical mode of being in the world as God's vicegerents, I believe that we should begin to be more hopeful about the possibility for a better world.

SELECTED GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

Al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar: Commanding the rights and forbidding the wrong

Al-daruriyat al-khamsah: The five necessities that religion seeks to protect, i.e. life, religion, progeny, property, and reason. See, maqasid al-shariah

Al-hukumah al-muqayyadah: The constitutional government

Al-hukumah al-mutanattisah: The enlightened government

Al-hukumah al-qasiyah: The cruel government

Al-hukumah al-rahimah: The compassionate government

Al-hukumah al-shuriyyah: The consultative government

Al-hukumah al-zalimah: The oppressive government

Alim: Scholar

Al-madinah al-'adilah: The just city

Al-madinah al-fadilah: The virtuous city

Al-wahdah al-kubra: The great unity, i. e. the harmonious existence of the universe under one God

Amr: Command

Aqidah: Creed

Aql: Reason

Ayah: Verse of the Qur'an. In a broader sense a sign that points to God

Batiniyyah: Esotericists

Bid'ah: Inauthentic religious accretions

Din tashri'i: Legislative religion

Falasifah: Philosophers, the group of philosophers that made up the early philosophical school in Islam

Falsafa: Philosophy

Fiqh: Jurisprudence; literally deep understanding, full comprehension

Hadith: Prophetic traditions, sayings of the prophet

Hakimiyyah: Sovereignty

Haya: Modesty, humbleness

Hukumah Shar'iyah: Islamic government or shariah government

Hurriyyah: Freedom, liberty

Husn wa qubh: Good and evil; or right and wrong. See also ma'ruf wa munkar

'Ibadah: Worship, but more generally voluntary service to God

Ihya': Revival

Ijma: Consensus

Ijtihad: Independent religious reasoning or juridical reasoning

Iman: Faith

Inhitat: Decline, stagnation; generally used with reference to Muslims' stagnation

Ird: Human dignity

Irja': Leaving the matter to God's judgment

Islah: Reform

Islahi: Reformist

Istibdad: Despotism

Istishara: Seeking counsel [e.g. from one's advisers]

Jabriyyah: Fatalism

Jahili: Pre-Islamic, ignorant, barbaric

Jahiliyyah: Pre-Islamic age, or the state of ignorance or barbarity

Kalam: Theology

Kanz: Hoarding of wealth without reinvestment

Khalifah: Vicegerent

Khawf wa raja': The constant state of being in between fear and hope

Khilafah: Vicegerency

Madaniyyah: Civilization. Also, hadharah, umran

Ma'ruf: Accepted; that which sound human nature accepts as good

Manhaj/nahj: Mode, method, program

Mantiq: Logic

Maqasid al-shariah: The shariah's general goals as opposed to specific rulings

Masalih mursalah/maslahah: Public interest

Millah/ummah: Nation or religious community

Mulk/Milk: Property or political power

Munkar: Rejected; that which sound human nature rejects as evil

Nahdah: Rebirth or renaissance, more specifically the post-1850 Arab intellectual movement that sought to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization while simultaneously reviving classical Arab culture

Nass: Text [of the Qur'an]

Neicheri: Naturalist (orig. Farsi)

Nizam Shar'i: Islamic system

Nizam: System

Qawmiyyah: Nationalism

Qiyas: Analogy

Sadd al-Dhara'i: Blocking the means [to evil]

Salafiyyah: The path of predecessors, i.e. early Muslims

Sayyid: Descendant of the Prophet

Sha'n al-nuzul: Occasions of revelation

Shahid: Martyr

Shariah: God's path; God's moral code

Shirk: Idolatry, the opposite of tawhid

Shura: Deliberative consultation, collective deliberation

Sunnah: Tradition, Exemplary conduct [of the Prophet], or Living Tradition

Sunnatullah: Laws of nature and society that are interpreted as laws of God

Taassub/asabiyyah: Group solidarity, communal feeling

Tafsir: Qur'anic exegesis

Tahriri: Emancipatory

Tajdid: Renewal

Tali'ah: Vanguard

Taqlid: Blind imitation of religious scholars by lay Muslims

Taqwa: God-consciousness; the fear of responsibility in the utmost sense of righteousness; guarding against moral peril

Tawhid: God's absolute unity, opposite of shirk

Thawrah tahririyyah: Emancipatory revolution

Ubudiyyah: The constant state of being God's worshipper

Ulama: The class of scholars

Umran: The classical term introduced by Ibn Khaldun in the rough sense of civilization

Wahy: Revelation

Watan: Fatherland

Wataniyyah: Patriotism

Wilayat al faqih al-mutlaqa: Absolute mandate of the jurist

Zakat: Poor-tax/relief

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