10 Islamic Religious Epistemology

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Introduction

This chapter aims to lay out a map of the diverse epistemological perspectives within the Islamic theological tradition, in the conceptual framework of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. In order achieve that goal, it aims to consider epistemological views in light of their historic context, while at the same time seeking to "translate" those broadly medieval perspectives into contemporary philosophical language. In doing so, the chapter offers a succinct overview of the main epistemic trends within the Islamic theological tradition concerning religious epistemology. The chapter is divided into two main sections designated for discussions of differing accounts found in distinct trends of the tradition, namely the Rationalist and Traditionalist trends. The discussion concerning the Rationalist trend focuses on the philosophical-theologians of the dominant Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, and Maturidite schools. The section on Islamic Traditionalism focuses on the Atharite scripturalism of Ibn Qudāma, and in particular the thought of Ibn Taymiyya. In order to map out these historic positions in light of contemporary religious epistemology, reference is made to a threefold typology of current views in the literature: (1) theistic evidentialism, (2) reformed epistemology, and (3) fideism.[1] As such, the remainder of the chapter will attempt to outline the different approaches toward religious epistemology in the Islamic theological tradition with this threefold typology in mind.

10.1 Islamic Rationalism

In outlining the Rationalist epistemic position, we do not mean to suggest that other positions within the tradition (i.e., Traditionalism) are *irrationalist* per se.

[1] Roughly, by theistic evidentialism we mean that the positive epistemic status of a given theistic belief depends on the evidence supporting the belief. We use evidence here to include nonpropositional kinds as well as propositional. Reformed epistemology is simply the thesis that theistic belief can have positive epistemic status independent from argumentation. Under the banner of fideism there are a spectrum of views, but we are thinking of it here mainly in terms of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief depending on some factor which is in some sense beyond reason, such as a spiritual disposition, or trust in God. Cf. Dougherty and Tweedt (2015).

Rather, we are aiming to pick out that segment within the tradition that laid the greatest emphasis on reason (*'aql*) in religious epistemology. In particular, we mean those aspects of the tradition which made the truth of Islamic belief accessible through and in some sense dependent on rational argumentation (*jadal*) and inference (*istidlāl*). Hence, in the epistemological sense, by Islamic Rationalism we are dealing broadly with forms of theistic evidentialism. In explicit terms, the Islamic Rationalist tradition here refers to the theo-philosophical schools of *'Ilm al-Kalām*. Practitioners of *kalām* were known as the *mutakallimūn* and most famously belonged to one of the following theological schools: Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, and Maturidite. The latter two denote the major Sunni schools of *kalām*, but it was at the pens of the Mu'tazilite theologians that the discipline of *kalām* initially began to flourish.

10.1.1 Epistemological Background

While each school of *kalām* takes on its own unique theological positioning, there is a common terminology drawn upon and a basic consensus with respect to fundamental concepts within their respective religious epistemologies (Mihirig 2022a: 13). First, each of the schools agreed that all forms of extreme skepticism are false. Indeed, many of the traditional books of *kalām* offer a refutation of skeptical and sophistical modes of thought (cf. Mihirig 2022a). Second, they divided the concept of knowledge into two rather broad kinds: eternal (*qadīm*) and temporal (*ḥādith*). Eternal knowledge is unique to God. He has eternal, unchanging knowledge (cf. al-Juwaynī 1950: 15–16). God does not need tools to gain knowledge; in fact, He does not *gain* knowledge as such. His knowledge is transcendental, timeless, and hence quite different to human knowledge. On the other hand, temporal knowledge is knowledge that has a beginning in time. It is shared by all the creatures God has created who have been given the ability to know. Human knowledge of religious, natural, as well as ethical matters is thought to belong to this category of knowledge, and since such matters have beginnings in time, knowledge of them must be acquired via some epistemic tools (cf. al-Juwaynī 1950: 16).

The schools of *kalām* limit their epistemological discussions primarily to temporal knowledge, and further divide it into noninferential (*ḍarūrī*) and inferential knowledge (*iktisābī; naẓarī*) (Ibrahim 2013: 102). Noninferential knowledge is available to any healthy person without any need for inference or argument, and it is also considered to be epistemically certain or indubitable (Abrahamov 1993: 21). This type of knowledge is typically divided into two main subcategories: sense perceptual knowledge (*al-ma'rifa al-ḥissiyya*) and rational knowledge (*al-ma'rifa al-'aqliyya*) (cf. Abrahamov 1993; al-Bāqillānī 2000: 14–15; al-Baghdādī 2002: 18; al-Ṣābūnī 2020: 36–38). Sense perceptual knowledge refers to one's direct sensual awareness of outward external objects

(*al-ḥiss al-ẓāhir*), such as humans, plants, and animals, but also to internal states (*al-ḥiss al-bāṭin*), such as hunger, happiness, or pain. Rational knowledge – at least of the noninferential kind – on the other hand, is knowledge whose denial leads to either contradiction or absurdity. Examples include the impossibility of some object occupying two places at the same time, a part always being smaller than a whole, or other basic self-evident principles of logic (*al-badīhīyyāt*). Such knowledge is seen as the starting point of a proper noetic structure, and hence a foundationalist epistemology is broadly accepted within *kalām*. By contrast, knowledge which is *inferential* in nature is knowledge that humans acquire through reasoning. This kind of knowledge need not be gleaned from strict deduction, however, for the *mutakallimūn* did draw on inductive as well as analogical modes of inference that they deemed to be appropriate sources of knowledge (cf. Mihirig 2022b). In contrast to noninferential knowledge, inferential knowledge ranges from epistemically certain (*yaqīnī*) to probable (*ẓannī*), (al-Nasafī 2001: 1:27).

The *mutakallimūn* also agree that there are three valid sources of knowledge: reason (*'aql*), sense perception (*ḥiss*), and testimony (*khabar*) (cf. Abrahamov 1993; al-Nasafī 2001: 1:27). Reason is considered to be our ability to understand both impossible, possible, and necessary propositions and enables us to infer conclusions about the unseen (*ghayb*) when drawing on data from the five senses. They insist that one has to accept reason as a valid source of knowledge, since in order to deny it, one has to use reason to argue against its validity (cf. al-Māturīdī 2020: 29). The Qur'ān is also cited in support, as it very frequently invites both believers and nonbelievers to use reason and base their claims to knowledge on reason (cf. Qur'ān 2:44, 3:91, 6:65).

The second source of knowledge is sense perception (cf. al-Juwaynī 1950: 173; 'Abd al-Jabbār 1965a: 12:59; al-Māturīdī 2020: 46). The different schools of *kalām* are broadly empiricist of sorts, for they considered most of our knowledge to come directly from the senses, or via reason gleaned from our sense experience. The *mutakallimūn* do acknowledge that our senses can sometimes mislead us, but that nevertheless all of our knowledge about the physical world initially comes via our five senses, and hence sense perception is considered to be an indispensable source of knowledge.

The third source of knowledge is testimony (cf. 'Abd al-Jabbār 1965a: 15: 317; al-Baghdādī 2002: 25; al-Māturīdī 2020: 27–28). Testimonial knowledge refers to the knowledge that we gain from other people. Our knowledge of the events in the places and times in which we are not present, for instance, is gained via testimony. In general, testimony is considered to be less epistemically reliable relative to reason and sense experience because people can be more easily deceived in this case. Testimony is taken to be an essential source of religious knowledge, however, for we do not receive knowledge of divine revelation directly; rather, we gain it through testimony. Similarly, the life and

deeds of Prophet Muḥammad (*al-Sunna*),[2] which hold great religious significance, also come from testimonial reports. There are two types of testimonies: multiple or mass-testimonial reports (*khabar mutawātir*) and singular testimonial reports (*khabar āḥad*) (cf. Abrahamov 1993; al-Māturīdī 2020: 28). Multiple or mass testimony is given by narrators so numerous that it is highly unlikely that the report is false. Hence, such testimony is taken as a very reliable source of knowledge (*qaṭi'ī*). Usually, it is expected that the report comes from at least three independent witnesses. Witnesses should also be known to be honest or trusted by society. Moreover, the content of the testimonial report should not be in conflict with well-known facts and self-evident dictates of reason. The Qur'ān and parts of the *Sunna* are considered by the *mutakallimūn* to belong to this category of testimony.

10.1.2 Religious Epistemology

A central issue discussed by the *mutakallimūn* concerns the relationship between knowledge and religious belief or faith (*īmān*). In the Qur'ān, God asks Muslims to have faith and declare their belief in Him (cf. Qur'ān 29:46, 4:171), and so it is taken as a matter of upmost importance to understand what it means to have faith in God. The schools within *kalām* typically insisted that faith is achieved through a certain methodical fashion. Crucial to this methodical process is the way in which religious belief *ought* to be formed. Roughly, the *mutkallimūn* considered there to be two primary ways that one can form a religious belief: on the basis of independent investigation or by accepting the beliefs of some person or society. This second kind of belief formation is known as belief by imitation (*taqlīd*) (al-Nasafī 2001: 1:39–40). *Taqlīd* refers to blind imitation or following (Mustafa 2013: 6). A person who believes by imitation is known as a *muqallid*. *Taqlīd* has been understood as involving two things: belief without evidence and accepting someone as an authority on religious matters besides God. This is typically taken to be epistemically *and* morally unacceptable in the formation of religious belief. If one does not base his beliefs on evidence and investigation, then the thought is that he will get to the truth simply by a matter of luck. As such, none of the schools of *kalām* hold that belief by *taqlīd* is desirable, and they encourage believers to form their religious beliefs based upon evidence (*dalīl*). Nonetheless, the schools of *kalām* did develop some interesting nuance on this issue.

The majority of Mu'tazilite thinkers insisted that religious belief grounded in *taqlīd* cannot be sufficiently appraised to be considered knowledge. One of the foremost representatives of Mu'tazilite theology was Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE). According to 'Abd al-Jabbār, the first duty of the religious

[2] Upon whom be God's peace and blessings.

believer is "discursive reasoning (*al-naẓar*) which leads to knowledge of God, because He is not known necessarily (*ḍarūratan*) nor by the senses (*bi'l-mushāhada*). Thus, He must be known by reflection and speculation" (1965b: 39). Moreover, if we were to blindly follow some person, group or society as a means to belief in any given religion, then getting the right belief will be matter of luck because "it is impossible that all these [differing] systems of thought should be right – for each contradicts the other." ('Abd al-Jabbār 1988: 201). But then, if someone sees this to be the case, one must also recognize that if one adopts the method of *taqlīd*, then it will just be a matter of epistemic luck if one arrives at the true religion, and knowledge precludes such epistemic luck (cf. Adamson 2022: 7–8). Therefore, one could not be said to *know* one's religion to be true in this case. Hence, 'Abd al-Jabbār asks, "Why is the *taqlīd* of the believer in God's oneness any better than the *taqlīd* of the unbeliever?" (1988, 199). At an epistemic level, he concludes that neither is more justified than the other.

The Maturidite position, in contrast, is somewhat more nuanced. In his famous work *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, the eponym of the Maturidite theological school Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE) opened the first chapter of his magnum opus with a thorough rejection of *taqlīd* in matters of faith:

> We find that all people, with all their different religious opinions and sects, agree on one statement, namely, that whatever one holds to be true, is valid, and, as a result, that whatever others than him hold, is invalid . . .. Therefore, it is taken for granted that *taqlīd* excuses its embracer from holding the opposite view on the same question. This, however, only accounts for the multiplicity of number. The only way out of this is if one of them has his ultimate argument based on intellect (*'aql*) by way of which his truth can be known and if he has proof by way of which he can persuade fair-minded people to accept his truth. (Quoted in Cerić 1995: 67–68)

The first thing to note about this passage is that al-Māturīdī embraces the position that Muslims have a "duty to reason in matters of faith" (*wujūb al-naẓar*), and he posits the intellect as the source of religious knowledge. Second, al-Māturīdī cites the problem of "religious disagreement" as being at the heart of the necessity to arrive at knowledge of God by use of the intellect. Thus, as J. Meric Pessagno explains in commenting on the above passage, according to al-Māturīdī, "what is needed for a true knowledge of religion is, first, an intellectual argument (*al-ḥujja al-'aqliyya*) that will convince the hearer of the personal trustworthiness (*ṣidq*) of the teacher, and, second, a proof (*burhān*) of the objective truth (*ḥaqq*) of what is taught. Only when both aspects are thus known is religion *known*" (1979: 21–22). If the person does not settle the problem of "religious disagreement" without recourse to some form of intellectual proof or argument, then each claim, al-Māturīdī thinks, would be equally invalid, and the *muqallid* in his grasping of religious truths would be in no significantly better epistemic state than one who grasps

religious falsities. Thus, Maturidites believe that, ideally, we all ought to base our religious belief on *propositional* evidence. However, some Maturidites did take *nonpropositional evidence* to be epistemically valid as well. For example, Abū'l Mu'īn al-Nasafī (d. 1142 CE) thought a religious faith is valid if based on miracles or even reports of miracles, or due to religious experience through reading the Qur'ān (cf. al-Nasafī 2001: 1:38–42).

We turn now to the Ash'arite school. According to its eponym, Abū'l Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 936 CE), religious faith is fundamentally a question of *taṣdīq* (assent). That is, to assent to what another proposes and what one henceforth holds to be true (Uslu 2007: 167–168). Indeed, as the Ash'arite theologian al-Juwaynī writes, "the true sense of faith is assent to God (*al-taṣdīq bi'llāh*) . . . the assent, strictly speaking, is interior speaking, but it exists only along with knowledge" (quoted in Frank 1989: 40). Some Ash'arite theologians, however, recognized a distinction between individual and communal obligations with respect to grounding one's religious faith on rational argument. In this regard, the Ash'arite theologian Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1118 CE) offers a succinct account of the positions among the early Ash'arites on this matter. He writes:

> Since it is a fact that rational inquiry is in principle obligatory, it is obligatory for *the community as a whole*. Whether it is, however, an obligation of *every individual* is something based on a principle that explains how one achieves adequate knowledge of God and of His attributes and His Apostles and the particular teaching of Islam. The followers of our school disagree on this: [1] Some of them hold that what is required is belief that is founded in a definitive, rational proof of what one is obliged to believe and accordingly his belief in what he believes is thus a true knowing . . . [2] Some of them hold that belief must be based on proof (*dalīl*), but that the proof may be one given in revelation (*sam'ī*), either in the text of the Scripture and the Sunna or from the consensus of the community; and it may be purely rational (*'aqlī*) . . . [3] Some of them say that what is required is a belief that apperceives its object as it really is and as such; accordingly, belief in it, so characterized, is knowledge. (Quoted in Frank 1989: 46–47)

Al-Anṣārī explains that those who adopt the first position divide the reasoning and speculation concerning the fundamental religious principles, such as belief in God and the Prophet, into those aspects which are "an individual obligation" and those that consist in "things which are a communal obligation." As for the former, they hold that an individual obligation is upon each responsible sane person (*mukallaf*) to have proper knowledge of God, and by extension the veracity of the Prophet's claims, on the basis of rational proof. In the case of the latter, what is said to be a communal rather than individual duty is attending to those matters such that if the community of the faithful neglected them, then they would be thereby committing collective sin. Al-Anṣārī states that these pertain to matters such as, "the drawing out of multiple proofs," "defending the core of Islam," "refuting opponents" of the

religion and "to dispose of the false reasoning of those who teach error and of heretics" (quoted in Frank 1989: 47). As such, rational argument is essential to the positive epistemic status of one's Islamic belief, but the acquisition of evidence may be satisfied communally, as opposed to individually.

10.1.3 Kalāmic Evidentialism

In light of the following discussion concerning *imam*, a synopsis of its religious epistemology can be drawn out by the recognition of it as typically a combination of "classical foundationalism" and "theistic evidentialism." The version of foundationalism upheld within the epistemology of paradigmatic *imam* is perhaps best rendered – following Dewey Hoitenga – "medieval foundationalism." This premodern form of classical foundationalism holds that only those beliefs which are "self-evident truths of reason," "evident to the senses," and "incorrigible" are among those beliefs which may be known in a noninferential fashion (Hoitenga 1991: 181–182).

This sort of foundationalist epistemology can be found in all of the major strands of the *imam* tradition. First, by upholding the notion of *'ilm ḍarūrī* they admitted the basic foundationalist thesis that there can be noninferential knowledge. Second, what was stipulated as comprising *'ilm ḍarūrī* was generally considered to be epistemically certain. Third, the sorts of beliefs that were restricted within the category of *'ilm ḍarūrī* closely parallels the classical foundationalist models of proper noninferential beliefs in Western thought. The consequence of this foundationalist epistemology – in so far as it relates to knowledge and theistic belief – is neatly summed up by Nicholas Heer in the following terms:

> Knowledge of all these matters [i.e., God's existence and the truth of scripture] can be gained *only* through reasoning (*naẓar*). This is because such knowledge is *not* necessary knowledge (*ḍarūrī*), but is, on the contrary, acquired knowledge (*muktasab*). God's existence, for example, is not known through sense perception, nor is it self-evident (*badīhī*) as are the axioms of logic and mathematics. Nor can knowledge of these matters be gained through illumination (*ilhām*) . . . or through purification of the inner self (*taṣfiyat al-bāṭin*) . . . or by instruction (*ta'līm*) of an infallible *imam*. (1993: 187–188)

As Heer accurately observes, given that theistic beliefs are not considered to be among our properly noninferential beliefs according to the *mutakallimūn*, they must be conceived as being part of our properly inferential beliefs. Consequently, for religious beliefs to receive the epistemic appraisal of knowledge, they must be based upon some evidence (*dalīl*) or set of evidences (*adilla*). Thus, it is the epistemological foundationalism of paradigmatic *kalām*, which results in its subsequent "theistic evidentialism," encapsulated by the supposition that such forms of knowledge do not comprise part of '*ilm ḍarūrī*.

This perspective is epitomized by the traditional *kalām* insistence on the epistemic (and moral) duty to engage in rational inquiry concerning religious belief: *wujūb al-naẓar* (cf. Spevack 2020: 237–242; Adamson 2022: 7–11). As suggested in the previous section, this doctrine essentially seeks to condemn blind imitation of one's community (*taqlīd*) in matters of faith. The idea transfigures into the notion that: (a) the first duty incumbent on humans is the fulfillment of the obligation to *know* God and (b) that this duty is to be fulfilled through reflection over the proofs for God's existence and broader attributes (cf. al-Rāzī 1991: 130). Reflection on the above would suggest that a *kalām*-based evidentialism on the nature of religious belief entails a *strong theistic evidentialism*. This is because for religious belief to be classed as knowledge for a believer, they must engage in and formulate an argument for their religious beliefs in propositional terms. It is not sufficient that it be based upon seemings, intuitions, or experience. As suggested above, however, some Maturidites had a broader conception of the sort of theistic evidence necessary to fulfill one's epistemic duty to reason to God (cf. al-Ṣābūnī 2020: 347). This might suggest that a more *moderate* form of theistic evidentialism could be upheld. Recently, Tobias Andersson (2022) has also argued that a "phenomenal conservatist" (PC) conception of (*moderate*) theistic evidentialism may be compatible with the religious epistemology of Ash'arite theologian Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 1490 CE).[3] Andersson notes that although as a *mutakallim* al-Sanūsī upholds the principle of *wujūb al-naẓar*, he also recognizes that the sort of evidence required to fulfill that duty may depend on one's circumstances. As such, al-Sanūsī draws a distinction between "'detailed' or 'specific' evidence (*dalīl tafṣīlī*)" and "'general' evidence (*dalīl jumlī*)" (2022: 134). Whereas the former kind of evidence is necessary for theologians, the latter may be sufficient for the layman to acquire epistemic justification, and a *dalīl jumlī* may comprise the sort of evidence recognized by PC (i.e., *seemings*).

At the same time, we have also seen that some of the Ash'arites distinguished between an individual obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*) and a communal obligation (*farḍ kifāya*) in satisfying the duty of *wujūb al-naẓar*. This might allow us to consider a different form of theistic evidentialism within *kalām*, namely what Stephen Wykstra coined "sensible evidentialism" (cf. Wykstra 1998).[4] In this case, propositional evidence is necessary for the positive epistemic status of one's theistic belief and for the epistemic health of the community.

[3] Phenomenal conservatism is roughly the view that a subject S is prima facie justified in believing that p if it seems to S that p, in the absence of defeaters S may have for p. Thus, in the absence of defeaters, if it seems to S that God exists through reflection over aspects of nature, say, then their seeming counts as prima facie evidence that God exists, and prima facie grounds of justification for believing that God exists (cf. Tucker 2011).

[4] By sensible evidentialism we mean the idea that for a belief to be sufficiently epistemically appraised as knowledge, some propositional evidence is essential, not necessarily due to the individual, but at least it must be had within the broader epistemic community.

However, it is not a requirement that each individual acquire this evidence themselves, providing that it is secured by some within the community. Interestingly, in his recent work on Maturidite theology, Ramon Harvey suggests that al-Māturīdī's religious epistemology may be understood in a similar way to that of Wykstra's "sensible evidentialism," (Harvey 2021: 222).

Thus, even if *strong* theistic evidentialism is the paradigmatic view within *kalam*, its Rationalist approach to religious epistemology is perhaps at least compatible with weaker forms of the evidentialist requirement (i.e., *moderate* theistic evidentialism and *sensible* evidentialism).

10.2 Islamic Traditionalism

Traditionalist Islamic theology is sometimes referred to as Hanbalism or Atharism. Hanbalism takes its name from its eponym, the famous Muslim jurist and champion of Sunni orthodoxy, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE). This theological orientation is also sometimes called Atharism – coming from the term *āthār*, roughly meaning "tradition" – because of the general emphasis and focus it lends to *āthār*, that is, Ḥadīth and Qur'ānic scripture. In turning to Muslim Traditionalist theology, we are turning toward a theological approach that appears prima facie to gravitate toward a fideistic religious epistemological outlook. By fideism, here, we do not mean irrationalism or an outright rejection of reason per se, but rather a position that denotes the general view that theistic belief is *in some sense* supra-rational. The particular *sense* in which religious belief is supra-rational, however, depends on how exactly it is exemplified. Thus, there is a spectrum of fideistic views, some of which may even be compatible with theistic evidentialism (Dougherty and Tweedt 2015: 554).

10.2.1 Qadāmite Traditionalism

In his article "Orthodoxy and Ḥanbalite Fideism," Aziz al-Azmeh defines Hanbalite fideism as, "the affirmation of dogmatic articles without a qualification that would discursively carry them beyond the bounds of their given textuality" (1988: 256). Roughly, al-Azmeh's idea seems to be that in the Hanbalite view, scripture (*naql*) ought to be given precedence to reason (*'aql*) and that the latter must conform to the dictates of the former. He also goes on to suggest that religious belief and affiliation is construed in terms of *taqlīd*, consisting of a testimonial passing from one generation of believers to the next, which is "a purely affirmative form of expression, and belongs properly to an act of devotion more than to one of intellection" (al-Azmeh 1988: 266). The positive epistemic status of religious belief, then, would somehow have to be ultimately grounded in and through religious scripture, even if its dictates *appear* contrary to the deliverances of reason.

Perhaps a good example of this particular brand of fideism can be found in the writings of the staunch Hanbalite theological apologist, Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223 CE). Ibn Qudāma was a loyal defender of Traditionalist Hanbalite theology who sought to preserve and transmit religious knowledge as understood by the earliest generation of Muslims (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). In that vein, Ibn Qudāma rejected any form of *kalām* and chastised its practitioners. In his famous *Taḥrīm al-naẓar fī kutub ahl al-kalām*, Ibn Qudāma argued that *kalām* was religiously abominable on a number of grounds. The most important in the context of the present discussion being his argument against *ijtihād* in religious matters. By *ijtihād* we roughly mean independent critical thought or reasoning. In the *kalām* sense, we can see this, for instance, in the "duty to reason" (*wujūb al-naẓar*) discussed in the previous section. According to Ibn Qudāma, to impose the duty of *ijtihad* upon all Muslims is wrongheaded for at least two reasons: (a) because it imposes an obligation upon Muslims who are unable to carry out the duty, and (b) that it is contrary to the Prophet's teaching because he never imposed such an obligation upon the entire Muslim community (cf. Ibn Qudāma 1962: 17–18). With that said, Ibn Qudāma asserts the following:

> To profess the obligation of *ijtihād* upon all would entail a condemnation of the broad masses to error, by reason of their neglect of that which is incumbent upon them. The only thing in respect of which the use of *taqlīd* has been said to be unlawful for them are those conspicuous matters, which they know by virtue of them being so conspicuous, without requiring special pains, thought, or examination; namely, the profession of the unity of God, the mission of Muhammad, the knowledge of the obligation of the five daily prayers, the fasting of Ramadan, and the rest of the pillars whose religious obligation is of common knowledge. These obligations, having become known by way of *ijmā'*, require no study or examination. Therefore, with regard to these obligations, it is unlawful for them to make use of *taqlid*. (Ibn Qudāma 1962: 18–19)

In this passage, Ibn Qudāma attempts to outline the proper place for *ijtihād* and that of *taqlīd*. However, he does so in a way that appears somewhat problematic. On the one hand, Ibn Qudāma argues that it is unlawful for a religious believer to accept the most essential religious doctrines via means of *taqlīd*. The reasoning is that such knowledge has been made obvious and manifest through scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*); it is not among the "minutiae of religious beliefs" that it is the job of scholarly experts to explicate. Thus, it would imply that such knowledge is to be attained through means of *ijtihād*. Yet, on the other hand, if knowledge of central Islamic doctrines is made manifest and hence known in and through *ijmā'*, that implies that such knowledge actually depends upon a form of *taqlīd* (i.e., adhering to the dictates of the scholarly community).[5]

[5] For further discussion of Qadāmite Traditionalism with respect to the issues just raised, cf. Aijaz (2018).

Perhaps one might argue in response that, in fact, this knowledge does not depend on *taqlīd* nor *ijtihād*, but rather *ittibā'*, that is, adherence to religious dogma through means of evidence from religious scripture. The idea then would be that one's knowledge of God, for instance, was derived from one's own independent study of basic scriptural texts. Nonetheless, from an epistemological point of view, this would not ultimately salvage Ibn Qudāma's view from appearing strongly fideistic or even presuppositionalist, because *ittibā'* presupposes the truth of religious scripture. Thus, George Makdisi concludes his analysis of Ibn Qudāma's religious epistemological approach by stating that the religious knowledge required for salvation, "may be known only through the traditions [i.e., Qur'ān & Ḥadīth], of which the depositaries and legitimate transmitters are obviously the traditionalists – certainly not the speculative theologians" (Ibn Qudāma 1962: xix).

Nevertheless, we suspect that Ibn Qudāma himself would deny that knowledge of God and scripture is something known by faith alone, or something that in some sense stands above or against reason. In fact, Muslim traditionalists did draw on different kinds of rational argumentation in proving their doctrinal commitments, and "they also believed in the harmony of scripture and reason" (Mustafa 2013: 46). As Binyamin Abrahamov notes, "the proofs that many traditionalists brought were not only proofs from the Qur'an and the Sunna but also rational proofs, sometimes even kalam arguments" (2016: 273). As such, perhaps there is an alternative conception of Islamic Traditionalism that makes better sense of its impetus for the place of "reason" in religious epistemology.

10.2.2 Taymiyyan Traditionalism

Sherman Jackson rightly points out that "the Traditionalists invoked 'reason' almost as readily as did the Rationalists; they simply rejected the notion that 'reason' was limited to the composite Islamicized Hellenistic-Late Antiquity version of it that the Rationalists embraced" (2009: 132). This latter idea on the nature of reason comes out most clearly in the thought of the Traditionalist Damascene theologian Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE). In his seminal work on the relationship between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*), Ibn Taymiyya attempts to refute "claims to rationality made by Muslim theologians and philosophers, and sets forth his own vision of true rationality that accords with divine revelation" (Hoover 2019: 32).

Central to Ibn Taymiyya's conception of reason is the notion of *'aql ṣarīḥ*, that is, pure or clear reason (cf. 1979: 1:376). For Ibn Taymiyya, '*aql ṣarīḥ* is always congruent with *naql ṣaḥīḥ*, that is, sound religious tradition (cf. 1995: 12:217). As such, any apparent conflict between the two can be explained in reference to either *bid'ī 'aqlī* (innovated/contaminated rationality) or *bid'ī naqlī* (innovated/contaminated revelation) (El-Tobgui 2020: 165). In critiquing the

general claim of certain theologians and philosophers concerning the alleged conflict between reason and revelation, Ibn Taymiyya seeks not to reject reason outright, but something closer to what C. Stephen Evans has termed elsewhere "*concrete reason*," as opposed to "*ideal reason*" (Evans 1998: 94). That is to say, Ibn Taymiyya rejects the conception of reason or of what is "reasonable" as concretely conceived in the intellectual strata of society in his time. In his case, that refers to an "Islamicized Hellenistic-Late Antiquity" conception of reason and the reasonable. For Ibn Taymiyya, this is not "*ideal reason*" or *'aql ṣarīḥ*, as he would put it, but rather *bid'ī 'aqlī*, an example of the ways in which human reason is limited and often flawed. For ideal or sound reason could never be at odds with true revelation, even if that appears to be the case when reason is construed through the lens of Islamicized Hellenism. A crucial component of this Taymiyyan conception of reason that is highly relevant for the present discussion is his notion of *fiṭra*.

For Ibn Taymiyya, '*aql ṣarīḥ* is predicated on *fiṭra*: "the foundation of reason is grounded in the soundness and health of the *fiṭra*" (2005: 369). Interestingly, al-Azmeh points out that "Ḥanbalite writers often use the notion of innate natural knowledge (*fiṭra*) to express what they see as the self-evidence of their position" (1988: 257). So, perhaps the notion of *fiṭra* could better explain the supposed self-evidence of those very clear or "conspicuous matters" of Islamic dogma alluded to by Ibn Qudāma, in such a way that salvages the apparent superfluity with which his fideistic religious epistemology regards the place of reason.

According to Ibn Taymiyya, "*fiṭra* is the original nature of human beings, uncorrupted by later beliefs and practices, ready to accept the true notions of Islam" (1995: 4:245–246). Jon Hoover suggests that it may be viewed "in Ibn Taymiyya's thought as an *innate* faculty" (2007: 39). However, it would not be quite right to think of *fiṭra* as a distinct cognitive faculty per se. Rather, it is the focal point around which all other faculties turn for direction, a disposition steering our cognition toward truth. Ibn Taymiyya puts it that

> [God] made the *fiṭra* of His servants disposed to the apprehension and understanding of the realities [of things] and to know them. And if it were not for this readiness (i.e., *fiṭra*) within the hearts/minds (*qalb*) to know the truth, neither speculative reasoning would be possible, nor demonstration, discourse or language. (1979: 5:62)

In a sense, then – looked at from a purely epistemological angle – this quote suggests that *fiṭra* is the natural constitution of the human mind. Significantly, from the epistemic point of view, Ibn Taymiyya apparently conceives of "the proper functioning of *all* our epistemic faculties . . . [as] predicated in *all* cases on the health and proper functioning of the *fiṭra*" (El-Tobgui 2020: 271). Accordingly, it is due to *fiṭra* that a human's "knowledge of truth . . . and the recognition of falsehood" is grounded (Ibn Taymiyya 2014: 49). Consequently,

on the Taymiyyan epistemic scheme, the positive epistemic status of one's belief is achieved through the reliable workings of the natural cognitive capacities God has created us with, when they're sufficiently tied to *fiṭra* (i.e., working naturally or properly).

Significantly, *fiṭra* in a crucial (albeit partial) sense resembles the sort of *sensus divinitatis* to which Alvin Plantinga refers in his work on reformed epistemology (cf. Plantinga 2000b; El-Tobgui 2020: 275; Turner 2021).[6] Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya declares that "the affirmation of the Creator and His perfection is innate (*fiṭrīyya*) and necessary (*ḍarūrīyya*) with respect to one whose *fiṭra* remains intact" (1995: 6:73). According to Ibn Taymiyya, this knowledge of God is actualized through a recognition of theistic signs present in the natural world and in scripture (Ibn Taymiyya 1979: 7:302; 2005: 401). Indeed, Ibn Taymiyya holds that, "everything else other than He is evidence of His Self and signs of His existence . . . no contingent existent can be actualized without His very self being actual. All contingent existents are entailed by Him; they are evidence and a sign of Him" (2005: 197).[7] Ibn Taymiyya also argues on theological grounds that "it was the method of the prophets – may God bless them – in proving the existence of God to [make] mention of His signs (*āyāt*) . . . [and] God's method of proof through signs are plentiful in the Qur'ān" (2005: 193–194). However, crucially, this proof or "inference through signs" (*istidlāl bi'l-āyāt*) is not to be conceived as an inference of any traditional kind. It does not appear to work on the basis of explicit premises from which a conclusion is inferred. This is what Ibn Taymiyya suggests when he writes that, "affirming one's knowledge of the Creator and prophecy does not depend on any syllogisms (*al-aqyisa*). Rather, this knowledge is attained from the signs (*āyāt*) that prove a specific matter that is not shared by others. These matters are known by means of noninferential knowledge (*bi'l-'ilm al-ḍarūrī*), which does not require discursive reasoning (*naẓar*)" (2005: 401). Therefore, the epistemic and cognitive process does not involve argumentation, and the religious beliefs that are a consequence of such a process are duly noninferential.

One way of construing how this cognitive process may proceed is in terms of a kind of quasi-perceptual model. For, according to Ibn Taymiyya, "the signs of God are always known through sense perception" (1995: 2:48), which as Wael Hallaq notes, includes both its "internal" and "external" dimensions (*al-bāṭin wa'l-ẓāhir*), (1991: 63). With this in mind, we might think that Ibn Taymiyya's thesis runs something close to what Del Ratzsch has argued for on the basis of Thomas Reid's epistemology: that belief in a designer from the

[6] Although it must be pointed out that *fiṭra* and a *sensus divinitatis* are different, the latter being a faculty and the former a disposition that includes that kind of faculty. In other words, *fitra* has within it a divine spark that inclines human beings to the knowledge and worship of God.

[7] Whether those signs be what he refers to as "*āyāt al-anfus*" – signs within oneself – or "*āyāt al-āfāq*" – signs within the cosmos (Ibn Taymiyya 1979: 3:108).

apparent design in nature can be formed *noninferentially*, akin to the way in which we form our ordinary perceptual beliefs (cf. Ratzsch 2003). In following Ratzsch, we might think that Ibn Taymiyya holds a similar position concerning the connection between our disposition (*fiṭra*) to form theistic beliefs – upon an apprehension of theistic signs in nature – and our sense perceptual faculties. That is, given our *fiṭrī* theistic disposition, our sense perceptual faculties may be geared up to form noninferential beliefs about God from perceiving His signs in nature. Although this process centers on our perceptual faculties, this is not to say that it does not also involve reason or rational reflection. Indeed, for Ibn Taymiyya recognizing God through His signs is to be conceived as "rational" (Ibn Taymiyya 1995: 1:49), and hence in a sense grounded in reason. Providing our *fiṭrī* theistic disposition is working naturally and properly then, we can know that God exists noninferentially through a perception of theistic signs.

That being said, Ibn Taymiyya recognized that *fiṭra* is susceptible to cognitive impediment; it can become corrupted in some sense (cf. Ibn Taymiyya 1979: 7:72). Impediments may arise due to certain desires (*hawā*) or personal motives (*gharaḍ*) which hinders one from accepting the truth (cf. 1979: 6:271). They could also be due to doubts or spurious objections (*shubuhāt*), blind imitation of one's socio-environment (*taqlīd*), or engagement in sheer conjecture (*ẓann*), (cf. 1979: 3:317). Consequently, it is possible that one may need propositional evidence to revive *fiṭra* and acquire knowledge of God (Ibn Taymiyya 1995: 16:458). That said, *fiṭra* may also be kept intact through spiritual practice (Ibn Taymiyya 1972: 2:341).

Ibn Taymiyya's emphasis on the congruence of reason and revelation sees him affirming that, in some sense, reason (*'aql*) is the epistemic ground for accepting revelation (*naql*) (cf. El-Tobgui 2020: 149–155). As we have seen, he also admits that propositional evidence, and therefore argument, may be epistemically required for knowledge of God. Yet, at the same time, his acknowledgment of being able to know God via *fiṭra* noninferentially, coupled with the notion that *fiṭra* is nurtured spiritually, means that it is possible to see Ibn Taymiyya simultaneously embracing all three religious epistemological positions: reformed epistemology, theistic evidentialism, and fideism. First, it is evident that his position maps onto reformed epistemology in the fullest sense because he holds to the thesis that God can be known in the absence of argument. Second, he can also be seen as a *moderate* theistic evidentialist, and third, a weak (or *responsible*) fideist (cf. Evans 1998; Dougherty and Tweedt 2015: 547).[8] His *moderate* evidentialism can be gleaned from the fact that he has a broad evidential scope when it comes to evidence drawn upon to know

[8] Roughly, we take *weak* fideism to be the view that evidence for God (at least for the most part) cannot be properly noticed without a certain prior disposition or affective-cum-spiritual character.

God, that is, a sign (*āyā*), propositional evidence (*dalīl*), testimony (*khabar*), and spiritual inspiration or religious experience (*kashf*) (cf. 1995: 20:202). He also appears to suggest that all forms of theistic knowledge will involve evidence, broadly construed. Finally, his weak fideism can be gleaned from his understanding that religious knowledge grounded on sound *fiṭra* rests on religious and spiritual practice such as meditative remembrance of God (*ẓikr*), without which the mind/heart (*qalb*) is unable to grasp the evidence for God (cf. 1995: 9:312-314).

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the main theological trends within the Islamic theological tradition concerning religious epistemology and has considered ways in which those approaches might be understood in contemporary philosophical terms. In summary, the broadly Rationalist trend within the tradition has been thought to embrace versions of theistic evidentialism. By contrast, the Traditionalist trend has been understood to adopt positions closer to fideism and reformed epistemology, yet without at the same time entirely doing away with demands for evidence.