Islamic Studies 62:2 (2023) pp. 189–222

https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v62i2.2679

Oral and Written Shīʿī Qur'ānic Elucidations in Twentieth-Century Indian Subcontinent: The Case of Sayyid al-'Ulamā' (d. 1988)

SYED RIZWAN ZAMIR*

Abstract

Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī (Ar. al-Naqawī, d. 1988), popularly known as Sayyid al-'Ulamā' and Naqqan Ṣāḥib, is widely regarded as the most prolific, influential, and popular Indian Shīʿī ʿālim *of the twentieth century. Although the author of a multi-volume* tafsīr, Faṣl al-Khiṭāb, *which includes a long prolegomenon (*muqaddimah*), Naqvī's Qur'ānic elucidations are hardly limited to this text alone; they are to be found throughout his vast corpus. In this article, I attempt an overview of Naqvī's multi-faceted engagement with the Qur'ān by weaving together these interspersed elucidations. This will be in contrast to the common scholarly approach that focuses on* tafsīr *as the only Qur'ānic commentary tradition worthy of study in Muslim piety and religious thought. Illustrating how Naqvī engages with the Qur'ān will shed light not only on the relatively invisible and understudied subject of the Qur'ān and its exegesis within contemporary South Asian Shiism but also on the amply deliberated major themes of religious and communal concern in contemporary Shīʿī South Asia.*

Keywords

Shiism, South Asia, Sayyid al-'Ulamā', oral exegesis, polemics, Qur'ān, modernity, Islam.

* Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Davidson College, North Carolina, USA.

I dedicate this article to a recently deceased mentor and friend at Islamic Research Institute (IRI), Dr Tanveer Ahmad upon whose encouragement this article was written, and with whom its maiden draft was shared first. Special thanks to my PhD advisor Prof. Abdulaziz Sachedina for sharing his personal collection of Sayyid al-'Ulamā's writings, and for his insights that have shaped my study of Sayyid al-'Ulamā's oeuvre; to Maulana Aseef Jaisi of Noor-e-Hidayat Foundation (Lucknow) for his continuing support of my research on Sayyid al-'Ulamā'; and to Mr Ali Abbas for digging and making available electronic versions of Sayyid al-'Ulamā's many texts scattered all over the internet.

Introduction

A *mujtahid* of the highest order who was trained in the Shīʿī seminaries of Lucknow and Najaf, Sayyid ʿAlī Naqī Naqvī (1905-1988) popularly known as Sayyid ul-ʿUlamā' and Naqqan Ṣāḥib, is in Justin Jones' words, "the final great mujtahid of Shiʿi India," and "his authorship of Urdu *taṣnīfāt* [writings] . . . without parallel among the formal 'ulama'."[1] He taught at the University of Lucknow and later at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), which at the time was the hub of Muslim modernism in the Indian subcontinent. He retired from AMU as the dean of Shīʿī theology. His writings and transcribed sermons constitute over one hundred and fifty works, and they range from treatises as short as just a few pages and as long as multi-volume works like *Tārīkh-i Islām* (The history of Islam), *Niẓām-i Zindagī* (The order of life), and his *tafsīr*, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb* (The decisive discourse). The breadth of his scholarly oeuvre, his diverse initiatives—such as his founding of the Imamia Mission—and his oratory, which is rare for a Shīʿī *ʿālim* of his stature, suggest that for the twentieth century, he was the foremost Shīʿī public intellectual of Muslim South Asia.

Although the author of a multi-volume *tafsīr*, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb,* which includes a long prolegomenon (*muqaddimah*), Naqvī's Qur'ānic elucidations are hardly limited to this text alone; they are to be found throughout his vast corpus. In this article, I attempt an overview of Naqvī's multi-faceted engagement with the Qur'ān by weaving together these interspersed elucidations. This will be in contrast to the common scholarly approach that focuses on *tafsīr* as the only Qur'ānic commentary tradition worthy of study in Muslim piety and religious thought. Illustrating how Naqvī engages with the Qur'ān will shed light not only on the relatively invisible and understudied subject of the Qur'ān and its exegesis within contemporary South Asian Shiism but also on the amply deliberated major themes of religious and communal concern in contemporary Shīʿī South Asia.

[1] Justin Jones, *Shiʿa Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 247.

An Overview of Sayyid al-'Ulamā''s Intellectual Venture and Corrective Intervention (*Iṣlāḥ*)[2]

By the time Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī rose to social prominence in the early 1930s, Muslim India was already in a period of intense political and social activism. It was a time of heightened religious activism, shifting orientations, and intra-religious polemics and debates.[3] And Lucknow was at the centre of all these sociopolitical currents. Not only was it a historical hub of Shīʿī Islam, but it was also a locus of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's prestigious family of *'ulamā'*, called the Household of *Ijtihād*.[4] After the controversy vis-à-vis the provocative literary anthology *Angārē*[5] published in Lucknow, the first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference was held there in 1936, followed then by the "most violent Shīʿī-Sunni riots,"[6] the *Madḥ-i Ṣaḥābah-Tabarrā*-agitations of the 1930s. Lucknow, so to speak, was in the eye of the storm. Witnessed firsthand from Lucknow, India was indeed at a crossroads economically, sociopolitically, and culturally, during what has come to be known as the "modern age of Islam"—or the "new age" [*nayā daur*], as Naqqan Ṣāḥib called it. Naqqan Ṣāḥib acknowledges this ushering of a new era and anticipates some serious crises facing Muslims.

---

[2] As the most explicit account of his diagnosis of "all that had gone wrong for Muslims of South Asia and beyond," the following description of his intellectual project is based on the transcript of his Muḥarram lectures (*ca*. mid-1930s) *Lā Tufsidū fī 'l-Arḍ* (Lucknow: Imamiah Mission, 1977). The first edition of this work was published in Lucknow in 1937.

[3] For shifting religious orientations, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Islamic Identities in Colonial India," in *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 14-53; and SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2019). For religious movements, see Dietrich Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India, 1900-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] For a scholarly overview of this family, see Juan Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and more recently, Justin Jones, "*Khandan-i ijtihad*: Genealogy, History, and Authority in a Household of 'Ulama in Modern South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (2019): 1149-91.

[5] Sayyid Sajjād Ẓahīr et al., *Angārē: Das Mukhtaṣar Kahāniyūṇ kā Majmūʿah* (Lucknow: Niẓāmī Press, n.d.), https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/angare-das-mukhtasar-kahaniyon-ka-majmua-sajjad-zaheer-ebooks.

[6] Sew Mushirul Hassan, "Sectarianism in Indian Islam: The Sunni-Shia Divide in the United Provinces," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, no. 2 (1990): 213. More specifically for Lucknow, see Imtiaz Ahmed, "The Shia-Sunni Dispute in Lucknow, 1905-1980," in *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad*, ed. Milton Israel and Narendra. K. Wagle (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), 335-50.

Yet, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's earliest writings and speeches are replete with references to a more specific and acute challenge: the "problem of religion." For all the challenges facing Muslims of India, the crisis of religion was in his assessment by far the most formidable. He points to the prevalent criticisms of religion—and Islam—such as "religion corrupts society," "it hinders progress," and that "it is dogmatic and irrational." Naqqan Ṣāḥib diagnosed two broader intellectual and social currents particularly responsible for this shifting attitude towards religion: first, the undermining of Islam by Christian and Hindu missionaries; and second, the undermining of religious foundations of any religion through rationalistic, scientistic, and materialistic philosophies. While the missionaries undermined the religion of Islam, the new intellectual trends inspired by post-Christian modern Western thought had begun to reduce "religion"—not any religion in particular, for example, Islam or Christianity, but "religion as such" (*madhhab*)—to an outdated "thing" of a bygone era, with no relevance whatsoever to the modern world. According to Naqqan Ṣāḥib, these new attacks on religion as such had made it extremely difficult for the lay piety—whether Sunni, Shīʿī, or any other religion for that matter—to uphold its basic religious commitments, therefore drawing its adherents often to an "indifference toward religion," even "non-religionism" (*lā dīniyat*).[7] In Naqqan Ṣāḥib's assessment, this shifting view regarding the pertinence of religion to the contemporary era spread in India under the spell of European intellectual and cultural influence and led many to seek to either decrease religion's sociopolitical influence or eradicate it altogether. Though he accepted many of the criticisms made against religion, Naqqan Ṣāḥib disagreed with the overall diagnosis of the problem, as well as the suggested solutions to it. Such a crisis, in his assessment, was neither faced by his Shīʿī community alone, nor confined to the wider Muslim community of India, but in fact, by every community that was oriented by an established religious tradition. He pronounced in an early sermon of his intellectual career the following:

> The powers of improvement *(ṣalāḥ)* and corruption *(fasād)* have always been at war with one another, and corruption of different kinds was born [out of these wars]. But the past is gone now; we have no direct relationship with it. What needs to be monitored today is the kinds of

[7] Other possible translations such as "atheism" (rejection of God) and "secularism" (privatizing the influence of religion to prescribed spheres of society) hardly seem appropriate. What we have here is an attitude of "rejection of religion" which can be rendered either as "areligionism" or "non-religionism." While areligionism will be indifference, non-religionism precisely captures the literal meaning and the sense that the term *lā dīniyat* seeks to convey.

> corruption that abound in the world now, and what kind of action we need to take regarding those. *These days, the greatest* fasād *that is most dangerous for the general benefit [of society]* (mafād-i ʿāmmah) *is the flood of "non-religionism"* (lā madhhabiyat). . . . By religion (*madhhab*) we do not mean any specific religion, but what is called by everyone "religion" in contrast to "non-religionism" (*lā madhhabiyat*).[8]

Though not restricted to this circle alone, his audience was predominantly those Muslims who were haplessly caught between the criticisms—both from within and from without—of Islam, Shīʿī Islam, and religion, and unable to intellectually respond to these condemnations. The growing indifference or sustained critique of religion was therefore at the heart of the Muslim crisis, and its preservation through defence and elucidation, the loftiest cause.

Elucidating Islam, therefore, underlies Naqqan Ṣāḥib's entire intellectual corpus. Through his elucidations, he attempted to bulwark against a deep sense of doubt and crisis in his South Asian Muslim audience's religious convictions, practices, and sensibilities. It would be his burden to articulate for his interlocutors why religion—and particularly Islam—still mattered, was indispensable for a healthy society, and necessary for its *iṣlāḥ*. From the 1930s until his death in 1988, this crisis of religion unabatedly occupied his intellectual energies.

Sectarianism and Intra-Religious Polemic

Naqqan Ṣāḥib's reception of and responses to the threat from missionaries and the Western-influenced newly propagated materialistic philosophies aside, ensuing pages will bring forth a plethora of evidence of intra-religious polemical tropes in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings and transcripts of speeches. Where and how are we to situate these polemical tropes?

First, there is a long history of these polemical debates between Sunnis and Shīʿīs.[9] These debates are a function of the dynamics and difficulties of their survival as a minority religious community. As a minority within a wider minority in their South Asian Muslim milieu, there is thus an inevitability and social compulsion for Shīʿīs to engage in theological and religious disagreements with other Muslims. That Naqqan Ṣāḥib addresses all major Sunni and Shīʿī constituencies is his affirmation of this necessity. That does not undermine the importance of

---

[8] Naqvī, *Lā Tufsidū fī 'l-Arḍ*, 83, 195-96; emphasis added.

[9] The most detailed study of Sunni-Shīʿī polemics is still S. A. A. Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz and His Times: Puritanism, Sectarian, Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra: Maʿrifat Publication House, 1982), especially chaps. 5 and 6.

these writings and speeches; rather it shows the investment on his part in the wellbeing of his community. He did not consider them below his stature. For our purposes, the content and manner in which they are conducted also clarify the religious terrain Shīʿī actors living as a minority tread on a daily basis.

Second, regarding the Deobandi-Barelvi divide, Tareen demonstrates that

> Intra-Muslim rivalries, like the Barelvī-Deobandī polemic, should be approached as moments of contestation between competing rationalities of tradition and reform. These rationalities become centrally visible during specific moments when the limits of the normative and the heretical, identity and difference, are authoritatively debated. Each chapter in this book has shown ways in which authoritative religious actors sought to strategically control the boundaries of tradition. . . . I have also sought to show that what may seem like arcane intra-*'ulamā'* debates were in fact embedded in crucial questions of power, morality, and social order.[10]

These comments apply, *mutatis mutandis*, not only to the Barelvi-Deobandi divide but also to the Sunni-Shīʿī and interreligious polemic among communities in South Asia. I propose and seek to show that there is much to be discovered in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's polemical writings and speeches. In addition, if we observe the Sunni-Shīʿī polemical discourse through his writings, we will attain additional evidence for Tareen's conclusion that "the internal workings of a discursive tradition [of Sunni *'ulamā'* in the British colonial period] . . . often did not operate according to the colonizing grammar of secular conceptuality."[11]

Third, and this relates to the second, as scholars we ignore such discourses only to our own peril, and hence neither understand the religious terrain our religious actors walk, nor stumble upon insights and creative new moves made amid these terrains, moves that not only serve polemical ends but are also occasions for edification and instruction for their audiences. In other words, treatises that we may deem polemical are hardly *just* that. They are replete with rationalities of tradition and *iṣlāḥ* (corrective intervention). For someone of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's stature, widely known as a first-rate orator,[12] whose many short treatises are illustrations that he neither minced words nor wasted any, every treatise even when responding to a polemical attack, was carefully

---

[10] Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad*, 377-78.

[11] Ibid., 381.

[12] Rizvi noted him to be "a very impressive and lucid orator." S. A. A. Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of Ithna Ashari Shiism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1986), 152.

crafted to impart some serious teaching for leading a sagacious life prescribed by Islam. In time, we will see examples of this phenomenon.

Yet, that is not all. Whether in relation to the Qur'ān or otherwise, there is an unexpected and counterintuitive dimension to Naqqan Ṣāḥib's oeuvre. The polemical thrust of many of these writings seems to suggest that these are yet again "just polemics." Yet, a unique hallmark of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's religious and intellectual project is his relentless effort to articulate Islam and Islamic teachings as universal. Already, Justin Jones has shown how he accomplishes this through the figure of Ḥusayn and the battle of Karbala:

> 'Alī Naqī's Husainology, then, was in many ways as revolutionary as the figure it described. In effect, it appeared to speak simultaneously to audiences at different levels. Looking beyond Shi'ism to humanity as a whole, 'Alī Naqī's telling sought to refresh and popularise Husain's message, promoting awareness of Imam Husain's sacrifice as an embodiment of an ethical ideal common to all religions.[13]

It deserves emphasis here that similar universalization tendencies are evidenced in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings on other subjects too. Not only does he present Ḥusayn as humanity's martyr *par* excellence (*shahīd-i insāniyat*), in fact, all other Islamic religious guides (*rahnumāyān-i Islām*, a title of his short biographies of the Shīʿī Imams) are equally universal in their import as exemplars. The Prophet of Islam and the figure of Abraham—via his *History of Islam*—and other Prophets can also be added to this list. He rearticulates Islam as a religion, along with its creed and practices, within a universal frame. As will be shown, the Qur'ān itself is a universal document and its teachings are tirelessly articulated as universally relevant for all of humanity, whether individually or collectively, as both proofs of the validity of Islam and their universality. In sum, the particularity of true Islam (which for him is unambiguously Shiism) is time and again extrapolated into an "Islamic-universalist paradigm."

But how is this universalism argued or demonstrated? It is sought through invocation and demonstration of intertwined threefold criteria proving how these teachings are: 1) *humanistic*, in other words, they concern the wellbeing of humanity through an emphasis on ethics, justice, and mutual care; 2) *logical*, thus they make intellectual sense; and 3) *practical*, thus they can be applied with ease. In the ensuing pages, we will run into this theme of Islamic universalism more than once.

---

[13] Justin Jones, "Shi'ism, Humanity and Revolution in Twentieth-Century India: Selfhood and Politics in the Husainology of 'Ali Naqi Naqvi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, no. 3 (2014): 415-34, at 423.

A word about the academic study of polemics also seems opportune here. Inter and intra-religious polemics fail to receive scholarly comment, unless they underlie, inspire, or instigate a religion's intervention in the public sphere or cause political activism and violence. This is caused by a number of factors. First, there is the practice of "methodological neutralism"[14] or internalization within religious studies of the Enlightenment ideals of "detached" and "dispassionate" observation of (religious) phenomena. In this paradigm, polemics are ripe with passion and are therefore not a proper object of study. This becomes evident when polemics are unconsciously assumed to be simply "just polemical," in other words, a lower form of religious discourse not worthy of serious scholarly attention. Second, there is the ideal of not "taking sides" and seeking to "stay neutral" as a good scholar, which manifests itself in staying as far away from polemics as possible to avert being labelled "confessional." In fact, much scholarship manifests a combination of both these factors. Here, the scholarly disinterest in contemporary religious polemics stands in stark contrast to its attitude towards a religion's early history. For instance, the study of the origins and early development of religious traditions, especially Christianity and Islam, affords ample evidence as to how theologies and politics were shaped by internal conflicts and debates among Christians and Muslims. Those polemics have continued to shape theology and the public sphere even in the colonial era is increasingly evident from recent scholarship.[15] Still, beyond the concern for the religious shaping of the public sphere, the academic study of religion does not seem to find much stock in devoting time and energy to a serious study of polemical literature in the contemporary era.

The academic study of intra-religious debates and polemics in Muslim South Asia is also significant from a different vantage point. We live in an increasingly polarized world. Whether in South Asia or the US, the hardened and polarized political arena and conflicting visions of contemporary societies suggest that beyond religion, the polemics in the contemporary world have expanded now into many other spheres of communal and national lives. Perhaps the study of the old divides will come in handy at least in helping us understand these "new" divides.

---

[14] Popularized by Ninian Smart in the early 1970s via *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). The term appears on p. 159.

[15] For example, see Fuad S. Naeem, "Interreligious Debates, Rational Theology, and the 'Ulamā' in the Public Sphere: Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī and the Making of Modern Islam in South Asia" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2015) and Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad*.

Keeping these preliminary remarks in view, it is time to clarify the role the longstanding polemical tradition played in how Naqqan Ṣāḥib rethought the crisis of religion. Acutely aware of its presence in the South Asian Islamic milieu as a perpetual challenge facing his Shīʿī audience, it constitutes a tangible strand in his articulation of Islam, whether in his writing or sermons. We will see instances where old doubts and attacks from Sunni scholars were fully acknowledged alongside the "new" ones. To guard and articulate the Shīʿī perspective on a given matter, arguments from both sides needed to be faced.

And it could hardly be otherwise. The modern era had hardly subsided the old Sunni-Shīʿī opposition, nor did it make life any easier for the Shīʿī minority within a larger Muslim minority of India.[16] It is almost impossible then to isolate Sayyid ul-'Ulamā"s response to the old tropes of Sunni-Shīʿī diatribes and polemics from his broader vision of the Islamic worldview and practice. In other words, the responses to perennial debates are seamlessly integrated into the reconfigured and re-presented Islamic vision of a good life.

Guarding Shīʿī Islam: Intra-Religious Polemics and Debates

The Truth about the Alteration of the Qur'ān[17]

The Sunni suspicion that the Shīʿī Qur'ān is different from a standard *muṣḥaf* is perhaps the most explosive and central polemical trope within Sunni-Shīʿī apologetics—and was part of the charge of Shāh 'Abd al- 'Azīz against the Shīʿīs in his famous *Tuḥfah-i Ithnā 'Asharī*:

> [The Shīʿīs] assert that the present Qur'ān is 'Uthmān's mutilated and garbled version whose commands have been altered by the chapters and verses he excluded from it. Secondly, according to the Shīʿīs, the Prophet's companions who passed on the Qur'ān were hypocrites and traitors, so to the Shīʿīs it is like the books revealed to Moses and Jesus. Thirdly, they believe that the Qur'ān's conveyors were not trustworthy and usurped the Prophet's family's right, so the Qur'ānic proofs, revelations, and miracles are meaningless to Shīʿīs.[18]

---

[16] Sunni-Shīʿī relations seem to have perpetually deteriorated since the late nineteenth century, and in post-colonial South Asia, especially Pakistan, where sectarian violence rose to new heights. For example, see Vali Nasr, "The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2000): 139–80.

[17] Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī, *Taḥrīf-i Qur'ān kī Ḥaqīqat* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press/Imamiah Mission, 1966). The first edition was published in 1933.

[18] Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz and His Times*, 283. The suspicion and myth of the Shīʿī Qur'ān has hardly subsided, as evidenced by its frequent mention on social media platforms.

Though provoked by this age-old polemic and a fresh wave of Sunni-Shīʿī tensions,[19] Sayyid al-ʿUlamā"s preface provides a fairly different framing of the issue and the stakes in it. What is supposed to be a defence—or a counter-offence—of a centuries-old accusation has now gained an imminent vitality, a renewed urgency and importance: For Naqqan Ṣāḥib, what is at stake in its resolution is nothing less than the urgent and unambiguous cause of Muslim unity itself:

> These days, Islam is attacked by its opponents and is surrounded by enemies from all sides. There are the Christian missions that have spread far and wide in the world, and the Arya mission, which is located all over India, whether big or small. Every day [they] manufacture novel criticisms [against Islam] in their factories, which, if not answered, will lead people of weak and fleeting (*bay thabt*) belief (*ʿaqīdah*) to wash their hands of Islamic beliefs when confronted by these [objections]. Attempts to spread shameful accusations (*ilzām*) around the world about the holy figure of the Prophet of Islam (blessings and peace of God be upon him and his family) are such that, when looked upon from the point of view of truthfulness and sincerity, [they] carry the [weight akin to] the sin of a murderer.
>
> In view of the sensitivity of the occasion, it was needed that all Muslims unite conjointly as a united front on the battlefield against the opponents and utilize their collective powers and resources in support of the shared Islamic principles and defence against the attacks of Islam's enemies. How unfortunate that some souls deem it a huge accomplishment to expand the gulf of differences and disagreements within the Muslim [community] and breathe discursive life into such issues every day, [a step] that leads to the derailment of Islamic harmony and [punches] holes in the wall of Islamic unity.[20]

While a thorough defence against the accusation will be plentifully enunciated, the early pages take time to argue the distinct greatness of the Qur'ān (*Qur'ān kī ʿaẓmat*) and the greatest capital (*sarmāyah*) of Muslims. Intriguingly, this distinctness is argued via a comparison of the Qur'ān with the scriptures of other religious traditions. Arguments are put forth to demonstrate four "problems" with the Torah (*Taurait*), six "reasons" that put the Gospels (*Injīl*) in doubt, and four "veils" that undermine the reliability of the Holy Vedas (*Vaid-i Muqaddas)*.[21] The limitations of the claims regarding the reliability of other religious

---

[19] The discovery and discussion of a Qur'ānic manuscript in 1912 from Bankipur in *The Moslem World*—an overtly missionary quarterly journal then—provided perhaps a fresh impetus to this already heated issue. See W. St. Clair Tisdall, "Shiʿah Additions to the Qur'an," *The Moslem World* 3, no. 3 (1913): 225-41.

[20] Naqvī, *Taḥrīf-i Qur'ān kī Ḥaqīqat*, 5-6.

[21] Ibid., 12-44. His intertextual scriptural references and arguments reveal that Naqqan Ṣāḥib had read and was familiar with these scriptures.

scriptures are then juxtaposed with "nine distinct excellences" of the Qur'ān,[22] all vouching for the uncontestable and indelible reliability of the established text. But why does he argue within the context of the ages-old sectarian polemic for the Qur'an's superiority over scriptures of other religious communities? This is where we stumble upon an unmistakable and ubiquitous aspect of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings and speeches. While rooted in polemic and apparently intended to clarify misperceptions among Sunni Muslims, from the very beginning, the Qur'ān is upheld as the most universal, most reliable, and simply the greatest text.

To demystify and dismantle the myth of the Shīʿī Qur'ān, the rest of the treatise then takes on the classical debate within the matrix of the *ʿulamā'*s discursive tradition, yet with an eye toward a lay modern Muslim reader. The closing words—far from being the concluding remarks of a scholarly treatise—seek nothing less than to rest the "Shīʿī Qur'ān case" once and for all, and read like a Shīʿī creedal statement, even a manifesto:

The Conclusion from the Whole Discussion (or My Belief)

> The present Qur'ān is God's speech, [His] transcendent revelation, [the] miracle of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) and [it] is mandatory for Muslims to live by it in practice. To oppose any part [of it], or to oppose its entirety, is to oppose God. Adherence to it is a pillar of every Muslim's religion and his most significant duty. Other than the present Qur'ān, no chapter, verse or alphabet has been proven to be part of the Qur'ān, nor could any such thing become the basis for Qur'ānic commandments.[23]
>
> *Wa Allāh yuḥiqq al-ḥaqq bi kalimātih*
> ʿAlī Naqī Naqvī
> Lucknow
> Jumādā al-ʿŪālā, 1351 AH (September, 1932 CE)

A Memorial for the Shīʿī Memorizers of the Qur'ān[24]

Naqqan Ṣāḥib's text, *Tadhkirah-i Ḥuffāẓ-i Shīʿah*, was published two years later almost as a long addendum to the previous text. The issue at hand in this text is the complaint from the Sunnis that the Shīʿīs do not take the Qur'ān seriously enough to have consistently produced memorizers

[22] Ibid., 44-51.
[23] Ibid., 204-05.
[24] Naqvī, *Tadhkirah-i Ḥuffāẓ-i Shīʿah* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press, 1934).

of the Qur'ān (*ḥuffāẓ-i Qur'ān*). While the former text construed the debate along the lines of Muslim unity, in the introduction to his *Tadhkirah*, he advances—louder than ever, whether before or after—a deep sense of betrayal of and persistent conspiracy against the Shī'īs throughout Muslim history and their tragic consequences:

> From the beginning of Islam, Shī'ī Islam has suffered from a vast variety of difficulties. It had to face the sinister activities of its opponents with such difficulties that, in view of those, the disappearance of the traces of Shī'ī Islam's accomplishments of life (*kārnāmahā-i zindagī*) aside, it was not far from a distant impossibility that Shī'ī Islam's own existence would have disappeared without any traces. Even a cursory review of the pages of history would reveal such frightening images of the [level of] opposition and hostility, [so much so] that a human being faced with the fact of Shī'ī Islam's survival and existence would [alone] be enough to compel him to see it [i.e., Shī'ī Islam's endurance] as a [tremendous] mystery of nature (*rāz-i qudrat*) and an affirmation from the Unseen (*tā'īd-i ghaibī*). The legacy of its intellectual excellence and religious contributions belong to a wholly another level [of mystery]!
>
> The world is not [a] worshipper of the Truth (*ḥaqīqat parast*), but instead a spell of devastation and ruin (*shikast-o rīkht*). In human nature, the passion for the two elements of fear and desire (*khauf-o ṭama'*) is operative in full force. The world's biggest crimes are carried out under [the canopy of] these two psychological states. Shiism also faced the extreme and incessant force of these two weapons. On the one hand, swords hung over the heads of those who were condemned of crime for merely speaking the name Shiism; and on the other, the open mouths of treasures would invite [them] in chorus by the temptation of gold and silver coins. . . .[25]
>
> Read *al-Shī'ah wa Funūn al-Islām* [Shī'īs and Sciences of Islam], the book of the Allama of the time, Āghā Sayyid Ḥasan Ṣadr, and witness [for yourself the fact] that there is not a [single] discipline or science in which the Shī'īs did not take part in first, and where this community, crushed by injustices and opposition, was not the trailblazer and guide. Alas! Thanks to the coldness and lack of support of the world the intellectual and religious achievements of Shī'īs are [still] veiled from public eyes.[26]

The preface then goes on to blame the Shī'ī community itself for not being attentive and devoted to preserving the contributions of its scholars and for having somewhat internalized this critique. Naqqan Ṣāḥib also notes that this particular polemic is unique to the Indian context:

---

[25] Ibid., 3-4.
[26] Ibid., 5-6.

> Among these false fabrications, whose recurrence in publication began right from the beginning of Shiism, there is a [certain] view whose false fame is confined to Hindūstān alone, and through which there has been an attempt to taint the dignity and excellence of individual Shīʿīs. Many among the folks of Islam have given space to this idea in their hearts and minds that among Shīʿīs there are no *ḥuffāẓ-i Qur'ān*, nor can there be.[27]

Here again, instead of simply dispelling the polemical argument, the first half of the text, spread over 107 (of the 194 total) pages, is dedicated to six orientational discussions (*tabṣirāt*),[28] namely:

1. Memorizing words and memorizing meaning (*ḥifẓ-i alfāẓ aur ḥifẓ-i maʿānī*);
2. The old usage of the [term] "memorization of the Qur'ān" (*ḥifẓ-i Qur'ān*);
3. Lack of attention to memorization of the Qur'ān by the Companions [of the Prophet];
4. The real reason for the plentiful memorizers of the Qur'ān [in Sunni Islam];
5. Various consequences of writing, reciting, and memorizing the Qur'ān;
6. The reasons for the lack of attention to Qur'ānic memorization by the Shīʿīs, and Shīʿī contributions to [explicating] the Qur'ān's meaning.

Yet the thrust of each is the same and thus can be seen as the central argument of this text: The preservation and memorization of the meaning of the Qur'ān is more significant than the preservation and memorization of its words. The first orientational discussion, for example, cites many *aḥādīth* emphasizing the greater significance of retaining meaning over retaining words, or else the Qur'ān, "will not go deeper than their throats (*lā yujāwiz ḥanājirahum*)."[29] Naqqan Ṣāḥib writes, "We wanted to show that from the religious point of view, memorizing the Qur'ān in a way where it remains confined only to its words while its meanings fail to affect the soul, is not a commendable act. Rather, if an occasion arises for criticism (*madhammat*), it deserves mention."[30] This treatise indeed was precisely that occasion for criticism from Naqqan Ṣāḥib.

---

[27] Ibid., 13-14.
[28] Ibid., 15-100.
[29] This is a reference to a Prophetic *ḥadīth* reported in Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Bāb man rāyā bi qirā'at al-Qur'ān aw ta'akkala bihi aw fakhara bihi, https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5058.
[30] Naqvī, *Tadhkirah-i Ḥuffāẓ-i Shīʿah*, 28.

The first preliminary discussion also contains a sub-section: "The recitation and reading of the Qur'ān and its benefits." At best it is a misnomer; there is simply no discussion of the benefits of reciting or reading the Qur'ān. He mentions "ten benefits." But in each case, so the argument goes, it is the meaning and content—not the words—that are critical to the Qur'ān's preservation and memorization.[31] The second part of the treatise then turns to the actual polemical criticism itself. As a detailed *scholarly proof,* Naqqan Ṣāḥib goes on to list and discuss the Shīʿī *ḥuffāẓ* of the first Islamic century.

Other Texts

Mention must also be made of two important theological treatises driven by sectarian polemic. *The Imamate of the Twelve Imams and the Qur'ān,*[32] a short treatise, states the polemical question: "Prove from the Qur'ān that the Imams are twelve in number and provide evidence from the Qur'ān of the existence of the Last [12th] Imam."[33] In the context of his response, we see Naqqan Ṣāḥib lay out a few significant exegetical principles: "To the extent one observes the Qur'ānic style of speech (*ṭarz-i bayān*), it has expressed certain matters by way of illustrations (*naẓā'ir*) and has invited the intellects of those with intellect to draw conclusions from these illustrations."[34] Citing many Qur'ānic verses he concludes that "we learn [from these verses] that the stories told in the Qur'ān are not just stories. Their purpose is to establish an illustrative model from which people can obtain guidance toward certain reality."[35] The rest of the treatise will build the case for the veracity of the Shīʿī doctrine of imamate and the imamate of the Twelve Imams through the Qur'ānic story of Moses and the Israelites.

Then there is the 144-page (three-part) *Principles of Religion and the Qur'ān,*[36] written during his seminary days in Najaf as an answer to an

---

[31] Ibid., 28-49. A question remains regarding Naqqan Ṣāḥib's argument. On the one hand, he always argues for giving precedence to the preservation of meaning over words, and he never explicitly forbade the reading and reciting of the Qur'ān. Yet, in view of his argument, if there were no study and learning of the meaning, one wonders what purpose the widespread practice of recitation of the Qur'an may have in Muslim South Asia. Thus far in his writings, I have not found any overt approval, commendation, or praise for the practice of recitation and reading.

[32] Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī, *Imāmat-i A'immah-i Ithnā' 'Ashar aur Qur'ān* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press/Imamia Mission: 1933).

[33] Ibid, 3.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 5.

[36] Naqvī, *Uṣūl-i Dīn aur Qur'ān* (n.p.: n.p., *ca.* 1932).

Aḥmadī pamphlet from 1928 that challenged Shīʿīs to present proof from the Qur'ān for their religious doctrines (the pamphlet itself was included in the text). Here again, an exegetical principle of the centrality of *ʿaql* (intellect) is discussed at length: "He[, the interlocutor,] wants all principles of religion to be proven through the text of the Qur'ān, and does not want the *ʿaql* to interfere. But who will ask the questioner: What form will faith in the Qur'ān take without the *ʿaql*?"[37] As an *uṣūlī* scholar, the *ʿaql* plays a central role in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's intellectual project, but its discussion remains beyond the scope of this paper.[38]

Finally, there is a short treatise, "The Qur'ān and the Political Order" that argues against an essay by Kausar Niazi in favour of *shūrā* (consultation) as a basis for Islamic polity. Pointing to the limitations of *shūrā*, Naqqan Ṣāḥib posits through Qur'ānic verses the necessity of an absolute infallible religious guide.[39]

Fresh Themes and Creative Approaches

Moving away from polemically driven texts, we turn now to texts that offer substantially original and pioneering approaches and content.

The Universal Statements of the Qur'ān[40]

The next two texts published in the same year clearly illustrate Naqqan Ṣāḥib's Islamic universalism I mentioned earlier. Here he attempts to compile verses of the Qur'ān that offer key *Islamic* declarations of universal import and application for the global human community. Here is the preface:

> Just as many people misunderstand and misapply the meaning of "respect" (*ravādārī*) and its usage, they have also forgotten the correct meaning of universalism or multiculturalism (*bain al-aqvāmiyat).*[41] Some embrace [universalism], but incorrectly. Others become weary of it, or even deeply irritated by it, all simply because they do not understand it. Multiculturalism does not mean agreeing with everyone else's view, or even endorsing falsehood and denying truth for the sake of others. Instead, it means to have in view—irrespective of any national or communal distinctions—those interests that are related to the welfare of

[37] Ibid., 65.

[38] I have extensively discussed this theme elsewhere. See Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Rethinking, Reconfiguring, and Popularizing Islam: Religious Thought of a Contemporary Indian Shi'i Scholar" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2011), 15-60.

[39] Sayyid ʿAlī Naqī Naqvī, *Qur'ān aur Niẓām-i Ḥukūmat* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press/Imamia Mission, 1972). I have not been able to trace the essay by Kausar Niazi.

[40] Naqvī, *Qur'ān kē Bain al-Aqvāmī Irshādāt* (Lucknow: Imamia Mission, 1976).

[41] Literally rendered, *bain al-aqvāmiyat* is "internationalism."

> all of humanity. Emphasis upon such higher realities and their perpetual presence in the mind will be a source for unifying all nations. A general attitude of "wishing everyone well" that brings out certain hidden intellectual principles to eradicate estrangement among nations will inculcate a feeling of humanity's unity and will also secure world peace. When we study the Qur'ān, we find [in it] many such verses. In this essay, along with [jotting down] appropriate commentary, we have chosen a few such verses as a sample of them.

To make his case, Sayyid al-'Ulamā' goes on to thematically organize and cite certain Qur'ānic verses of universal import and relevance for the global human community. Representative of his style and characteristic traits of his many writings, the text is succinct, thought-provoking, and novel. His contribution lies in distilling and assembling such verses (sometimes only a fragment of a verse), giving short headings that highlight the key Qur'ānic teaching in the verse and accompanying explanatory comments. Under each theme, after delineating the emphasis and teaching in the selected scriptural passage, he cites and engages past and present—both Sunni and Shī'ī—Qur'ānic commentaries on the verse.[42] Here I will only mention the first four short themes and chapters as illustrative examples, from the original seventeen:

1. **The Creator's All-Encompassing Compassion and Universality of the Lordship (*Rabūbiyyat*):**[43] Based on the *basmalah*-verse, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's discussion is a case in point vis-à-vis his universalizing intent. That there is only one Compassionate Creator across all the universes, in his analysis, not only obstructs *shirk*, but more importantly, lays the foundation for a real possibility of one united world (*ittiḥād-i 'ālamī*), one that human civilizations have always sought but have not achieved: "The foundation is there; Islam has always been inviting the world to build [a unified world] upon its foundation, and always will," he concludes.[44]
2. **Proclamation of Faith's Universality:**[45] Based on the Qur'ānic verse 2:4, "Who believe in what has been sent down to thee *and what has been sent down before thee*, and have faith in the Hereafter,"[46] Naqqan Ṣāḥib contends that "In light of Qur'ānic guidance, every Muslim believes that from the beginning of creation, in every nation and country, God had given birth to guides of religion (*hādiyān-i dīn*). Believing in the

[42] Abū 'l-Kalām Āzād and Abū 'l-A'lā Maudūdī particularly standout from among the contemporary South Asian commentators.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Ibid., 6.
[45] Ibid., 7.
[46] All translations are from *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

truth of this reality is [an essential] constituent of Islam."[47] Naqqan Ṣāḥib's affirmation of the truth of religion, and by extension other religions, is "generic" (*ijmālī*), i.e., without specification. One implication of this Qur'ān-based generic affirmation of religious history of humanity is simply that "it is not dignified for a Muslim that he utters inappropriate or insulting words [about their religious founders], since there is a doubt that they may be from among the true guides of religion, faith in whom is essential according to the Qur'ān."[48]

3. **Coercion in the Affair of Religion is not Right**:[49] Based on the Qur'ānic verse 2:256 "No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. . . ," Naqqan Ṣāḥib's analysis of the occasion for revelation and support of other commentaries concludes that "in truth, religion (*dīn*) is related to a human being's heart and mind. That which is accepted under compulsion, can it ever be religion?"[50]
4. **Religious or National Affiliation is Irrelevant for Charity:**[51] Based on the Qur'ān 2:272 "Thou art not responsible for guiding them; but God guides whomsoever He will. And whatever good you expend is for yourselves. . . ," "this question has always been asked: 'If a person from another religion asks [for help], is it all right to help him according to [our] religion?'" In this section, Naqqan Ṣāḥib is concerned primarily with this question. Again, through the occasion of revelation and support of other commentaries, he categorically concludes, "The meaning of this verse is that while doing charity you should not be concerned whether the person is a Muslim or an unbeliever. All you need to see is that there is a human being and he is in need of your help. So just help him."[52]

The Criterion of Civility and Respect in the Glorious Qur'ān's Manner of Discourse[53]

Written in the same year as the previous text, this short text reads almost like an addendum. The preface opens with the following words:

> The meaning of respect (*ravādārī*) is not to deny the truth or accept falsehood. Instead, it means that opposers of truth are spoken to, or an idea is presented to one's interlocutor in such a way that the harshness of speech does not hinder [the interlocutor's] attentiveness to the truth. One should not cause the interlocutor to persist in refuting the truth, which

[47] Naqvī, *Qur'ān kē Bain al-Aqvāmī Irshādāt*, 7.
[48] Ibid., 8.
[49] Ibid., 10.
[50] Ibid., 11
[51] Ibid., 12.
[52] Ibid., 13.
[53] Naqvī, *Qur'ān-i Majīd kē Andāz-i Guftagū maiṇ Miʿyār-i Tahdhīb-o Ravādārī* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press, 1976).

> may at times require the truth to not be posited in a straightforward, candid way. Instead, one must choose a manner that would instil a nagging quest for the truth in the interlocutor's conscience, such that if the addressee—based on the judgement of his free conscience—were to choose to search for the truth, he would reach it. There are many examples [of this approach] in the pure words of the leaders of Islam, i.e., the fourteen infallible ones. For now, we will only present some illustrations from the Glorious Qur'ān.[54]

Here I will cite only one example. Section five posits the following verse:

> Say, "People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God." And if they turn their backs (*fa in tawallū)*, say, 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.'"[55]

Sayyid al-'Ulamā' considers the Qur'ānic invitation itself as courteous, but focuses in particular on the last part of the verse, in other words, "if they turn their backs." He contends that despite them turning their backs,

> . . . the Qur'ān does not use harsh words, say by calling the people of the book "unbelievers," "faithless," "idolaters," etc. Even though these judgements are obviously correct, the Qur'ān did not put forth any commentary vis-à-vis the interlocutors because it would have caused bitterness (*talkhī*). Instead, the Qur'ān is restrained in its remarks: We are not concerned with who you are. Bear witness for us that we are of the same religion, the [religion] of our great ancestor, Abraham.[56]

"This is a Qur'ānic mode of conduct (*tahdhīb*)," Naqqan Ṣāḥib concludes, "which cannot be given any name other than respect (*ravādārī*)."[57] A text quite relevant to questions regarding interfaith relations and dialogue, it is comprised of some twenty-one such verses and their commentary.

Ḥusayn and the Qur'ān[58]

To my knowledge, this short essay is unprecedented in its approach to introducing Ḥusayn b. 'Alī and is really unique even within his own large corpus of deliberations on Ḥusayn and Karbala. What is portrayed in just

---

[54] Ibid., 3.

[55] Qur'ān 3:64. Interestingly, this is the same verse that in 2007 inspired and became the basis for the "A Common Word" initiative, which began with a letter from Muslim leadership to their Christian counterparts, and later continued through conference presentations, published volumes, and Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue meetings. For details, see https://www.acommonword.com/.

[56] Naqvī, *Andāz-i Guftagū*, 11-12.

[57] Ibid., 12.

[58] Naqvī, *Ḥusain aur Qur'ān* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press/Imamia Mission, 1957).

a few pages here is nothing less than a Qur'ānic manifesto and a testimonial to the heroic life and deeds of Ḥusayn. Signified by and wrapped in Qur'ānic verses and idioms, the historical and mythological backdrop to Ḥusayn's birth, his life, his sacrifice, key moments of the journey to Karbala, his martyrdom, and its aftermath are all shown to be rooted in and having emerged from within the Qur'ānic matrix. Not only does this essay unambiguously avow the perennial Shīʿī claim that an Imam is a walking Qur'ān, but it also weaves a Qur'ānic witness to Ḥusayn's life, mission, heroism, and end. Treading the hermeneutical space between the typological and the allegorical and then intertwining both, Karbala and Ḥusayn clearly emerge as prefigured and foreshadowed within the Qur'ān. Given its hermeneutical particularity and as a unique example of how *ta'wīlī* exegesis—so central to the Shīʿī Qur'ānic exegesis tradition[59]—has continued into the contemporary period, I invite the reader to explore the full English translation of the text.[60]

Before we move on from the discussion of this treatise, an additional comment seems quite critical. The overwhelming fame—or notoriety—of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's *Shahīd-i Insāniyat* (The Martyr of Humanity)[61] has clearly eclipsed his other writings on Ḥusayn and Karbala. This is because of the domineering impact the response to this book has had on shaping both how his Shīʿī audience and even Western scholarship views Naqqan Ṣāḥib's position on Karbala. Centred exclusively on *Shahīd-i Insāniyat,* a book written quite early in his intellectual career, notice, for example, Jones's following observation:

> Indeed, 'Alī Naqī seems to have gone further than many authoritative renditions of Husain's martyrdom in his omission of any bonds between the celestial and worldly realms. One example is the absence within *Shahid-i insaniyat* of any reference to direct communication between Husain and God during the former's prayer.[62]

---

[59] For an overview of Shīʿī Qur'ānic exegesis and centrality of *ta'wīl* (and esotericism) in Shīʿī Qur'ānic exegesis, see Sajjad Rizvi, "Twelver Shīʿī Exegesis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 706-20.

[60] Sayyid Ali Naqī Naqvī, "Ḥusayn and the Qur'an," trans. Syed Rizwan Zamir, *al-Sidrah* 8 (2018), http://www.aiseminary.org/al-sidrah/qur%CA%BEanic-biography-imam-%E1%B8%A5usayn-translation-sayyid-al-%CA%BFulama-%E1%B8%A5usayn-%CA%BFa-qur%CA%BEan/, accessed April 13, 2022.

[61] Naqvī, S*hahīd-i Insāniyat* (Lahore: Imamia Mission Pakistan Trust, 2006). This is still one of the most comprehensive studies of Ḥusayn's life and the events of Karbala in Urdu by a Shīʿī scholar.

[62] Jones, "Shi'ism, Humanity and Revolution," 421.

In sum, Ḥusayn is humanized and becomes a human exemplar. But what about this essay? How do we make sense of it? This essay, along with many others, is a strong counterpoint to this widespread perception. A more intriguing and fruitful challenge—one that could hardly be dealt with here—will be to see how one could read *Shahīd-i Insāniyat* together with this text, and his copious other writings and speeches on the subject.

The Interplay of Mythology, History, and Ethics in *The History of Islam*[63]

A peculiar case even within Naqqan Ṣāḥib's oeuvre, the first forty-page prelude to the early history of Islam is unambiguously an act of storytelling inspired both in form and content by Qur'ānic storytelling. This telling of Islam's sacred story is deeply rooted within the Qur'ān itself, and with a characteristically Shī'ī twist. What is predominantly a work on the life of the Prophet opens with the creation story, under the section "Beginning of Creation" (*āghāz-i āfarīnash*):

> Allah and Allah alone was there. Nothing else. By the gesture of His Will was born a *light* that illumined the possibilities of existence within the all-pervasive darkness of non-existence. *Thirteen other lights* were radiating in that luminous arena. In the rays of these lights that became the encompassing atmosphere, millions of small and big lights began rolling about restlessly [for expression]. There was no temporality for us to tell how long this lasted. Then, spirits were born, who, along with the lights, swept the breeze of life for all that was other than God. All beings with spirits, which were to be born till the day of Resurrection, were now gathered with their qualities of will and intelligence. The Creator then took a pledge from them regarding the knowledge of, and obedience to, their Lord. They affirmed and covenanted the same.[64]

This mytho-theological story continues until the *jinn*, angels, and eventually, Adam appear on the scene.[65] Despite God's command, 'Azāzīl—a *jinn* who was accepted into the company of angels in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's telling—refuses to prostrate to Adam, God's representative on Earth. He was banished from the company of angels but asked for

---

[63] Sayyid Ali Naqī Naqvī, *Tārīkh-i Islām* (Karachi: Mahfuz Book Agency, 1996).

[64] See Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 1," *al-Sidrah* 10 (2020), http://www.aiseminary.org/al-sidrah/islams-sacred-story-a-contemporary-retelling-part-1/; Zamir, "Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 2," *al-Sidrah* 10 (2020), http://www.aiseminary.org/al-sidrah/islams-sacred-story-a-contemporary-retelling-part-2/, accessed April 13, 2022, the quote is from part 2; emphasis added.

[65] Naqvī, *Tārīkh-i Islām*, 4.

permission to explore the fate of humans and possibly mock God's claim of human superiority over angels. God responded: "You can strive your hardest but some sincere and virtuous humans will live such that they will not succumb to your instigations, and will not deviate from the path of truth and virtue." Humanity until today then is caught between upholding God's covenant and the machinations of 'Azāzīl, now Satan.[66] This telling of the Qur'ānic story in turn undergirds the ethical challenge faced by humanity until eternity.

The borderline between history and scriptural stories has clearly been blurred. The approach in these opening pages stands in stark contrast to the deep rift—almost to the point of divorce—between history and theology as intellectual disciplines in modern Western intellectual tradition and a hallmark of Western modernity. David Nirenberg's recent essay clarifies the unique challenge in this regard of "the 'kerygmatic' life-orientational traditions [e.g., Judaism, Christianity and Islam]—those that call for an ultimate commitment on the plane of the historical."[67] Nirenberg's analysis of major Western thinkers highlights the insurmountable gap between the demands of reason and how Abrahamic religions form their historical commitments via revelation and scripture. Interestingly, Naqqan Ṣāḥib belongs to the camp of *ūṣūlī 'ulamā'*, and thus methodologically posited the primacy of *'aql*. Yet, he does not seem to experience the same tension here. Put differently, how was he (and other *ūṣūlī 'ulamā'*) able to avoid the tension between intellectual and scriptural data? How did his emphasis on *'aql* stand reconciled with historical data? Instead of the rift, what we notice in this (hi)story is a three-dimensional interplay between the "ethical," "historical," and the "mythical":

> Just as the ethical is intertwined with the historical, the historical in turn is intertwined with the mytho-theological. History as "narration of what happened at a given moment in historical time" is thus embedded within a "sacred mythology" that sets the backdrop for the *meaning* of these events. Mytho-theology and history thus meet within an interpretive circle which makes it impossible to separate them or point out a clear hierarchy between the two. Even when he seemed to be historicizing mythology—

[66] Ibid.

[67] David Nirenberg, "The Historian as Theologian: A Conflict of the Faculties?" in *Claiming History in Religious Conflicts*, ed. Adrian Brandli and Katharina Heyden (Basel: Schwabe, 2021), 341. Nirenberg borrows the terms "kerygmatic" and "life-orientational" traditions from Marshall Hodgson, the well-known orientalist historian of Islam.

and ran into serious controversies[68]—the historical analysis was an extension of this mytho-theology that undergirds the vision of history itself.[69]

More specifically this four-volume work is an account of the Prophet's life and that of the early Muslim community. To set the historical record straight, on occasions he turns to the Qur'ān itself for historical evidence. The most significant such instance is Sayyid al-'Ulamā''s noticeably disproportionate attention to the Battle of Badr, spanning some sixty-five pages.[70] His presentation of the Battle of Badr is one of the most elaborate discussions of the thorny question of the intentions and underlying causes of that battle. At stake in resolving that issue is the looming question of whether the Prophet initiated Badr or not. In the modern age, any assessment of the worth of Islam as a world religion was haunted by the spectre of a sustained assault on the Prophet's life and character by certain Christian missionaries and secular intellectuals.[71] Among South Asian Muslims the religious consciousness of this matter was particularly heightened since the publication of William Muir's infamous biography of the Prophet.[72] Put simply, this is an example of a *new* issue forced by the *nayā daur* (new age). Therefore, an evaluation of the Prophet's military career—and by extension the first battle of Islam—became the cornerstone of this offensive or defensive war on the part of Muslims. Naqvī argues that the Battle of Badr was a defensive *jihād*; the Prophet neither intended to attack nor do the historical reports of raiding Meccan caravans carry any weight. But how does he make this argument against the overwhelming evidence in al-Ṭabarī and other Muslim historical sources?[73] It is here that Sayyid al-'Ulamā' turns to the Qur'ān for support, basing his arguments on what he deemed to be two key Qur'ānic verses.

---

[68] For a detailed discussion of this controversy in relation to the publication of *Shahīd-i Insāniyat*, see Jones, "Shi'ism, Humanity, and Revolution."

[69] Zamir, "Islam's Sacred Story: A Contemporary Retelling-Part 2." This two-part essay also shows that Sayyid Naqvi's presentation of Ḥusayn's life and deeds at Karbala situates him as the ultimate mythical hero of Islam's sacred story. This three-dimensional hermeneutic is yet another instance to note why Sayyid Naqvi's Islamic humanism more broadly along with the *prima facie* humanization of Ḥusayn in *Shahīd-i Insāniyat* must not be taken at face value, nor equated straightforwardly with Western humanism.

[70] Naqvī, *Tārīkh-i Islām*, 157-222.

[71] For example, see Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam Across the Centuries* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

[72] Originally published in four volumes from 1858-1861.

[73] For example, see Alfred Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 281ff.

Clearly, our author is quite aware of the daunting challenge ahead, and of the extent to which he was up against the consensus of the Muslim historical writings. That is why he prefaces the discussion of the Qur'ānic verses by reminding his audience of why and how that intellectual move could make rational sense. But does it make sense because scripture trumps and overwhelms history, or because the Qur'ān itself at times is to be approached as a historical document? His answer is the latter. For Sayyid al-'Ulamā', this is one such occasion where approaching the Qur'ān as a historical document is quite critical, for as he notes, "The narratives offered by the Qur'ān in regard to the circumstances and the life of the Prophet of God should carry historical significance even for non-Muslims."[74] He posits other arguments as well, invoking, for example, the Prophet's character, pointing out that since the Prophet's enemies knew him as *ṣādiq* and *amīn*, there would have been an uproar from them if the Prophet had falsified any of the details of what had truly transpired. Sayyid al-'Ulamā' also asks the readers to ponder that if indeed aggression was intended on the Prophet's part, why would he spend time building not one but *three* mosques in Medina in just the first year of his arrival there? And all this is not even to mention the sheer lack of resources needed for warfare. These acts would make no strategic sense whatsoever.[75]

Discussing and commenting at length on the two verses 22:39-40 and 4:77,[76] Naqqan Ṣāḥib argues that Qur'ānic evidence provided by these verses wards off any suspicion that the Prophet initiated the Battle of Badr. But if the Qur'ānic evidence was so unambiguous, whence came the impulse in Muslim historical sources to attribute the Badr initiative to the Prophet? In a classic Shīʿī refrain, he attributes this problem to the influence of Umayyad and Abbasid interventions in Muslim historiography. In passing, Sayyid al-'Ulamā' also draws a strong parallel between certain historical accounts of the Karbala narrative and those of Badr. In both cases, he notes, to mislead the later generations of the Muslim *ummah*, caravan raiding was introduced to insinuate doubts regarding the moral perfection of the Ahl al-Bayt. In debating the Battle of Badr, Naqqan Ṣāḥib is clearly arguing against both missionary attacks from the outside and tensions within the Sunni-Shīʿī view of the Prophet.

It is time now to turn to Naqqan Ṣāḥib's Qur'ānic elucidations from two other venues: his oral and written *tafsīr*.

---

[74] Naqvī, *Tārīkh-i Islām*, 160.
[75] Ibid., 159-60.
[76] Limitations of space do not allow the elaboration of his arguments.

The Oral and the Written *Tafsīr*

Rarely has a Shī'ī scholar of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's *mujtahid-'ālim* stature spoken to Shī'ī laity through Shī'ī commemorative gatherings (*majālis*), the very backbone of Shī'ī religious life in South Asia. The pulpit there was, at least in his time, customarily reserved for a *dhākir*, i.e., a speaker of limited religious training. Many of his writings that have come down to us are, in fact, transcripts of his *majālis*-sermons.

Qur'ānic Elucidations from the Pulpit: Insights from the Format of a Shī'ī Commemorative Gathering (*Majlis*)

In general, scholars of religion understand that discrete statements from a major religious scholar should be contextualized and understood against the backdrop of his oeuvre. Yet, it is often forgotten (Naqqan Ṣāḥib is a case in point, but there are many other examples in contemporary Shī'ī and Sunni South Asia) that beyond the written words, i.e., their writings, religious scholars also operate within a rich and enormous oral context. In fact, sometimes the "oral" transmission of knowledge takes precedence over the "written."

Some preliminary remarks regarding the setting of Shī'ī oral-*tafsīr* are necessary here. It is the Shī'ī commemorative gatherings (*majālis*). The basic format of *majālis* lends itself to oral *tafsīr*. Every *majlis* begins with an elaborate opening salutation to God, the Prophet, and his family, followed by a recitation of the Qur'ānic verse(s) that the *dhākir* has chosen as the theme for the day's lecture, or sometimes for a whole series of lectures. The first half of the *majlis* is then dedicated to an explication of the selected verse(s), with an intentional and dedicated effort expected on the *dhākir*'s part to tie the verse(s) and the theme to the lives of the Ahl al-Bayt; a straightforward expression of the Shī'ī impulse and sensibility that the lives of the Ahl al-Bayt are the living embodiment of the Qur'ān, and then both are deeply intertwined and connected. It is in the context of this background that the significance of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's sermons for a study of his Qur'ānic elucidations becomes clearer.

Illustrations

By sheer virtue of this format, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's *majālis*-lectures are substantially, albeit partially, Qur'ānic commentaries. Despite the constraints of the audience's expectations with this traditional *majlis* format, it is well-known that he sought to transform, and quite consciously push the limits of these constraints to make room for what

he deemed as the pressing and substantial issues of his time. His *majlis*-lectures are usually a close textual reading of the chosen Qur'ānic verse(s) along with an intellectual reflection upon its subtleties. Frequently, we also observe in these lectures a dialectic between intellect and revelation—i.e., between intellectual reflection and scriptural verses, which is a hallmark of his thought and all his writings.[77] His lectures are also then evidence of his distinct attempt and approach to a "faith-seeking understanding." Regardless of the approach—i.e., reflection-revelation, revelation-reflection, or a mix—the outcomes invariably converge.

Two illustrations should suffice to give the reader a taste of the way Naqqan Ṣāḥib engages the Qur'ān in his *majālis*-lectures. According to the compiler of the popular five-volume collection of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's *majālis*-lectures, this *majlis*-lecture from volume two was one of the twelve he could find from the many that Naqqan Ṣāḥib delivered to his Shīʿī audiences in Pakistan during his visit from India in 1981. It is titled, "*Ulū 'l-Amr*" (i.e., those in authority) and is based on the Qur'ānic verse 4:59: "O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you."[78] His lecture is simply an eliciting and weaving of the following four questions[79] that the Qur'ānic verse poses to any thoughtful reader:

1) There are three commands to obey (*aṭīʿū*) but the word "*aṭīʿū*" (obey) came twice. Why?
2) Why was the command for obedience (*aṭīʿū*) separated for Allah, but not for the Prophet (*rasūl*) and those in authority among you (*ulū 'l-amr*)?
3) In a similar verse, the Qur'ān states that "Whosoever obeys the Messenger, thereby obeys God" (4:80). Why not say one who obeys God thereby obeys the Messenger? What difference would it make?[80]
4) Nowadays, some say that the commands of the Prophet need to be followed but with the caveat that one should follow only those commands that he gives as a Prophet. Those commands and

[77] For a translation of a complete sermon titled "Belief in the Unseen (*'ilm bi 'l-ghayb*)" where his "revelation/reflection approach" is on full display, see Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: Revised, Enlarged and Updated Second Edition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2020), 512-14.
[78] Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī, "Ulū 'l-Amr," in *Majmūʿah-i Taqārīr* (Lahore: Imamia Kutab Khana, n.d.), 2:197ff.
[79] His answers and arguments are beyond the scope of this paper.
[80] This is an example of intertextual commentary, a standard practice within Shiʿi-*majālis*.

> teachings that he gave as a human being, therefore, are not seen as binding. How do we make sense of this distinction? Is it at all viable to make such a distinction?

As the second example, let's turn to the *Lā Tufsidū-Majālis* mentioned earlier. The ten-day *majālis*-lectures begin with clarifying why the "eloquent" Qur'ān would add the words *fī 'l-arḍ* (in the land). He answers that what the Qur'ān had in view is not a corrupting behaviour directed at an individual or even a neighbourhood, but one that undermines the general welfare (*mafād-i 'āmmah*) of humanity. Articulating under the subject of *fasād fī 'l-arḍ*, the various crises facing Muslims, and dissatisfaction with the reforming and conservative camps' answers, he provides an analysis of the power of religion, politics, and culture as forces which although exist legitimately there to prevent corruption (*fasād*), can, and have historically been used to perpetuate corruption against the general welfare of humanity. In sum, it is a discussion of the contemporary forces of *fasād* and his diagnosis of its reasons and possible remedy via the Qur'ān.[81] These lectures delineate concerns that drove Naqqan Ṣāḥib throughout his life and hence offer a particularly unique window into his intellectual project.

Brief Remarks on the Written Exegesis, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*[82]

While preoccupied with responding to the crisis of religion, Naqqan Ṣāḥib began the commentary project of "The Decisive Discourse" (*Faṣl al-khiṭāb*). The first volume of this intended commentary was published in 1941, still in the early years of his intellectual career. In a note from his preface, he mentions how the necessity of the intended Qur'ānic commentary was articulated vis-à-vis *old* and *new* challenges, and the whole project was intrinsic to a broader defence of Islam and carried out for the benefit of the lay Muslim reading public:

> Whether Muslims need a complete exegesis of the Qur'ān in this age can be gauged by the day-to-day objections (*i'tirāżāt*) levelled against the Qur'ān. Though responses to those objections were already available in books in the Arabic language, since lay people have not heard about them, they are intimidated by these questions. Or there are objections which are

[81] Naqvī, *Lā Tufsidū fī 'l-Arḍ*, passim.

[82] Naqvī, *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Misbah al-Quran Trust, 2011). What I offer here are some general remarks. *Faṣl al-Kkhiṭāb* deserves a thorough and lengthier examination which is simply not possible here. Those interested in Shī'ī *tafsīr* in South Asia and a comparison between this work and other Shī'ī *tafāsīr* may consult Syed Asif Raza Zaidi, "Barr-i Ṣaghīr aur Īrān kē Bīsvīṇ Ṣadī kē Shī'ah Mufassirīn kī Muntakhab Tafāsīr kā Taḥqīqī-o Taqābulī Muṭāla'ah" (PhD diss., University of Karachi, 2005). Sayyid Naqvi's *tafsīr* is discussed on 190-201.

> themselves products of the new age, and that's why ancients did not attend to answering those. The new ideas that reach this land sailing from the shores of Europe seize over the hearts and minds of many [here]. In their hearts, these ideas insinuate the kind of doubt (*shubahāt*) about every facet of religion (*madhhab*), the resolution of which, if not presented in accordance with their [i.e., of those seized by Western ideas] mindset (*dhihniyat*) and their taste, would result in them becoming captive to the doubt, which will then turn into doctrine (*ʿaqīdah*) and [become the cause of] their turning away from religion. Especially in (the country of) India, the deluge of sectarianism and inventing [new] religion (*madhhab-tarāshī*) have reached such heights, that may God protect us!. . . The only cure for all these difficulties is that a meticulously sifted proper commentary on the Qur'ān is presented in Urdu, from which laypeople could benefit, and be protected from all these difficulties.[83]

The first volume includes a 270-page long prolegomenon to the Qur'ān (*muqaddimah*). It discussed orientational-theological matters such as the difference between *aḥādīth-i qudsī* and the Qur'ān, the nature of the divine revelation (*waḥy*), the meaning of God's speech and whether God's speech is created, the history of the Qur'ān's revelation, a long section on the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān (*iʿjāz al-Qur'ān*)—subsidiary to which was an elaboration of the concept of the miracle itself[84]—the history of the compilation of the Qur'ānic text, clarification of the Sunni suspicions regarding the Shīʿī view of the Qur'ān, various recitation-styles of the Qur'ān, principles of Qur'ānic exegesis with a special emphasis on the meaning and limits of exegesis based on an opinion (*tafsīr bi 'l-ra'y*),[85] and a century-by-century account of the major exegetical works written in Islamic intellectual history. Exegesis of the Qur'ān in this volume extends until chapter 3, verse 91. Quite ambitious in scope, the commentary in certain cases extended to a few pages.

Echoing some of his concerns toward the earlier texts, the prolegomenon clarifies to the lay reader why understanding the meaning of the Qur'ān and integrating it into one's way of life are the most vital aspects of one's engagement with the Qur'ān. Consequently, he questions those engagements with the Qur'ān that are limited to mere rituals, amulets, healing, oral recitations, or kisses in reverence for its holiness. "Indeed it [i.e., the Qur'ān] descended for the general benefit

---

[83] Naqvī, *Muqaddimah-i Tafsīr-i Qur'ān* (Lucknow: Nizami Press, 1941): 3-4.

[84] Discussion of miracles and the Qur'ān as a miracle comes up frequently in his writings in the early decades of his intellectual career. See ibid., 32-97; Naqvī, *Tadhkirah-i Ḥuffaẓ-i Shīʿah*, 28ff; Naqvī, *Lā Tufsidū fī 'l-Arḍ*, 67-79. *Muqaddimah* in fact extensively and verbatim integrated his earlier writings on the Qur'ān.

[85] Naqvī, *Muqaddimah*, 147ff. It was a particularly thorny question at the time.

of God's creation. The world has been instructed to reflect on its subjects, draw conclusions from them, and put those [conclusions] to practice."[86] He asks, "What does it mean to enact *tamassuk bi 'l-Qur'ān* (holding fast to the Qur'ān)?" Explicitly criticizing the Ahl al-Qur'ān movement, he argues that the "silent guide Qur'ān" in which matters are discussed broadly and summarily, demands engagement with the words and teachings of the "speaking guide," the Prophet and his progeny.[87] In the addendum, he asks, "Is the Qur'ān difficult or easy?" in which he provides five arguments and an extended discussion against the absurdity of the prevalent notion that it is the latter and that by reading the Qur'ān—whether in Arabic or translation—independently of other exegetical works and interpretive skills and tools, one could arrive at the intended meaning.

The ambitious project, however, quickly came to a halt, and he would not return to it for another 30 years. In 1972, when the project was finally completed and published, his preface no longer served to situate the commentary in terms of the defence of Islam or the Qur'ān, but instead as the "religious need of the time;" for the Muslim masses to have any meaningful relationship with their sacred scripture, there was a strong need for a Qur'ānic commentary in the Urdu language. Yet, he returns to the project with limited ambition. The commentary on a verse was quite minimal, no more than a few lines. While one comparative study calls this final version "a hasty *tafsīr*" which failed to meet the expectations of scholars because of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's intellectual stature,[88] another argues that the real *tafsīr* is to be discovered in the translation itself, and the author's deep attention to it.[89]

The format of *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*, if it conforms to the traditional verse-for-verse style, also departs from traditional methods in the following ways: simplification of the language, avoidance of lengthy and tortuous discussion of philological and grammatical nuances (nuance was subordinated instead to the transmission of what he saw as the intended message), accuracy in translation—by way of sifting through various contemporary translations and employing classical sources—, a succinct exposition of the essential message contained within the verse, and finally, taking for interlocutors various South Asian Sunni

[86] Ibid., 143-44.
[87] Ibid., 144.
[88] Zaidi, "Barr-i Ṣaghīr aur Īrān kē Bīsvīṇ Ṣadī kē Shī'ah Mufassirīn," 201.
[89] Naqvī, preface to *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*.

commentators.[90] In sum, the characteristic features of simplicity, directness, and avoidance of unnecessary technicalities so common in his earlier works are also present in the commentary *Faṣl al-Khiṭāb*. Clearly, in composing it Naqqan Ṣāḥib primarily had the Muslim masses in mind, not specialists.

Highlights, Observations, and Comments

Earlier in the article, I made some preliminary comments on polemics and polemical treatises written by Naqqan Ṣāḥib. In closing then, I turn to a couple of more important issues on the subject. First, did Naqqan Ṣāḥib consider himself a *munāẓarātī*, a polemicist? He did not in his explicit words. In the opening pages of a treatise discussed earlier, he notes, "I have neither picked up the pen to negate someone's faith in the Qur'ān (*īmān bi 'l-Qur'ān*) nor do I consider it a beneficial service to Islam. . . . My objective is to offer a complete analysis of the issue of the alteration of the Qur'ān."[91] In another already-cited text, we hear the following words:

> In this text [of a Sunni scholar] we also see the words that the biggest objective of the Shīʿīs is to reject the prophecy of Muḥammad-i Muṣṭafā, denial of the Qur'ān and opposition of the *ijmāʿ* (consensus [of the community]). O Lord! My complaint is to you! Is this how the duty of truthfulness and objectivity is performed? The answer to these aforementioned words demands the pen of a polemicist. I am unwilling to enter this arena. I only wanted to show what poisonous thoughts are published about Shīʿīs by writers these days.[92]

Finally, regarding the issue of divisions among Muslims and hatred and animosity—what we presume perhaps as the reason for downplaying the importance of studying texts on polemical themes—I turn to Naqqan Ṣāḥib's overt attitude toward sectarian hostilities among Muslims. How he reconfigures the polemical debate on the status of the Qur'ān has already been discussed. Expanding on those, listen also to the following relevant words:

> The accusation that "You do not believe in the Qur'ān!" is laid upon a particular [religious] group over and against its overt declaration and pronouncement. If this is not stirring discord and conflict, then what is? The natural reply to this group's [accusation] is that "No! *You* do not

[90] This aspect of his *tafsīr* is also witnessed in his other writings. He seemed to be actively familiar and engaged with the viewpoints of Sunni *'ulamā'* and public intellectuals.

[91] Naqvī, *Taḥrīf-i Qur'ān kī Ḥaqīqat* , 7.

[92] Naqvī, *Tadhkirah-i Ḥuffāẓ-I Shīʿah*, 13.

> believe in the Qur'ān." The result [of such a dynamic] is obvious: The fight among them becomes a laughingstock of others, and an independent observer gains every right to the opinion that no one's faith carries any substance or reality. [It becomes] thus an opportunity for doubting the established veracity and trust in the Qur'ān. Is this how the demand for one's love and sympathy for Islam is answered?[93]

There is, however, still more to his response to the Sunni-Shī'ī opposition. In *Lā Tufsidū,* already presented as the key text, there is a long closing lecture that mourns the disunity of Muslims of South Asia in no ordinary terms. By far, his rhetoric is at his most passionate here, scorning, mourning, and mocking Muslims left and right for what he clearly saw as a grave disaster. This pertains specifically to the problem of Muslim disunity and mutual hostility and was expressed sarcastically and with the loudest critique of all:

> When I look at the *modus operandi* of Muslims, what I observe is that the religion that was the flagbearer of teachings of peace and harmony, one that had come to eliminate differences, that same religion has been made into a source of *fasād*. Its adherents are ever ready to cut each other's throats, and willing to harm [each other] in as many ways as they can. The biggest thing that the Prophet tried to eradicate was precisely that the Muslims do not call each other unbelievers. . . . [Yet] it is our favourite hobby to crown those who disagree with us with a legal ruling (*fatvā*) of "unbelief," on the sole grounds that a person does not agree with our religious path/school (*maslak*); [this,] despite [the fact] that disagreement in human temperaments is unavoidable.[94]

The concluding words of his *Lā Tufsidū*-lectures are nothing less than a eulogy and mourning of Muslims' shortcomings in this regard:

> At a time when new laws are being promulgated and the moment when India is passing through a new phase of life (*nayā daur-i zindagī*) and everyone is concerned with enhancing power, we [Muslims] are busy in reviving our old conflicts. . . . It is an occasion of great humility for Muslims that their corrective (*iṣlāḥī*) powers are so suspended, their powers to rectify and tolerate so weakened, and the spirit of Islamic unity so declined that together they are unable to reach a point [of consensus]. Non-Muslims are now feeling a need to fix the *fasādāt* among Muslims. In other words, it is non-Muslims who have now become rectifiers of Muslims. This is a state of grave concern. If the situation does not change and keeps getting worse, then may God be the protector of Islam (*Islām kā khudā ḥāfiẓ*), and Muslims must already say a *fātiḥah* on their existence themselves.[95]

---

[93] Ibid. 6-7.
[94] Naqvī, *Lā Tufsidū fī 'l-Arḍ*, 201-02.
[95] Ibid., 206-07.

Soon after the *Lā Tufsidū*-lectures when the *Madḥ-i Ṣaḥābah-Tabarrā*-agitations of the 1930s in Lucknow mentioned earlier culminated in the violent riots in 1939 in which over 18,000 Shīʿīs were jailed, Naqqan Ṣāḥib wrote an essay which was published in the newspaper *ʿAdālat* and was then widely circulated as a pamphlet under the title *Ittiḥād*.[96] Heartbreaking and tender mourning of what had transpired, Naqqan Ṣāḥib invokes the futility of his *Lā Tufsidū* Muharram-*majālis*:

> Oh! [It is indeed] flaw of my eyes that the image which was afore floating in my head with the appearance of a "threat/warning" (*khaṭrah*), the same exists now right in front of my eyes in the form of an occurred event. Woe to the world of my mirage-like imaginations that I see a dream and think that it is true and tangibly happening in the world. Months ago, in the air of peace and concord, I saw the map of "*fasād*," saw a station on the way, and heard the blowing of a storm. I cried out: *Lā tufsidū fī 'l-arḍ* [Do not corrupt the land] and kept shouting it for ten days. Some listened to it; some did not. And those who listened did not deem it necessary to deliberate over it.[97]

Finally, a word about the academic study of oral *tafsīr* and Shīʿī *majālis* is also opportune here. Despite complaints against tyranny of the written word and by extension underappreciation of the centrality of orality in human experience and its rich and extensive legacy in human cultures,[98] the scholarly study of religion continues to privilege the written word over the oral one. That is why sermons, lectures, and speeches which are supposed to be part and parcel of a particular scholar's oeuvre and intellectual legacy and influence, must be tapped in the study of a figure's religious thought and influence. It could be argued that the Muharram-*majālis* are akin to the genre of *malfūẓāt* literature so unique to South Asian Sufi Islam. While the latter has received scholarly attention for the study of Sufism, scholars have paid much less attention to the printed lectures of preachers of various levels of scholarly training that continue to get published in Shīʿī South Asia. This is perhaps because Shīʿī *majālis* of South Asia have tended to be studied through an anthropological lens, rarely seen as "texts in themselves" or a "discourse" and "intellectual thought." Perhaps just as polemics do not

---

[96] Naqvī, *Ittiḥād* (Lucknow: Sarfaraz Qaumi Press, n.d.).

[97] Ibid., 4-5. This dedication to the cause of Muslim unity was among the most highlighted themes of the 2014 Lucknow seminar commemorating Sayyid Naqvī and his contributions. It remains an important and intriguing question how his polemic and positing of Shīʿī Islam as *the* true religion reconcile with his efforts to unite Muslims, and one that cannot be probed here.

[98] See especially studies of Walter Ong, for example, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

attract serious academic scrutiny, the "written word" is deemed relatively more "serious" and "intellectual" than the "oral word."

Concluding Remarks

The centrality of the Qur'ān to the Islamic discursive tradition means an inevitable omnipresence of the Qur'ān in all Muslim deliberations, especially those of the *'ulamā'*. From what is still only a sample, we have seen that Naqqan Ṣāḥib's engagements with the Qur'ān were quite diverse, both in the themes they tackled and the manner in which he approached or presented those. His is a case of a multi-faceted exegesis of the Qur'ān, one that encompassed varying avenues, genres, approaches, and most significantly, creative deliberations. We have also noted that Naqqan Ṣāḥib's polemic is neither an afterthought, nor a task accomplished on the side, but an intrinsic component of his intellectual project, a necessary hurdle turned into an opportunity for articulating Islamic universalism. I hope I was also able to illustrate to some extent Naqqan Ṣāḥib's universalizing intent i.e., attempts to demonstrate—even within polemical contexts—the pertinence of Islamic teachings to global humanity.

Earlier I had offered a brief overview of Naqqan Ṣāḥib's intellectual project. In view of this article, three additional interrelated observations are critical to underscoring Naqqan Ṣāḥib's significance for South Asian Islam in general, and Shiism in particular. First, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings and sermons provide a clear window into the range of religious and intellectual challenges faced by Shī'ī Muslims of the Indian subcontinent in the twentieth century. Consequently, his writings can be viewed as a *microcosm* of the Shī'ī Muslim religious landscape of modern South Asia.

Secondly, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's body of work is unique in the South Asian Muslim context for its deep attentiveness to the needs and questions of the Shī'ī community. As we have seen, most of his writings on the Qur'ān (this is true of his writings across the board) self-consciously emerge out of a concrete and existing concern, or situation that demanded—even forced—a response from Shī'ī Muslims. Echoing SherAli Tareen's able survey of Sunni *tafāsīr* of South Asia in the modern period, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's Shī'ī elucidations of the Qur'ān conform with the broader trend of shifts from elite scholarship to the lay Shī'ī piety and attending to the "needs and demands of a new public beyond the confines of a scholarly elite."[99] His whole corpus is directed at this newly emerging Shī'ī Muslim

[99] SherAli Tareen, "South Asian Qur'an Commentaries and Translations: A Preliminary Intellectual History," *ReOrient* 5 no. 2 (2020): 251, https://doi.org/10.13169/reorient.5.2.0233.

reading public. Notice, for example, the section in the Prolegomenon on whether the Qur'ān is easy or difficult. Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings do make religious knowledge accessible to a lay Urdu reading public. This is accomplished not just through the simplicity of language and distilling complex arguments into simpler commonsensical summaries, but also via ease of navigation through the radically shortened treatises, dividing a text into shorter sections and within each section an extensive use of headings, enumeration of arguments, and making bold in text certain terms. The meaning and content of the Qur'ān are vital for Muslims; it comes before all else. Yet, this meaning is not meant to be accessible uncomplicatedly, without the mediation of an expert scholar, an *ʿālim*. So, while on the one hand, there is much effort to make the Qur'ān accessible to the lay Urdu-reading public, there is still a concern for authoritative and valid interpretations. On the Sunni side, Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī's advice to his lay audience in one of his sermons echoes a similar argument and conclusion.[100] There is, however, a difference. We noted earlier that nowhere have I seen an endorsement of the plain recitation of the Qur'ān—without accompanying recourse to understanding—in Naqqan Ṣāḥib's writings. In Thānvī's case, recitation of the Qur'ān is endorsed quite straightforwardly.[101]

Finally, and linked to the two preceding observations, the writings and career of the foremost Shīʿī *ʿālim* of twentieth-century India provide an excellent avenue to gauge and observe the role of the *ʿulamā'* and the much-debated issue of religious authority in contemporary Islam. It must be obvious by now that for the lay reading public—and not restricted to Urdu-reading public alone because part of the charge of Imamia Mission founded by none other than Naqqan Ṣāḥib himself was to translate and circulate his writings in many other vernaculars in India—Naqqan Ṣāḥib consciously took up the mantle of being a "public intellectual." Intriguingly, this term is rarely ever used for the *ʿulamā'*. In an earlier article, I examined and lamented ways in which the *ʿulamā'*'s scholarly tradition and their discourse, despite much talk of them, continue to be ignored in Western scholarship.[102] I noted that "although in our study of Islamic societies, the *ʿulamā' per se* are not absent, nor their institutions or sociopolitical roles missing, yet their scholarly and

[100] See Ashraf ʿAlī Thānavī, *Khuṭbāt-i Ḥakīm al-Ummat: Dunyā-o Ākhirat*, ed. Munshī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Khān (Multan: Idārah-i Tālīfāt-i Ashrafiyyah, 2009), 1:14-19.
[101] Ibid, 19ff.
[102] Syed Rizwan Zamir, "Rethinking the Academic Study of the 'Ulamā' Tradition," *Islamic Studies* 53, nos. 3-4 (2014): 145-74.

intellectual traditions remain shrouded."[103] This article in turn is an exercise in what it would mean to take their writings, speeches, and thought seriously.

I close, then, with a basic—yet often-neglected—pointer. Despite all Naqqan Ṣāḥib's finesse and creative deliberations upon a wide spectrum of writings, ultimately, what anchored and remained central and common to all his elucidations and considerations was the pressing need to re-educate his Shīʿī Muslim audience and to empower them again to live the teachings and ethos of Islam *fully*, in all their spiritual, moral, intellectual, and sociopolitical dimensions. It is to this end that Naqqan Ṣāḥib's Qur'ānic elucidations and other works are directed. Like his Sunni counterparts, Naqqan Ṣāḥib's intellectual efforts were in SherAli Tareen's words, "in service of his audience's moral pedagogy and reform."[104] In undertaking and carrying out this task unrelentingly throughout a long and arduous religious career, he was simply living out a very basic "job description", i.e., the vocation, or calling, of a Muslim *ʿālim*, a calling that he had inherited from his own family of *ʿulamā'*, the *Khāndān-i ijtihād*, that was modelled for him by his own teachers, and reinforced by the memory and presence of countless *ʿulamā'* before him, and one that is clearly articulated within the foundational sources of the Islamic tradition itself.

* * *

[103] Ibid., 163.
[104] Tareen, "South Asia Qur'an Commentaries," 233-56.