



What is Islamic Analytic Theology?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share some thoughts and broad proposals on the prospect and definition of a contemporary Islamic Analytic Theology, the role it might play in today's world, and some of the tasks it should undertake. First, I will propose a definition of the field, in terms of its object, purpose, and methodological framework. I clarify what precisely would make such a pursuit 'Islamic,' and how it differs from what is commonly called Islamic Studies. Second, I make three proposals regarding the epistemic parameters of such a discipline. Third, I discuss how modern conditions require it to play a role differing somewhat from that historically played by the discipline of *Ilm al-Kalam*. Finally, I review some unique tasks that a contemporary Islamic Analytic Theology should undertake.

Introduction

Islamic philosophy and theology seem to have been largely relegated in our time to exercises in intellectual history. Yet Islamic belief and practice have not. Is there no role for living, contemporary work in these fields? Much of what is being done today in Christian theology, which is not of a purely historical nature, has gone under the name 'analytic theology,' as represented by well known figures like Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and Robert Adams, among others.¹ This invites reflection on the prospect of a contemporary Islamic Analytic Theology (hereafter, IAT). The aim of this paper is simply to share some thoughts and broad proposals on what this could look like, the role it might play in today's world, and some of the tasks it should undertake.

First, I propose a definition of IAT in terms of its object, purpose, and methodological framework. I argue that, in terms of its object and immediate purpose, IAT would not differ from analytic theology in general. Its object is God and His relation to creation, inasmuch as this is comprehensible within the parameters of analysis. IAT's direct purpose, then, will be to comprehend God and

¹ See Swinburne, Richard. *The Coherence of Theism 2nd ed.* (2016: OUP, Oxford); Plantinga, Alvin. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism.* (2011: OUP, Oxford); Adams, Robert. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics.* (2002: OUP, Oxford).

His relation to creation insofar as that is possible within those parameters. This makes IAT distinct from what we call ‘Islamic studies.’ What makes IAT uniquely ‘Islamic,’ then, is its methodological framework. That is, that it is done ‘Islamically.’ But what exactly does that mean? I will argue for a conception of an ‘Islamic’ method as any method that is logically compatible with one premise and one overarching aim, to which the direct purpose of IAT is subordinated as a means to an end. The overarching aim is to receive God’s pleasure and reward in the Hereafter, and the premise is that Islam is a universal message to humanity from God, providing guidance for the fulfillment of that aim.

Secondly, I advance three proposals regarding the epistemic parameters of IAT. The first is that IAT can and must be genuinely inquisitive as well as defensive of the pillars of Islamic theological belief. The second is that the epistemic parameters of analysis, under the methodological framework of IAT, do not extend to the basis of religious faith—faith is not analytically ‘falsifiable.’ The third is that the epistemic parameters of IAT do not extend beyond what the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ knew and disclosed.

Third, I discuss some unique challenges raised by conditions of modern life, which call for a change in the way we perceive the role of IAT, different from the role historically understood for *Ilm al-Kalam*, of which I understand IAT to be a contemporary continuation. Namely, a contemporary IAT would address the needs of a wider range of the modern Muslim public than was the case in the classical period. I close by describing some obligatory tasks for a contemporary IAT in that regard.

On what Islamic Analytic Theology (IAT) is, what makes it ‘Islamic,’ and why it is not the same as Islamic Studies

I take the proper object of IAT, like that of analytic theology in general, to be God and His relationship to Creation, inasmuch as this is comprehensible within the parameters of analysis. Its corresponding purpose, then, is to comprehend God and

His relationship to Creation, as far as is possible within those parameters. Islam itself, then, is not directly the object of IAT, as it presumably is of the field that today we call ‘Islamic studies.’ IAT and Islamic Studies are therefore distinct fields. Then what makes IAT ‘Islamic’? The suggestion I will make here is that this is a methodological matter: IAT pursues its object ‘Islamically.’ But what does this mean?

In today’s academic environment, to say that Islam itself is the object of Islamic Studies invites the question: what is Islam? How this question is answered fundamentally determines the nature of the field, in terms of its object, purpose, and method, such that different possible answers on offer actually define completely different fields of study. For example, research in Islamic Studies might proceed on the basis of the premise that Islam is merely a historical cultural development, and not also a universal message to humanity revealed by a transcendent Creator. On the basis of such a premise, certain Islamic methods of, and purposes for, studying Islam would be effectively excluded in favor of the hegemony of secular presuppositions. We could then say that such research is methodologically un-Islamic. For methodology must always be suited to one’s object and purpose. The Islamic purpose for studying Islam is to learn what God’s message is, so as to please Him and enter Paradise. If Islam is not a universal message from God to humanity on how to do that, then that purpose, along with any methodological elements suited to that purpose, will be excluded.

But does this mean that methodologically Islamic research should, likewise, exclude what some might call ‘un-Islamic’ methods? This depends on how we determine what methods are ‘un-Islamic.’ We should take care here, because from the premise that Islam is merely a historical cultural development, it follows that whether something is ‘Islamic’ is essentially a matter of its historical or cultural origin. And this goes both ways. The notion, that whether something is Islamic is essentially a matter of its historical or cultural origin, entails that Islam itself is merely a historical cultural development. So to exclude ‘non-Islamic’ elements from our methodology, and then to identify them by their historical origins, is decisively to adopt a secular (albeit ethnocentric), and not an Islamic

methodological position, no matter how ‘fundamentalist’ it may appear on the surface.

I suggest here that an un-Islamic methodology is one that is incompatible with the Islamic purpose for studying Islam; that is, of understanding God’s message so as to please Him and enter Paradise. Compatibility with this purpose entails acceptance of the premise, and related ontology, without which the purpose has no sense; that is, that Islam is a universal message to humanity revealed by God through the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. If use of a method entails the denial of that purpose, and/or the ontological commitments that it presupposes, then that method is un-Islamic.

Say, for example, that one proposes in the field of Islamic Studies to analyze the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the historic milieu of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. One may even propose a Marxist analytic framework to examine those conditions through the prism of class structure and conflict. It is logically possible to do so with the aim of gaining a better, more contextual understanding of the revelation itself, and by extension of how better to realize its imperatives in our own historical conditions. But if we were to deploy such a method with the aim of exhaustively explaining Islamic revelation, implying thereby that the revelation is merely an effect or function of historical material conditions (as an ideological Marxist would have it), then this would logically preclude the ontology within which the Islamic purpose for studying it makes any rational sense. The provisional adoption of an ontological framework, for methodological purposes is one thing. The adoption of a methodology for the purpose, or with the effect of imposing the hegemony of a specific ontology is another. The difference here turns on precisely what purposes one thinks can be achieved by means of the method.

Just as Islamic Studies can be methodologically Islamic or un-Islamic, so can analytic theology. The purpose of analytic theology, as proposed above, is to understand God and His relation to creation inasmuch as this is possible within the parameters of analysis. Analytic theology is Islamic:

1. Where its purpose is subordinated, as a means, to the higher purpose of becoming, by means of the acquired understanding, someone who receives God's pleasure and Paradise;
2. Where it is pursued under the premise that Islam is a universal message to humanity, revealed by God through the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ; and
3. Where the methodology it deploys is compatible with 1) and 2).

In either case, research in the field of Islamic Studies might well take the historical or contemporary tradition of Islamic theology as its object, but whether it proceeds by an Islamic or un-Islamic methodology, it would not fall within the field of IAT, as conceived here; that is, analytic theology pursued under an Islamic methodological paradigm. By this means I want to make a distinction between IAT and Islamic Studies, analogous to that between philosophy and history of philosophy, where the former is a live project distinct, though by no means independent of, or isolated from, its history.

Three proposals regarding the epistemic parameters of IAT

In relation to this history, we might ask, would contemporary IAT be strictly a defense of religious doctrine, or also an inquisitive, philosophical enterprise? This question is raised by the reasonable notion that it would be a contemporary exercise in *'ilm al-kalam*, along with the fact that the latter has usually been defined as a strictly defensive exercise. This reflects the distinction between the 'old theological approach' and the 'new theological approach' discussed by Ibn Khaldun, who credits (or blames) Al-Ghazali for initiating the latter.² Herein lies a possible objection to my construal of the purpose of IAT. If IAT is a contemporary continuation of the *kalam*, then its purpose cannot be the genuinely inquisitive, philosophical aim of comprehending God and His relation to Creation, inasmuch as that is possible through analysis. The first proposal I will suggest here is in answer to this question. IAT is indeed contemporary *kalam*, but nevertheless it cannot avoid being an exercise in genuine inquiry, for the same reasons that classical

² *The Muqaddimah*, Franz Rosenthal, trns. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1967. p. 363.

kalam could not remain purely defensive. That is, that in order to meet the intellectual challenges to Islamic belief, posed by the prospect of its carrying rationally absurd ramifications, it was necessary to articulate newly discovered philosophical insights that are not explicitly given in the revealed sources.

To take just one well-known example, the prospect was raised that the doctrine of the world's creation in time entails the absurd consequence that an infinite period of 'time before time' preceded creation, during which God 'waited around' for no reason. Since it was impossible to deny that this notion is absurd, it had to be denied that the doctrine of creation in time entails that absurdity. This led to the position that time was created with the world, before which there was no time.³ Now this obviously constitutes a new theory of a sort which is not explicitly part of the basic orthodoxy on creation that a purely defensive discipline would be expected to defend. The position, of course, was not original to Islamic theology—we find versions of it in Augustine (354-430), Boethius (480-524), and Philoponus (490-570).⁴ But again, we do not determine its status as 'Islamic' by means of historical origin, but by its compatibility with, and facilitation of, coherent Islamic belief.

As in Christianity, so in Islam, genuinely philosophical inquiries about the nature of time, eternity, motion, and causation were found to be unavoidable in the effort to defend the coherence of religious belief against intellectual challenges. Therefore, it was—and is—not really possible to circumscribe a 'purely' negative, defensive role for either IAT or *kalam*, which is not *ipso facto* also the positive and inquisitive role of expanding our understanding of the basic theological pillars by following out their logical consequences in the face of intellectual challenges. The aim of comprehending, as far as is analytically possible, and that of defending religious doctrine about God and His relation to Creation, are not actually distinct

³ Moad, Edward. "Al-Ghazali's Position on the 'Second Proof' of the 'Philosophers' for the Eternity of the World, in the First Discussion of the Incoherence of the Philosophers," *Sophia*, 2015.

⁴ Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*, P.G. Walsh, trns. Oxford University Press, 1999; Augustine. *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick, trns. Oxford University Press, 1998; Philoponus, John. *Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World*. Christian Wildberg, trns. Bloomsbury, London – New York, 2014.

purposes, but are unified, ultimately, in the effort to understand revealed knowledge as fully as possible.

So we should not think that the defensive and inquisitive are mutually exclusive postures that essentially separate a ‘purely’ theological from a ‘purely’ philosophical or scientific pursuit. Every systematic scientific inquiry operates within some paradigm, in relation to which it normally takes a conservative approach in the face of anomalies—explaining the anomaly away whenever possible, rather than discarding or fundamentally altering the paradigm.⁵ In that sense, every science is both defensive and inquisitive. It may be argued that the case of theology is distinct in that the religious nature of the paradigm renders it absolutely unfalsifiable, in the sense understood by Karl Popper as distinctive of science.⁶ Properly understood, this is true in a very limited sense. And this is the subject of my second proposal.

The limited sense in which we can concede that the theological paradigm is unfalsifiable is as follows. Our religion is understood as originating from a transcendent source, and this source is experienced as a Divine Person. This has the consequence that the religious paradigm is not thoroughly analytic in nature. At its root, it is spiritual and personal. This, I think, is at least partially what motivates the traditional wariness about *kalam*. The analytic should not have hegemony over religious life. Relating to God through the prism of analytic theology alone is like getting to know your prospective spouse by examining his or her DNA (except of course, that God doesn’t have DNA). The ideal Muslim life is more like a conversation with God. We ask of God through prayer, He expresses Himself through revelation, and we have to listen and understand as well as we can.

The falsifiability or modifiability of our understanding of God, then, is one thing; and the falsification of our very relation to God, and/or His very existence is quite another. It would not be surprising for a believer’s faith in this to remain resilient through relatively fundamental modifications in the analytic framework by which

⁵ Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press, 1962.

⁶ Popper, Karl. *Logik der Forschung*. Verlag von Julius Springer, Vienna. 1992.

he or she intellectually organizes his understanding of this relationship. The very nature of what could falsify a proposition of analytic theology is of a wholly different order from that of the very basis of faith, where the latter is an inner spiritual connection to God Himself, while the former is merely the intellectual architecture of one's understanding of that connection. The two should not be conflated. The consequence of this, methodologically, is that the epistemic parameters of analysis do not extend to the bases of faith: God's revelation and the subjective process of *hidayah* through which He renders one responsive to that message.

What then, are the parameters of theological analysis in Islam? This is really a question of the methodology of IAT; and as such the qualification 'Islamic' does pertain, because some (not all) of the answers as to what does and does not fall within the parameters of analysis have been drawn historically from Islamic revealed sources. For example, it is understood that God's Essence is not comprehensible by the human intellect. The vital connection between IAT and Islamic Studies proper lies here. While the Islamic revealed sources and the historical tradition of interpreting them is the proper object of Islamic Studies and not of IAT, it is an indispensable resource for IAT.

My third proposal is that the epistemic parameters of IAT do not extend beyond what the Prophet ﷺ knew and transmitted. The Prophet shared all that was revealed to him, and he understood all that was implicit in what was revealed to him, including all possible valid interpretations and applications of that knowledge, under any possible circumstances. So an expansion of one's understanding of what was revealed, or a change in one's understanding of revelation, concomitant with changing circumstances (e.g., when advances in natural science illuminate a Qur'anic passage in a way that is new to us), does not necessarily amount to an invalid theological innovation. However, this does not imply that any and every change is valid. There is still a logical difference between what really is an implication of the *Sunna* as understood or applied in the circumstances of a particular form of life, and what is not such an implication (though it may appear to be).

This is a logical distinction. The epistemological question of how to draw the distinction in any specific case, though crucial, is another issue. To conflate the two, so as to render a positive argument for relativism, is illegitimate. Thus, when we reach the limits of our knowledge of some issue, we say “*Allahu Alim*.” We do not indulge in jumping to the conclusion that objective knowledge is in principle impossible because ‘there is no truth,’ simply because we haven’t gotten to the bottom of it; or even if—as well may be the case—we cannot get to the bottom of it, from any absolutely non-perspectival vantage point.

This observation, that our understanding of any issue is inevitably affected by some perspectival vantage point, whether determined by social, historical, or other conditions, has often been misused as a positive justification for any position which diverts from what is often construed as an oppressive ‘mainstream’ or ‘orthodoxy.’ But this is to overlook the fact that sometimes the important question is just what is the most appropriate understanding for one to have, given one’s particular vantage point, and not how to understand things from God’s ‘perspective,’ so to speak. The proper aim of pursuing knowledge is not to become God, but to become close to God by surrendering to God as a servant, in the conditions of life in which one finds oneself.

Our predecessors in Islam found their way, from within their own conditions, by tapping the spring of Prophetic knowledge. If, with God’s grace, we find our way from within our own conditions, however different they may be, it will be by tapping the same source. If it seems that our historical and social conditions demand some radical break from the way things were understood by our predecessors, it just might be that we don’t understand our own conditions well enough. He who knows himself knows his Lord. This pertains to the conditions that change as well as those that do not. Here, again, the line between the purely ‘theological’ and ‘philosophical’ blurs, as it must.

Modern conditions and the role of contemporary IAT

What, then are the unique features of the modern condition that might demand a change in the role and shape of IAT, from that of the *kalam* of the past? Consider

the structural changes in society brought on by modern education and communication technology—what we might call the growth of an intellectual middle class. In the past, *kalam* and other forms of scientific discourse were largely limited to a scholarly elite. Ghazali, for instance, discouraged the general public from being exposed to *kalam*; but Ibn Rushd charged him with violating an even stricter standard of discursive segregation by deploying imaginative mediums that made intellectual topics more accessible to the less qualified.⁷

The Islamic tradition faces a real question, here, as regards its stance toward modernity parallel to the question it faces over the issue of participatory politics. Is education of universal value, across all sections of society? Or is it to be restricted to only a select few, in order to avoid troubling the masses with unnecessary questions that might upset religious and social order? We might hanker for the days when everyone ‘knew their place,’ but modern conditions are not feudal. It is not possible to limit the kind of education and access to information that creates a need for *kalam* to the elite. The old notion of insulating the general public from such discourse is an unrealistic anachronism. Members of the general public in Muslim society are facing challenges that in earlier times might have been limited to scholars: apparent tensions between natural science and religious belief, epistemological and ethical challenges posed by moral and religious diversity, and the demands and dilemmas of modern participatory politics and public debate.

For the most part, it seems, traditional circles of Islamic scholarship have tried to maintain the feudal exclusionary policy on discourse, expecting the general public to continue in a state of blissful *taqlid*. This has been most vividly apparent, in its political dimension, in some of the responses to the ‘Arab Spring’ movements. The problem is that the modern public is not so provincial, even in the Muslim world. They demand an account of things, proofs, explanations, and the right to ask questions. Questions are forced on them, in fact. And in the vacuum left by traditional expectations on the general public to leave what supposedly does not concern them, fundamentalist movements have provided their own proofs and

⁷ See Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Al Iqtisad fi Al I'tiqad* (Moderation in Belief), Aladdin M. Yaqub, trns. University of Chicago Press, 2013; and Ibn Rushd. *Fasl al Maqal* (Decisive Treatise), Charles Butterworth, trns. Brigham Young University Press, Provo, Utah, 2008.

explanations. Between them and their secular modernist twins, they have persuaded large swaths of Muslim society that they have a monopoly on reason and evidence, and that the Islamic tradition is mere superstition, with no rational basis in either science or religion.

The problem is that the fundamentalist logic is weak and impoverished. It eventually leads full circle to secularism in the metaphysical sense. But for the modern Muslim of the intellectual middle class, some reason is better than none, and the reason and logic of Islamic tradition has been locked away in Ibn Rushd's ivory tower. So what is happening? The tension of trying to maintain the feudal social and discursive structure in the political realm, under modern conditions of education and communication, has turned the old traditional monarchy system into a crushing military dictatorship locked in a death match against radical ideologues.

In the moral and religious realm, the link has been broken between piety and ethics, creating two separate spheres—one in which there is outward religiosity without moral conscience, and another in which there is, frankly, neither religiosity nor ethics because the only norm is conformity either to consumer culture or to the edicts of states whose legitimacy is rapidly disintegrating. In the case of the sciences, the public has been forced into a false dilemma between a 'scientific' or Islamic religious worldview, not only by an unchallenged 'scientism' that makes claims beyond its epistemological sphere, but by the absence of an Islamic intellectual approach to the problem that is both accessible to the general public and solid and sophisticated enough to meet the challenge holistically.

The result of this is a spreading fundamentalism that insists on imposing its own truncated 'proofs' on areas of *fiqh* and politics, and yet opposes any rigorous application of reason to philosophical issues underlying the relation between natural science and theology. This produces a pretense that we can greedily consume the technological products of modern science, and aspire to harnessing modern technology for Muslim empowerment, without actually engaging the worldview that gave birth to it. For the modern Muslim, knowledge and reality are effectively in the hands of materialists, while Islam is simply culture and

convention. And this situation is not incompatible with, but rather conducive to, the fiercest and most divisive forms of fundamentalist sectarianism.

To be specific, fundamentalism, as I understand it, is born in the face of the apparent impossibility of giving a reasoned account of religious belief, which in turn, motivates the abdication of intellectual responsibility. It emerges when one feels forced to choose between losing his God, or losing his mind, and one opts for losing his mind in an attempt to escape the abyss of moral confusion and atheist despair posed by the prospect of losing God. The hegemony of the modern fact-value distinction, among other things, has been instrumental in producing this dilemma. The only antidote for this condition is to provide the resources for religious intellectual responsibility that will empower the Muslim intellectual middle class to make a reasoned account of its religious life. This is precisely the role of *kalam* for the modern Muslim world: to make these resources accessible, not only to the elite, but to the general public.

The *mutakallim* of the future, the contemporary Muslim analytic theologian, should play the role of public intellectual. We need to engage our spiritual and intellectual tradition on the range of issues facing the Muslim intellectual middle class, and not just wish them away in favor of an idyllic medieval fantasy. In order to do this, we will not only need to thoroughly work out these issues, morally and philosophically at the scholarly level. We will also need to find multiple ways to make this work beneficial and accessible to the public. This requires productive partnerships with artists and media professionals to find effective methods of doing exactly what the likes of Ghazali, Rumi, and many others once did by communicating sound, abstract ideas in imaginative forms, ultimately producing a contemporary Muslim culture that is rich and enriching, both spiritually and intellectually.

Some obligatory tasks for a contemporary Islamic analytic theology

I conclude this essay by briefly discussing three questions of methodology and epistemology that are raised by the prospect of a contemporary IAT. The first

question, which touches on the nature of a contemporary IAT in relation to the classical tradition, is of the epistemological role of the moral and/or the moral dimension of the epistemological. This is a challenge posed to modern thought by the classical tradition, whether considered in its *kalam*, *falsafa*, or *tasawwuf* manifestations. All three understood there to be a relation between the moral and spiritual condition and the epistemic condition. Whether this cognitive dimension of the ‘heart’ was conceived as a faculty beyond reason, or simply the absence of an obstruction to the clarity of reason, the effect is the same, viewed from the perspective of the modern academic paradigm. Real philosophical insight and awareness was a fruit of spiritual and religious practice, not as merely something to be realized in cocktail party conversation, or simply in pursuit of academic prestige. The moral life was considered part of philosophical methodology. In this respect, also, the continuity or discontinuity between IAT and the classical tradition will be affected by how IAT conceives and carries itself in the contemporary academic environment in which it will inevitably operate.

A second question we face is whether the epistemic parameters of sound analysis are limited to objects of possible experience. If we hope for any productive and coherent engagement with the challenges of modern, post-Kantian philosophical thought and culture, we will have to deal with this question carefully and lay our cards on the table here. How we do so will distinguish (at least) two fundamentally different paradigms, and discussions carried on between scholars working across these paradigms, without having first raised this question and acknowledged this difference, will invariably lead to confusion. Among other things, the answer to this question will determine the degree, and kind, of continuity there might be between contemporary IAT and the classical tradition.

In classical discussions, a similar question would have been posed by asking whether the scope of pure reason extends beyond that of the senses and imagination. For the *falasifa*, the answer was a resounding yes. The aim of philosophical education was to raise the level of cognition, for those who are so capable, above that of the imagination to that of the purely intelligible. As for those

who, like the modern empiricists, denied this possibility in principle, the reply was that their denial simply reflected the limits of their cognitive capacity.

While my own philosophical sympathies lie on the side of the classical tradition here, I don't think the modern challenge to this can be simply brushed aside. The question constitutes an important challenge for a systematic contemporary IAT. Among other things, it will determine our approach to the obligatory problem of the relation between theology and the natural sciences and the proper role of the latter in the former. For if the epistemic parameters of sound analysis do not extend beyond the objects of possible experience, then it seems there is no way around the hegemony of the methods and findings of a certain conception of the natural sciences (and theoretical physics, in particular) over what is and is not permissible for analytic theology.

This brings us to a third question related to the connection, again, between IAT and 'Islamic studies' in the contemporary context, with regard to the role of the social sciences. Some of the discourse I find here seems dedicated to defending a dogma that rejects in principle the possibility of any unified paradigm of thought understood by the label 'Islam.' It has seemed to some, among this strain of social scientist, that they can still refer coherently to the object of their study (whatever it turns out to be on this dogma) and evade standard accusations of 'essentialism,' by coining plural forms of controversial terms (e.g., 'Islams'). Obviously the notion of an 'Islamic analytic theology' will meet objections from this corner. Shall we then speak only of 'Islamic analytic theologies'? The answer is no. And the reason is that again, the object of IAT is not identical to that of Islamic Studies.

But this raises another epistemological challenge posed to any contemporary IAT. Just as the assertion that the parameters of theological analysis do not extend beyond possible experience lends itself to the hegemony of the natural sciences, this challenge lends itself to the hegemony of the social sciences. But this both entails and follows from a position on the nature of the object of theology. The methods of a discipline have to be suited to the object. If the methods of the social

sciences are taken as hegemonic in the context of theology, the implication is that God is a social phenomena and a social construct.

The argument for such hegemony will no doubt be made, on the basis of the observation that theology, like any discipline, is an inescapably social activity. But even if we concede, for the sake of argument, that it follows from this that any possible ideas about God are social constructs, it does not follow from this that God *is* a social construct. It would follow, however, that the idea *of* God *as* a social construct, is itself a social construct, and that the circulation of such ideas among Muslims is a social phenomena. The constructivists may reject any denial that this social phenomenon also be called ‘Islam,’ but that social phenomenon would necessarily be quite distinct from another social phenomenon consisting of a shared belief in, or idea of, God as more than merely a social construct. And, this latter social phenomenon will most typically be characterized by a strong denial that the former is, properly speaking, ‘Islamic.’ So the hegemony of the methods of the social sciences in theology will certainly entail a very different ‘Islam’ and a different IAT—one of which the object is not God and His relation to creation, but some category of social phenomena consisting of social constructs, whether discursive or practical, referred to in these terms.

So, the idea of an IAT, as defined at the beginning of this essay, precludes the methodological hegemony of the social sciences, along with both the epistemological and ontological hegemony of history. But this is not to say that the social sciences have no role to play. Indeed, they may have a crucial role. IAT cannot proceed without a close study of various historical ideas, and expressions of ideas, about its proper object. We can acknowledge that these ideas about God are unavoidably influenced by social conditions, without making the false inference that God Himself is a social construct. A keen awareness of the historical social conditions and dimensions of that vital material is, therefore, as crucial for understanding it, as that of our own conditions is for understanding ourselves. For the same reason, an astronomer must have a keen awareness of the material contingencies of her telescope, and of how these can affect her view of the stars.

As historical conditions have changed, Muslims have always faced new and unique intellectual challenges, and have risen to meet them by harnessing the resources of the Qur'an, *Sunnah*, and our intellectual tradition in appropriately original ways. This requires a collaborative process of discussion and self-correction, seeking to maintain the right connection to our prophetic sources while applying them to navigate the new and changing realities with which Allah, in His wisdom, continually confronts us. What I have tried to offer here is a humble contribution to this discussion, focused on preserving the intellectual agency of the Muslim mind, through clarity over the nature, purpose, methods, and parameters of our mutual project, along with its responsiveness to our contemporary context. Needless to say, everything here is not only open to, but also crucially in need of sincere critical examination, to which I therefore eagerly invite the reader. We are on this quest together. And Allah knows best.