Doors to the Imaginal: Implications of Sunni Islam's Persecution of the Ahmadi "Heresy"

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Abstract: This article focuses on the implications of Sunni persecution of Ahmadiyyat by analyzing texts by the movement's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, to identify the epistemological basis of his claims to prophecy in 19th century India. Rather than situating the claims within an Arabist, juridico-theological lineage, as is normally done, the analysis emphasizes their points of convergence with Persianate, Illuminationist theosophy of the 12th century mystic, Suhravardi. This convergence rests on acknowledging the existence of an intermediate cosmological realm that Henry Corbin termed the mundus imaginalis, which can be accessed by the subtle imagination of spiritual adepts and prophets. Situating Ahmadiyyat within the Persianate theosophical tradition sheds new light on the community's persecution. In declaring Ahmadiyyat as "heresy," and in Sunnism's symbolic violence against Ahmadiyyat, the theosophical features of Ahmad's thought have also been marginalized. Consequently, Sunni Muslims around the world are excluding Muslim access to the imaginal realm. The conclusion points out how other communities have faced and are facing similar exclusion on similar grounds, and argues for further investigation into the axiom that exclusion of the imaginal is a feature of modernity.

Keywords: Ahmadiyyat; heresy; Islam; Persianate; Sufi; imaginal; theosophy

1. Introduction

The Ahmadiyya community has been the subject of much enquiry on account of its extreme persecution by Muslims worldwide. In Pakistan, where the community was based from 1947 till 1984, Ahmadis are considered heretics and are subject to unprecedented structural discrimination, physical violence and symbolic bans on communication (Yusuf 2012). Public Ahmadiyyat has been effectively criminalized in Pakistan since 1984 (Qadir 2015). Around the world, about 12 million community members face exclusion and often violence by non-Ahmadi Muslims. Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims and, unlike Bahais (who were also declared heretics in the 19th century), they refuse to accept a status as non-Muslims, resulting in their ambiguous role as an insider-Other in Islam.

In general, there has not been much scholarship on Ahmadis. Most of the literature tends to describe and explain the causes of exclusion by reducing it to socio-economic, colonialist (Lavan 1972), and political/nation-building (Khan 2012a, 2012b; Saeed 2007) factors, or to analyze the international law/human-rights violations (Khan 2003; Lathan 2008; Mahmud 1995; Uddin 2013). Such descriptions have shed much light on the dynamics of Ahmadi discrimination in Pakistan, and generally on state-building by way of exclusion. Similar national identity processes are at work in other Muslim majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia (AI 2007), Indonesia (Burhani 2014), Egypt (AFP 2010), or Kyrgyzstan (RFE/RL 2011). Indeed, exclusionary effects are also common in Muslim minority contexts, such as Bulgaria (Corley 2006), Belarus (Fagan 2003), or South Africa (Qadir 2016). However as reductive accounts, such analyses of exclusion tend to brush aside the matter at stake—religious difference—to look for more "real" explanations. Moreover, such explanations cannot answer the

question: why are Ahmadis subject to this level of persecution and not other, even more "heterodox" Muslim communities in Pakistan?[1] Similarly, attention to the consequences of hereticization again focuses on the political and legal implications, ignoring religious outcomes.

This oversight is partly because the drivers of religious change are typically considered to lie outside religion and in broader societal forces. By implication, religion is considered to be largely static and defined by fixed dogmas. Despite considerable scholarship on the topic, most religions are still approached by scholars and public through the lenses of (Protestant) Christianity and Cartesianism. In reality, it is more often the case that what is considered doctrinaire changes over time due to changes within a religious framework that correspond to, but are not necessarily caused by, wider social trends. Abdulkader Tayob (2009) argued convincingly that Islamic discourse has undergone numerous changes, responding to "external" signals like colonial modernity, but processing them in "internal" discursive shifts. Such religious change tends to settle as the new mainstream, often in discursive opposition to a constituent Other. Ebrahim Moosa (2014), for instance, describes the "sedimentation" of orthodox Sunnism over time in tension with doctrines of Shi'ism. In that context, what does the hereticization of Ahmadis by non-Ahmadi Muslims worldwide mean for religiosity? Although Shi'as have also been at the forefront of Ahmadi persecution in South and southeast Asia, the most vocal opponents of Ahmadiyyat are found amongst Sunnis. The crux of the matter is the claim to prophecy by the movement's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a claim that is violently disputed by almost all the billion other Muslims around the world. What is at stake in this claim and its persecution?

This paper addresses these questions by unpacking the actual conflict: the claims of Ahmadiyyat's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, to have received revelations. In fact, the claims in themselves are not enough to transform Ahmadi heterodoxy into heresy, since they are situated within a well-developed and classically supported (if not mainstream) approach to Islam, that is, mystical Islam or Sufism. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad did not classify himself as a "Sufi" and often argued that the practice of *tasawwuf* (spirituality) had been corrupted in South Asia. Indeed, the category of "Sufism" is notoriously too broad (and possibly too artificial) (Ernst 2007) to identify any precise convergence with Ghulam Ahmad's thought, although I mention some points further on.

My argument here is that much of the grounding for the Sunni persecution of Islam is based on conceptually locating him within a tradition of Arabist theology, where he appears not simply as heterodox but as heretical. This same location is uncritically followed also by scholarship that seeks to explain Ahmadi persecution by way of socio-economic factors. However, if Ahmadiyyat is conceptually located in the tradition known as Persianate theosophy, as Ahmad himself seemed to do, we may recover new insights into the persecution. In addition to how all the "external" factors above impact on contemporary Ahmadi persecution, we can then also see what "internal" shifts in Islamic discourse are taking place by way of this exclusion. By analyzing a selection of Ahmad's texts, I propose that he is better located conceptually in the Islamic theosophical tradition that placed emphasis on what Sorbonne scholar of Islamic Studies, Henry Corbin (1964, 1977; Corbin [1969] 1997), termed the "subtle imagination." Appreciating the role of the subtle imagination in Ghulam Ahmad's claims is fundamental to understanding the global persecution of Ahmadis and what it says about the larger body of Sunni Muslims who hereticize them. It is also a more precise conceptual location than relatively vague references to Sufism.

Exclusion is a common feature in any religious group, and is becoming more important in the rapidly growing world religion of Islam (Nasr 2006). Therefore, by understanding what exclusion of Ahmadiyyat entails conceptually and theologically, it is possible to draw implications for Islam more broadly and even for religion as a *dynamic*, discursive category. The analysis of any particular tradition being excluded such as Ahmadiyyat is, of course, highly specific, but the findings presented

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[1]　A notable example is of the Zikri community in south-western Pakistan (Ahmed 2002).

here give insights into intra-Islam issues, and can be tested for general religious study implications in future research.

This paper draws on an analysis of selections from Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's voluminous oeuvre (80 books plus letters and sermons). There has been little commentary on these writings, even from prominent Ahmadi detractors. The major scholarship on Ahmad's claims remains Friedmann' (2003) magisterial work, which, however, addresses largely juridical aspects and Arabist references, brushing aside their theosophical, Persianate features.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section presents a brief description of the Ahmadi community and the persecution they face. It also introduces the texts for this analysis. The section after that presents a theoretical framing of the imaginal to situate Ghulam Ahmad's claims, drawing on Henry Corbin's commentary on Islamic theosophy of illumination propounded by the influential 12th century mystic, Suhravardi. Next, three aspects of epistemology in the claim to prophecy are presented. In the last section, the implications of these aspects are discussed with regard to the import of persecution.

2. A Brief Background to Ahmadiyyat: Claims and Persecution

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (b. 1835) declared in 1880 in a major work—*Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya*—that he had received divine inspiration to reform the condition of Muslims in British India (Ahmad 1880). In November 1888, he invited Muslims to be initiated under his guidance and held a major ceremony for dozens of new initiates the following March. The ceremony became an annual event (*ijma'*) and marked the beginning of Ahmadiyyat as an Islamic reform movement centered in the town of Qadian in British-ruled Punjab, now in India.

Over a decade or so, Ghulam Ahmad made four important spiritual claims. He first referred to himself as the *mujaddid* [reformer] of the century, drawing on a tradition that a reformer of the religion would appear every 100 years. Arguing that no one had been ascribed the title in the beginning of the 14th Islamic century (from 1882 AD), he claimed that title for himself and described numerous challenges faced by the Muslim world as his reform task. Second, he referred to himself as *muhaddath* [a person spoken to by God]. This was a more extravagant title, since Sunni Muslims had only ever agreed unanimously to use this title for one person in Islamic history: The Caliph Umar, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and his second successor. However, some Sufi traditions claimed that numerous *muhaddathun* (plural) had appeared in Islamic history and that their status should be considered as that of prophets in potentiality (Friedmann 2003).

The third title Ghulam Ahmad claimed emerged from his revelations: that of *mahdi* [guided one, typically used by Shia's for the eschatological 12th imam] and *masih* [messiah]. With this claim, as early as 1893 (recorded in his *A'ina-yi kamalat-i Islam*, p. 426) Ahmad claimed to be the second coming of Jesus. He interpreted the Quran and various Islamic traditions to argue that Jesus had survived the crucifixion, been healed, continued his mission in the east (probably in Kashmir), and died a natural death at the age of over 100.[2] He further contended that the second coming of Jesus in the New Testament and the Quran should be taken symbolically and not literally, and that he was to complete the promised role of Jesus (to lead the faithful in prayer at the end of times). As Friedmann shows, this claim aided Ghulam Ahmad in his debates to contest the British-claimed "superiority" of Christianity over Islam. However, there is no direct evidence that this was the guiding, ulterior motive.

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[2]　This claim might seem audacious to many audiences today, particularly in (post)Christian contexts. Yet, there has been a long-standing debate on the possibility of Jesus' missing years and life past 33 having taken place in Kashmir. The claim draws partly on the Bhavishya Purana, partly on stories of Krishna, and partly on long-standing folk tales of the tomb of a "Judaic" prophet at Roza Bal shrine in Srinagar. See, for example, Kersten (1986). German Indologist Günter Grönbold, as well as texts published by the Pontificia Universita Gregorianà and others, roundly criticized Kersten's research and revival of older scholarship on the topic. All of these and others refer to Ahmad as a major source of the "fallacy." Regardless of the accuracy of the claim, it is evident that this is a long, albeit minority, tradition of beliefs.

The claim to be *masih*, and the correlated argument that Jesus had not been bodily lifted from the cross to return physically at the end of days (as most Muslims believe) provoked a remarkable controversy. However, it was overshadowed by Ghulam Ahmad's fourth claim: to have received revelation that he was a prophet.

It is difficult to overstate the ensuing furor raised by this. Ghulam Ahmad's claim violated a deeply held belief among Muslims then (and which has only increased since) that Muhammad was the last of the prophets sent by God. The Ahmadi response to this rests on a now-uncommon interpretation of the Quranic reference (33:40) to Muhammad as *khatim al-anbiya'* [final prophet] and of a *hadith* [oral tradition] in which he said he was the "seal of the prophets" (Al-Bukhari, Sahih, Kitab al-manaqib 18, vol. 2, p. 390). The common interpretation considers *khatim* [final] as temporal finality, implying that Muhammad was the last in time of a succession of over 124,000 prophets sent by God; prophecy therefore was sealed (closed, shut down) after his death in AD 632.[3] Ahmadis interpret the term as logical finality: *khatim* as ultimate and, thus, that Muhammad is the ultimate "seal," or guarantee of authenticity, to perfect all prophecies. Once again, the claim drew on a long-standing, albeit minor, theological tradition. In the early days of Islamic thought, there was never a complete consensus on the now-dominant temporal definition of the finality of prophethood; in fact, "this now generally received understanding of the Qur'anic phrase ["final"] is not the only possible one and had not necessarily been the earliest" (Friedmann 2003).

Ghulam Ahmad's claim was situated within his prophetological scheme. For him, it was inconceivable that God would abandon humanity without guidance after the death of Muhammad (AD 632). He drew on classical kalam and Sufi sources—outside the mainstream but considered valid generally—that bore out this contention and included a number of people as prophets from even other religions, including Krishna and possibly Zoroaster. One inspiration for Ahmad was the Andalusian Sufi theosopher, Ibn-al-'Arabi (d. 1240 AD). The latter, often referred to as *Shaykh-al-Akbar* [the greatest master], also maintained that God provided guidance to humanity and continued to do so after the death of Muhammad. Indeed, as Friedmann demonstrates, this was not an uncommon position for classical scholars and Sufis in Islamic history of ideas.

For this position, and especially for Ibn-al-'Arabi and Ghulam Ahmad, prophets are not all equal, and a major division can be made between those who revealed a new law of God (such as Moses or Muhammad) and those who perfected or reflected that law to address the problem of the times (as Jesus did for Moses). Ahmad's claim was to be a "minor" prophet, reflected in the glory of the ultimate seal of prophecy—Muhammad—and perfecting his message to reform the decay of the Muslim body in 19th century India.

Furthermore, in the tradition of continuing spiritual guidance and reform, he also established a line of successors, now referred to as Caliphs in the community. This, and the continuing importance of the annual *jalsa* [gathering] where new Ahmadis join the community, illustrates the significance of *bay't* [initiation] with Ghulam Ahmad as spiritual leader. The *bay't* is an esoteric act tying a believer together with a guide on a spiritual path. Literally translated from Arabic, meaning 'to sell,' the Islamic practice of *bay't* is an oath of allegiance by 'selling' one's self in exchange for the spiritual guidance given by an Imam or spiritual leader. The tradition can be traced back to Muhammad, and is common practice in Sufi orders, although it is devalued, if not rejected outright, by Sunni orthodoxy including in South Asia. The Ahmadiyya hold a *bay't* ceremony during the annual gathering of the community now in the UK, when the Ahmadi Caliph takes the oath from new converts.

3　This view is amplified in Urdu, Pakistan's national language, in which the root word "*khatm*" is strictly ambiguous but in common parlance often connotes "final" as "last." Sunni Muslims stress temporal finality more than Shi'a; the latter defend temporal finality of prophethood equally but allow for and even rely on ongoing spiritual guidance by imams, even infallible ones. Arabic, similarly to Hebrew, is based on triconsonantal or triliteral roots. As a result, most words may have many meanings depending on how the sequence of three consonants is interspersed with vowels. Meanings are often gleaned from contexts, and ambiguity is common in interpretations.

2.1. Ahmadi Persecution

Ghulam Ahmad's claims were certainly heterodox in 19th century India, but they were not unique. Indeed, they tied to a strand of theology that had lost traction over time. Moreover, even the claim to prophethood was rooted in some ecstatic Sufi lineages and in Persianate Islamic traditions. However, at the time, these claims and the practice of *bay't* sparked a virtual pogrom against Ahmadis. Popular and political Muslim opinion in the early days was not all hostile to Ahmadis but groups demanding state action against Ahmadis grew in number and reach. After Pakistan was formed in 1947, the Ahmadiyya leader at the time, Ghulam Ahmad's son, led the community out of its birthplace in Indian Qadian to Lahore in Pakistan, and then to a new city nearby. Persecution of Ahmadis found ample space in the new "Islamic" republic of Pakistan. Violence simmered and erupted often involving looting, arson and murder of hundreds of Ahmadis. Eventually, the new National Assembly of 1974 passed a unanimous constitutional amendment declaring Ahmadis heretics and non-Muslims. The Second Constitutional Amendment of Pakistan declared the Ahmadiyya be treated as non-Muslim minorities under law, invalidating Ahmadi claims to be Muslims, and associating them as a political Other in the state-building process of Pakistan ((Khan 2012b), cf (Qadir 2015) for an analysis of the parliamentary discussion passing the amendment). In 1984, the military President Zia-ul-Haq promulgated an Ordinance that resulted in most Ahmadi activities becoming criminal offences (Anti-Islamic Activities of the Qadiani Group, Lahori Group and Ahmadis (Prohibition and Punishment) Ordinance, 1984).

As a result, Ahmadis are barred from calling themselves Muslim, praying or preaching in the name of Islam, and exhibiting Islamic religiosity publicly—for example displaying Islamic symbols or Quranic verses, distributing Islamic literature, using the *kalimah*, or calling their places of worship "mosques" (Mahmud 1995; Siddiq 1995; Valentine 2008). Those accused of "posing" as Muslims can be charged with blasphemy, which is punishable by death under Pakistani law. This led to unprecedented structural discrimination: Ahmadis were barred from holding the office of President or Prime Minister and were forced to vote in elections only for reserved minority seats, along with other non-Muslim minority populations in Pakistan. The community boycotted this categorization, effectively leading to their dis-enfranchisement.

The Ordinance also fed waves of public violence against the approximately six million Ahmadis still in Pakistan, apparently condoned by religious authorities and state officials (Idris 2008; Tanveer 2013; Yusuf 2012). Many Ahmadis emigrated from Pakistan, including their spiritual and organizational head [Caliph], and at least six million now live elsewhere. However, they are discriminated around the world, in Muslim majority countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia as well as minority contexts, such as Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, and South Africa (Qadir 2014).

In the face of such violent and overt persecution, there has been notably little analysis of the thought of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. Even Pakistan's ideological founder, Muhammad Iqbal, in his polemic against the Ahmadiyya, does not quote from Ghulam Ahmad, and only presents mainstream arguments against any claims to "prophethood" after Muhammad (Iqbal 1973a, 1973b). Iqbal's focus was on the rupture caused by Ahmad among an otherwise "united" front of Muslims in the sub-continent. Indeed, this was precisely the accusation relied on most by parliamentarians in 1974, who referred to Iqbal as a national authority.

The lack of attention to texts is surprising because Ghulam Ahmad's claims to be *mujaddid*, *muhaddath*, *masih*, and *nabi* cannot be isolated from his notions about religion, prophetology, the cosmos, and modes of knowing. Not only do Ahmadiyyat's political and theological accusers ignore these texts, but in large part so have scholars. Friedmann has undertaken the most comprehensive analysis yet of Ghulam Ahmad's claims based on textual sources. However, he tends to contextualize the claims with apparently strategic motivations by Ahmad to counter Hindu and Christian polemics against Islam. More importantly, he overlooks the epistemological and mystical elements to concentrate on technical, literal history. This gap is crucial, since the Othering of Ahmadiyyat in Islam and banning of their publications in Pakistan (coupled with discouragement elsewhere) has meant not only that Ahmadis

are widely considered non-Muslims. It has also meant that Ahmad's epistemology and concomitant approach to religious knowledge has been excluded. In many ways, the symbolic violence is almost as severe as the physical violence.

2.2. Texts Reviewed

The worldwide Ahmadiyya community has published all of Ghulam Ahmad's works online in Urdu, Persian and Arabic (the languages they were written in) as well as some translations in English (https://www.alislam.org/library/). The first work analyzed here is the essay *Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* (PTI), originally delivered as a talk at the Conference of Great Religions organized in 1896 in Lahore, British India, and subsequently translated into over 50 languages (Ahmad [1896] 1996). At the time Ghulam Ahmad was already contesting other Muslims on his claims, but the fledgling Ahmadiyya community had not yet faced the violent persecution that was soon to begin. This still-unanalyzed work outlines Ahmad's view about Islam, including his epistemology, and the focus here is on the chapters entitled "The state of man after death" and "Sources of divine knowledge."

Another important but scholarly neglected work is *Tadhkirah* [Notes] (TAD), a compilation of dreams, visions and revelations from various sources that has been translated into more than 1100 pages in English, including a subject index of revelations (Ahmad [1976] 2009). Ahmadis have used this to gain insight into the content of Ghulam Ahmad's prophecies, but the focus here is on the epistemology. The fact that dreams and visions have been meticulously diarized, and the fact that Ahmadis continue to interpret and derive inspiration from this text, attest to the importance of the imaginal in Ghulam Ahmad's claim. Here, some insight into his explicit epistemology is gained through his own, limited commentary on the dreams and visions, which have been faithfully translated in the present edition.

The third text comprises extracts from Volume III of the five-volume compilation of speeches and texts by Ghulam Ahmad, edited and translated in 1979 as "The Essence of Islam" (EOI) (Ahmad 1979). About 120 pages of this volume includes speeches and writings on faith and certainty, the need for prophets, and the meaning of prophethood in Islam. Among other sources, this volume includes extracts from an important, lengthy book entitled *Haqiqat-ul-Wahi* [The Truth about Revelation], which was published originally in Urdu in 1907 (Ahmad 1907). EOI also includes relevant extracts from *Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya* [Proofs of Ahmadiyyat].

Although this is a limited selection from the large body of his writings, they already offer a consistent insight into Ghulam Ahmad's approach to the Self and knowledge about God. Scattered within these texts and elsewhere are references to the 13th century AD Andalusian Sufi master, Ibn-al-'Arabi, whose views are very similar and are rooted in what Henry Corbin calls "mundus imaginalis" when he discusses the philosophy of illumination of renowned 12th century mystic Suhravardi.

3. The Persianate Tradition of Illumination

The Illuminationist philosophy developed and propounded by Shahab-al-ḍin Suhravardi (d. about 1191 AD) has been the source of innumerable classic commentaries and modern exegeses (Nasr 1983, 1997; Walbridge 2001; Ziai 1990). One of the most thorough is by the Sorbonne scholar, Henri Corbin (1977), who explores Suhravardi's claims to link his *Hikmat-al-Ishraq* (Philosophy of Illumination) with classical Zoroastrian theology. For our purposes, there are three important features to Suhravardi's theosophy[4] as interpreted by Corbin.

4　Nasr describes this term thus: "By theosophy we mean that wisdom which is neither theology nor philosophy but a form of *sapientia* whose attainment depends upon intuition and illumination and as it is understood in the original Greek sense, not as it is employed currently for pseudo-spiritual movements" (Nasr 1981, p. 166, fn. 4).

3.1. Mundus Imaginalis

The first feature is the presence of a "real," if invisible, world that the Illuminationists call *Malakūt*, lying between the sensible world (*Mulk*) and the Angelic Intelligences (*Jabarūt*). Corbin translates this with the Latin term *mundus imaginalis*, to avoid contemporary Western usages that he says are caught up in a Cartesian dualism between body and mind, and that refuse to allow for the existence of an intermediate order of reality, or one that is populated by incomplete or invisible bodies. Corbin uses the term to avoid "betraying" the sense of the Arabic and Persian term 'alam-al-mithal (literally, "world of similitude" or "analogies") from theosophical texts by Suhravardi and his copious commentator Quṭb-al-din Shirazi (d. 1311 AD) (Corbin 1964, p. 1). The same term was profusely used by the great Sufi master, Ibn-al-'Arabi, as well as the famous Mulla Ṣadra (d. 1640 AD). In his vast scholarship of these theosophists, along with the Shaykhi school in Iran, Corbin links the idea of such an imaginal world to Zoroastrian and, indeed, Platonic thought.

Corbin refers to *mundus imaginalis* as "a median and mediating universe, an intermediate world between the sensible and the intellectual (intelligible), an intermediate world without which articulation between sensible and Intellectual (intelligible) is definitely blocked" (Corbin 1977, p. viii). This intermediary world has a history although, "The epochs of a spiritual world make up a history sui generis, which is in its very essence imaginal history." It has a geography, which he describes in considerable detail, although again the geography is not that of the physical world but rather a "visionary geography, the geography of a world that secretes its own light, like those Byzantine mosaics whose gold illumines the space they encompass" (Corbin 1977, p. 21). The difference from modern cartography or history could not be greater: the individual sits at the center of this world as an Empyrean subject:

> The presence of the subject at the center is not a situated presence but a situative presence. In medio mundi, the soul is no longer bound to spatial coordinates. Instead of "falling into," of having to be situated in a predetermined space, the soul itself "spatializes," is always the origin of the spatial references and determines their structure. That is why we find here not an empirical representation, but an archetypal figure. (Corbin 1977, p. 20)

Yet, the mundus imaginalis is not some purely intellectual realm, comprising cognitive objects. It comprises real bodies, real places and cities, real persons, and real events. However, only mystics, adepts, or prophets may perceive these. In that sense, mundus imaginalis is not the same as the Platonic world of Forms, which is closer to the Islamic cosmological notion of *Jabarūt* (Corbin 1964, p. 6). As Shirazi writes:

> Therefore, imaginative forms exist neither in thought . . . nor in concrete reality, otherwise anyone with normally healthy senses would be able to see them. But they are not merely nonbeing . . . they are corporealized forms, not pure intelligibles—they must necessarily exist in some other region and the latter is what is called the world of the archetypal Image and of imaginative perception. It is a world intermediate between the world of the Intelligence and the world of the senses; its ontological plane is above the world of the senses and below the intelligible world; it is more immaterial than the first, less immaterial than the second . . . [It is] the world of autonomous Images and Forms . . . The prophets, the Initiates, the mystical theosophists have all acknowledged the existence of this universe. (Corbin 1977, pp. 126, 131)

3.2. The "Subtle Imagination"

How is this world accessible? Shirazi notes that "the totality of the things which exist in the higher world have their nadir and their analogue in the lower world" (Corbin 1977, p. 128). This is the second important feature of Corbin's reconstruction: the "subtle imagination" that can access

the mundus imaginalis.[5]   Drawing on both ancient Zoroastrian and classical Islamic theosophy, Corbin's point is that the faculties of perception have long been reduced to either sensory (physical) or intellectual (conceptual). This has foreclosed what he sees is the median faculty of the imaginal, or "agent imagination." Post-Cartesian thought has devalued knowledge that does not belong either to the pole of the body or of the mind, and so has conceived of imagination as a subset of the mind but only in a pejorative sense of "the imaginary, that is, the unreal, the mythic, the marvelous, the fictive, etc." (Corbin 1977, p. vii).

Corbin is scathing in his criticism of this neglect, which for him has foreclosed all access to the spiritual. His greatest ally in this argument was the famous psychoanalyst and post-Jungian scholar James Hillman, an avid proponent of the "poetic basis of the mind" (Hillman 1975; Cheetham 2015). Corbin's fundamental point is that the imaginary is absolutely *not*—and may even be opposed to—the imaginal. Instead of reducing all imagination to mere fantasy, Corbin reads classical Islamic theosophers as indicating two distinct elements: the fictive, ordinary imagination—by means of which anybody can think up pink elephants and unicorns—and then the subtle imagination, which does not think *up* anything, but rather catches, reflects (or brings *down*), spiritual reality—which requires practice. So, "this [subtle] Imagination must be a purely spiritual faculty, independent of the physical organism and therefore able to continue to exist after the latter has disappeared" (Corbin 1964, p. 9). Or:

> This [subtle] Imagination does not construct something unreal, but unveils the hidden reality; its action is, in short, that of the ta'wil—the spiritual exegesis practiced by all the Spirituals of Islam—whose special quality is that of alchemical meditation: to occultate the apparent, to manifest the hidden. (Corbin 1977, p. 12)

3.3. Grace of God

This brings us to the third significant feature of Corbin's reading of Suhravardi and the theosophers of Illumination. For them, access to the Imaginal world, through the subtle Imagination, is not in the control of the practitioner: it is entirely in the gift and grace of God. Practitioners may prepare themselves for the gift—by "polishing the soul"—but that dispensation is not in their hands alone. God decides whom to grant access to the mundus imaginalis, to what extent, and with what frequency. This, again, distinguishes the imaginary from the Imaginal: the former can be accessed by anyone and for any purpose, while the latter requires spiritual training. The nature of access to the Imaginal may vary, but it is fully integrated into the senses: recipients can hear, see, feel, and taste the Imaginal world. Suhravardi again:

> The suprasensory realities encountered by the prophets, the Initiates, and others appear to them sometimes in the form of lines of writing, sometimes in the hearing of a voice which may be gentle and sweet and which can also be terrifying. Sometimes they see human forms of extreme beauty who speak to them in most beautiful words and converse with them intimately about the invisible world; at other times these forms appear to them like delicate figures from the most refined art of the painters. (Corbin 1977, p. 132)

So, prophecy is a form of access to the Imaginal that can also be achieved by spiritual initiates, albeit to a lesser degree. It is dependent only on God's grace, but initiates can prepare themselves ("polish the mirror" of the soul) for receiving the grace to access it. Preparation may be practical (helping others), or devotional (praying), or intellectual (practicing *ta'wil*). The latter, although often

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[5]   In most cases, Corbin refers to the "Active Imagination," but this is open to mis-interpretation if the capitalization is omitted. It also connotes a sense of fancifulness that is precisely the opposite of what Corbin intended. Moreover, Jung used the term as part of his therapeutic technique, giving it a very narrow and further mis-leading sense. I use "subtle imagination" instead to avoid mis-readings, and draw here on Corbin's occasional use in some texts of the "subtle organ" (Corbin 1964). Subtle here does not mean "delicate," but rather sensitive (to the imaginal realm); yet there is an element of activity involved, as discussed in this section.

reserved as a term for Shi'ite interpretations of the Quran, was a wide-spread practice in South Asian Islam up until the 19th century AD. Literally, it means "to carry back" to the origin, or principle. But, when extended:

> the ta'wil is essential symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols, the intuition of an essence or person in an Image which partakes neither of universal logic nor of sense perception, and which is the only means of signifying what is to be signified. (Corbin [1969] 1997, p. 13)

For those practicing ta'wil, the literal words of the Quran—or the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) or sayings of Companions—are doorways to symbolic meaning. In this view, even (or perhaps, especially) persons are symbolic of their celestial archetypes, and ta'wil is not merely a hermeneutical/exegetic technique, but rather a way of ascending the spiritual ladder to knock at heaven's door.

4. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's Epistemology and the Subtle Imagination

The Persianate/Imaginal frame of thinking provides a pathway to understanding Ghulam Ahmad's thought and claims different from the more Arabist/juridical-theological approach of Friedmann. It is worth recalling that Ghulam Ahmad suggested that Zoroaster could be considered one of God's prophets, contrary to many but not all Muslims (Friedmann 2003, p. 124). He also laid claim to a Persian heritage, including as revealed to him by God (e.g., TAD, 48, 91), and held that 19th century India was "Persian" in its Islamic nature (TAD, 64), foreshadowing a common scholarly understanding of Indian Islam today (Arjomand 2017). He further held that Muhammad had prophesied a time at which Muslims would become errant, following which "a man of Persian origin would be raised to teach them [Muslims] the faith" (TAD, 221).

Ahmad's writings and record of revelations are replete with metaphors (not similes) of light, flame/ fire, illumination, halos around celestial bodies of earthly persons, and doors. All this evokes the Illuminatist theosophy of Suhravardi, which there is no record of Ahmad ever having read or quoted. He also relies on the complex theosophist terminology, brought to fruition by Ibn-al-'Arabi, of the *barzakh*, or intermediary realm between the created world and the heavens (typically plural in Ahmad's writings). It is precisely this that Corbin designated *Mundus Imaginalis*. However, it is his epistemology rather than his literary style that connects Ahmad to the Persian classical theosophy as described by Henry Corbin. Three elements stand out as the basis of his claims: the nature of spiritual knowledge, the nature of spiritual knowers, and the nature of revelation.

4.1. Selfhood and Knowledge

Ghulam Ahmad's ideas about knowledge stem from his understanding of the three-fold nature of the Self. In *Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* (PTI) he argues that the Self is not a uniform entity, but rather has is multi-layered. The highest aspect is the spiritual Self, which moves naturally toward God, who can grace it to bestow Paradise in this world.

This complexity of the structure of the human Self means that aspects and elements of a Self can achieve spiritual knowledge, which itself is also not uniform but is of three types (PTI, 134, 172–75 and *Essence of Islam* (EOI), 77). The first type is knowledge by way of inference or by reason: seeing smoke leads a person to think there is fire somewhere nearby. The second is knowledge by way of sight: seeing the fire confirms its presence. The third is knowledge by way of experience: not trusting the eyes, which may be deceived, but rather feeling the fire warm one's body or burn one's hand. For Ghulam Ahmad, all three can lead to knowledge of God, but they are progressive and only the last may be termed certainty. He divides spiritual knowledge further into various stages. Once more,

this is an almost standard epistemology of theosophers and of South Asian Sufis.[6] The entry to all stages of knowledge for Ahmad, as for most Sufis, is unquestioning faith:

> this is what helps open the door of Divine grace and becomes the means of acquiring good fortune here and in the hereafter. When a person establishes himself firmly on faith and then seeks to foster his knowledge through prayer . . . God Almighty Himself, . . . taking him by the hand, leads him from the stage of faith to that of *'ain-al-yaqin* [certainty by sight] . . . Faith means acceptance at a stage when knowledge is not yet complete, and the struggle with doubts and suspicions is still in progress . . . faith is related to the unseen. (EOI, 43, 48, 50)

Both faith and the knowledge that attends upon it are "achieved only through God Himself . . . This is not a matter of man's own choice" (PTI, 54). So, there are:

> three grades of the perfection of good fortune, namely *fana* [extinction of the self], *baqa* [revival] and *liqa'* [communion.] 'Complete submission to Allah' means to surrender to Him all human faculties and organs, and whatever belongs to oneself, and to dedicate everything to the cause of God . . . when a person achieves such a high grade in his comprehension of the Divine, certainty, trust and love . . . as if he is already enjoying it, and his belief in the Being of God Almighty becomes so certain as if he is beholding Him . . . and every spiritual bounty appears present before him, that condition which is free from all constraint and is secure against every doubt and apprehension . . . is designated *liqa'* . . . The grade of *liqa'* is achieved perfectly when Divine reflection completely covers the humanity of the seeker . . . some seekers have conceived the symbolic relationship as the physical union of two beings. (EOI, 60–61)

At this stage, "when a seeker after God arrives at the end of his search he reverts to where God is. The perfection of his ascent or approach to God becomes the cause of his descent towards man" (TAD, 87). Persistent effort by a believer is required for a "sacrifice of himself in the cause of God" (PTI, 88). Indeed, "one does not attain to high spiritual status until one submits himself to a kind of slaughter and death" (TAD, 22). But the crowning achievement "is a pure bounty, and is bestowed upon the believer without any further effort or toil" (EOI, 81). The belief that only God opens the doors to the imaginal, too, is a feature of theosophy and Sufism.

4.2. Men of God and Prophets

Ghulam Ahmad calls one who achieves the ultimate stage of *liqa'* as among the "children of God" (EOI, 61), or "a godly person . . . a man of heaven" (PTI, 131). At the final stage of spiritual fulfillment, "when a person arrives at the grade of *liqa,'* he manifests Divine powers on the occasions of the upsurge of this grade" (EOI, 63). Then, the seeker "perceives a brilliant light illumining his inner self like the dawning of the day; and he observes streams of devotion, love and loyalty flowing mightily through himself and feels every moment as if God Almighty has descended upon his heart" (EOI, 65).

But such seekers do not merely know God in a rational, intellectual sense. Ahmad states that such seekers attend "upon the threshold of God, like the angel Gabriel." In a state of ultimate communion with the Creator, "a believer, reflecting Divine qualities, becomes a vice-regent of God and reflects Divine features . . . the fire of Divine love envelops him and the flame of light wholly consumes the framework of his ego and takes its place. This is the climax of the blessed love of God" (EOI, 91, 102). In this ecstatic state of union with God, "the wonders of Providence are revealed to the seeker and he experiences such Divine favors as are hidden from others. He is favored with true visions and is honored with the words of God and is informed of the delicate mysteries of the hereafter" (EOI, 101).

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6   For instance, see Chittick (1989). Indeed, such an epistemological basis is deep-rooted in Sufi thought that it is almost taken for granted and rarely explicated.

These men of God, for Ahmad, reflect Divine qualities: their eyes see beyond the created world and into the mundus imaginalis, their tongues, hands and ears become organs of God, their foreheads are "blessed with a light," and so on. In the ultimate stage of communion, Ahmad states that, "The heart of the seeker is a mirror which is so polished by calamities and hardships that he begins to reflect the qualities of the Prophet [Muhammad]" (EOI, 109). Or, again, "The Holy Prophet, may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, is the true and the primary object of these divine favors. They [blessings] are bestowed upon others merely on account of their relationship to him" (TAD, 82). Devotion to Muhammad is a defining feature of Muslim practice generally but is especially marked amongst Sufis. However, the latter seek specially to appreciate the full degree of perfection of Muhammad's prophecy and to be blessed by his reflection on their own spiritual path (for an excellent discussion of this, see (Chittick 1989), cf. (Hirtenstein 1999)).

This is the crux of Ghulam Ahmad's discussion of spiritual knowledge. Knowledge of God by actual sight and observation, bestowed as a Divine bounty, results in a total loss of the ego of the man of God to the extent that he displays Divine qualities; the ultimate display of Divine qualities, and so the highest stage of communion, is the extent of prophets; and the highest stage of prophethood is that of Muhammad, who encapsulates all the qualities of all the prophets of God and is the "climax" (PTI, 86) of all prophethoods.

Prophets can be distinguished from otherwise spiritually knowledgeable persons by their social mission to reform forgetful humanity:

> Such a person in this manner combines within himself two opposites. He is turned completely towards God and also completely towards God's creatures . . . Anyone who arrives at this station is turned towards and is pulled in two directions at the same time; one towards God Who is Eternal and the other towards God's creatures who have been brought into being by Him. (TAD, 86)

> "It should be remembered that it is the Prophets (peace be on them) who demonstrate the existence of God and teach people His unity . . . [they] alone established through thousands of signs and miracles that the Transcendent Being Who comprises all power does in fact exist . . . Had there been no Prophets, no one would have achieved this degree of reason . . . When God Almighty designs to reveal Himself to the world, He raises a Prophet, who is a manifestation of Divine powers, and sends down His revelation to him and manifests His Divine powers through him". (EOI, 114)

In times of error and disbelief:

> Allah becomes like a hidden treasure. Then He determines that He should again be known to mankind and be recognized by people. For this purpose, He chooses one of His servants and bestows upon him the mantle of Khilafat and is recognized through him . . . This has been the way of Allah in every age since eternity. (TAD, 113)

Friedmann (2003, chp. 6) describes Ghulam Ahmad's division of two Abrahamic lines. Just as Isaac's line was laid out in a final law with Moses and then perfected by Jesus, so Ismail's line was laid out in a final law with Muhammad and now perfected by Ahmad. While even some Ahmadis may contest an exaggerated reading of this schema, it does lay the groundwork for an important feature of Ahmad's thought: prophets are not all of the same rank or all of the same type. There are degrees of prophethood; besides, some were law-bearing, like Moses, while others were not, even if they were highly exalted like Jesus. This distinction leads to Ahmad's argument that the doors to revelation may now be closed in Isaac's line but have never been closed in Ismail's line, in which Muhammad appeared and is the ultimate prophet of any line.

If a "Prophet is one who receives revelation from God and is honored with converse with Him . . . no harm is done," says Ahmad, "if a follower of the Holy Prophet is raised as such a Prophet." In fact:

What is most harmful is to believe that the followers of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) are debarred from enjoying converse with God until the Day of Judgement. That religion is not worthy of being called a religion . . . whose followers cannot come near enough to God to be honored with His word . . . As the Holy Quran does not close the door of Prophethood whereby a person through obedience to the grace of the Holy Prophet may be granted converse with God and may be informed of hidden matters through Divine revelation, then what is there to stop the appearance of such a Prophet among the Muslims?" (EOI, 127)

Yet, the seriousness of the claim to prophethood was not lost on Ghulam Ahmad. In numerous instances, he mentions his "agony" at the response of Indian Muslims upon hearing his claim, and his persistent prayers to relieve him of his trials (e.g., TAD, 88). In response, Ahmad received numerous visions and revelations confirming his mission, and affirming that converse with God was very much in the bounds of possibility for the righteous.

Indeed, says Ahmad, "Islam has always produced persons of this rank" (PTI, 183). "Among Muslims thousands achieved sainthood by following the Holy Prophet alone" (EOI, 130). Again: "a person who receives divine guidance and training, and becomes a recipient of revelation, wears a mantle which properly belongs to Prophets and is loaned to a non-prophet" (TAD, 100). For Ahmad, "A foolish one, who is in truth an enemy of the faith, does not desire that converse with God should continue as a characteristic of Islam" (EOI, 138). Demonstrating the "excellence" of Islam, Ahmad points out that "It is Islam alone which conveys the good news of that path [converse with God]. All other people have since long sealed up divine revelation" (PTI, 184). Since direct experience alone is the highest level of certainty, Ghulam Ahmad deems it necessary that God "did not design that divine revelation should be sealed up for the future and the world should thus be destroyed" (PTI, 185). Or, "There is no worse concept concerning Islam than to say that it is a dead religion whose blessings were confined only to its beginning" (EOI, 166).

4.3. Revelations and Dreams

Ahmad refers to "revelation" as converse with God. When such converse is coupled with a social mission, it becomes prophecy and that too is more common in Islam than is often acknowledged according to him. But revelation per se is even more common for those who have established a "perfect relationship with God Almighty" (EOI, 102). In this final stage of *liqa,'* the converse with God is sensory:

from time to time God, the Benevolent, causes His eloquent and delicious words to issue from his tongue . . . Very often they comprise great prophecies which relate to vast and universal affairs . . . Some of these prophecies are related to himself or to his children, or wives, or relations, or friends, or enemies, and some have a wider scope. To him are revealed matters that are not disclosed to others, and to him are opened the doors of the unseen which are not opened to others . . . His eye is given a visionary power through which he can see hidden events. Very often written statements are presented before his eyes ... He can often hear the voice of angels and finds comfort in it at times of disturbance. Even more surprisingly, he can sometimes hear the voice of inanimate objects, vegetables, and animals . . . Very often he can smell good news and can perceive the bad odor of disagreeable matters. His heart is endowed with the faculty of intuition. Many things flit across his mind and prove true. (EOI, 103–4)

I was vouchsafed visions of spiritual light in the shape of bright columns of green and red so beautiful and enchanting that their description cannot be conveyed in words. These columns extended up to heaven. Some of them were bright white, some green and some red . . . these columns were a representation of the interaction of the love between God and His servant. It was a light that proceeded upwards from the heart and there was a second light that descended from above. The meeting of the two took the shape of a column (TAD, 26–27).

Sometimes, in a dream or a vision, spiritual matters assume physical shape and are seen as human beings. (TAD, 31)

The visions and dreams are thus almost tactile. At one place, he describes meeting Muhammad, who "embraced me and I saw that rays of light proceeded from his countenance and entered into me. I felt these rays were like palpable light and I believed that I was seeing them not only through my spiritual sight but also with my physical eyes" (TAD, 56). The visions opened up a universe that Ahmad specifically points out are beyond the ken of ordinary human imagination. He recalls a time when he was stuck at an early stage of writing his famous Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya, "proceeding in the dark night of his own concepts, when suddenly from behind the curtain of the unseen came a voice: 'Verily, I am your Lord' [in Arabic]. Such mysteries were then revealed as were beyond the reach of reason and imagination" (TAD, 147).

In a state of *liqa,'* Ghulam Ahmad had revelations describing him as Adam, Abraham, Musa, Joseph, Ali, frequently Jesus, and even Mary. At one point, he had a vision that he *was* God, and that his thoughts manifested as actions and events in the world. In this vision, he even created the world and heavens by his mere command. But this meant for him that he felt his entire Self dissolved and filled with Divine Light: "My whole structure was demolished and only the structure of the Lord of the universe remained visible" (TAD, 248–49).

Continuity of converse is crucial for Ahmad, as is the quality of certainty: "In the design of God, Prophethood in my case means only the frequency of converse with God" (EOI, 132). The discourse might be direct as if a person is speaking to another. But it can also be in the form of waking dreams, or even sleeping dreams. Hence there is great emphasis amongst Ahmadis on dream interpretation, and more so on interpreting the recorded dreams of Ahmad himself.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I set out to compare Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's writings with the Persianate school of Illuminationist theosophy, focusing on Ahmad's prophetology, epistemology, and notion of revelation. The analysis of Ahmad's texts found connections in his epistemology to the Illuminationist schema of Mundus Imaginalis, as elaborated by Henry Corbin. Although Ghulam Ahmad himself refers only occasionally to Ibn-al-'Arabi, and never at all to Suhravardi (founder of the Illuminationist school), the similarities are striking and, at the very least, deserving of further investigation. These include the use of metaphors of light and darkness, the idea that experience is the highest level of certainty, polishing the heart to ascend to spiritual knowledge, and the presence of a "real" realm that can be accessed by adepts partly through devotion.

Ghulam Ahmad also amply echoes Suhravardi's emphasis on access to the imaginal realm being a gift of God. Also similar is the emphasis on spiritual knowledge of what is unseen by others (the mundus imaginalis), which may also be manifested in this world and in the adept's senses such as their eyes or ears. There is also the appreciation that access to the imaginal is not only possible, but indeed is an invitation by God that many have taken up throughout the ages. Finally, although again Ghulam Ahmad does not define it as such, his interpretations of various verses of the Qur'an, connote Corbin's definition of ta'wil: taking the verse back to its origin. This is most evident in Ahmad's discussion of the cryptic Surah al-Kahf (chp. 18) in EOI (295–310). In other places, he particularly refers to *liqa'* as the place of understanding how the visible is connected to the unseen origin.

There are points of convergence in this epistemology with mystical Sufi traditions, especially in South Asia, and a case can be made for linking Ahmad's claims to ecstatic pronouncements by some Sufis.[7] Ghulam Ahmad's claims to being *mujaddid* (reformer) connects with many Sufi claims, and his

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[7] As above, Ghulam Ahmad had been wary of establishing a Sufi lineage, since he felt that their practices had become generally corrupted and monetized in India, and that many were not strict enough in stressing the general requirements of Islam. Moreover, the consistency and breadth of his revelations seem to have exceeded those of many Indian Sufis.

claim to being *muhaddath* (spoken to by God) is atypical for orthodox Sunnism but resonates with some pronouncements of mystics in Islamic history. However, his claim to being *masih* (messiah) is more specific and is much less common amongst Sufis. What is truly at stake in the Ahmadi persecution is Ahmad's claim that he received revelation of being *nabi* (prophet). Although it is rare to find such public announcements made by Sufis, the way in which Ghulam Ahmad uses this category connotes a long-standing mystical tradition of *fina-fi-il-Rusool* (negation of one's identity into the Prophet's).[8] Even further, the 10th century AD Persian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj is famous for making what many saw as a claim to divinity, as well as other "ecstatic" pronouncements, that eventually led to his execution (Massignon 1994).

Yet, Sufism is a very broad category and Ghulam Ahmad himself had been wary of establishing a Sufi lineage, since he felt that Sufi practices had become generally corrupted and monetized in India. He also pointed out that many Sufi orders were not strict enough in stressing the general requirements of Islam. Moreover, the consistency and breadth of his revelations seem to have exceeded those of many Indian Sufis. Finally, Sufism entails no obvious, common epistemology. By contrast, all four of Ghulam Ahmad's claims can be readily and identifiably housed within a Persianate, theosophical chain, where they resonate epistemologically. This tradition has also been defined in the category of Islamic mysticism or "Sufism" (Ziai 1990). Situating Ahmad's epistemology in this different tradition from Friedmann's (Arabist, theological) lineage, we emerge with a distinct frame for the claims themselves as well as their implications.

When connected with the theosophical tradition, the declaration of heresy against Ahmadis in Pakistan, and their virtually universal exclusion by Muslims worldwide, takes on new significance. The exclusion does not so much appear as a defense of the finality of prophethood of Muhammad (which was not in contest), but rather as a concentration on literal definition of "prophethood" and an exclusion of the epistemological principles at stake in Ghulam Ahmad's claims. Prime among these is the ability to converse with God, itself based on the faith that the doors to such converse remain open in Islam. Ghulam Ahmad's further claim that he is the second coming of the savior prophesied in many other religions—Hinduism and possibly Zoroastrianism—in addition to Christianity and Islam, might be an indication that he believes the doors to the Imaginal are open to other faiths as well, albeit only through his guidance.

A crucial point in his claims is self-critique of the body of Muslims. For Ahmad, prophets are defined not only by converse with God but also by their social mission. Which, in turn, implies the *need* for such a mission: typically, the errancy of Muslims. In other words, for Ahmad, a prophet does not choose himself, but rather is chosen by God in order to fulfill a mission of correction that God deems necessary. With the exclusion of Ahmad's epistemology, this need is likewise marginalized: if there can be no prophets then there is, concomitantly, no need for God's critique of the faithful. By closing the door to the imaginal, Sunnism pushes God further out of the human realm, and the right of judgment on religiosity is taken into human hands.

Another important feature of Ahmad's thought is the need for Muslims and others to recognize his claim and to approach God through his path. In that way, *bay't* is an essential act for an Ahmadi who accepts Ghulam Ahmad as their guide. As discussed above, *bay't* is an act of spiritual initiation, tying the initiate to the spiritual teachings of their guide. As such, it severely undermines the authority of clerics. By implication, banning Ahmadi practices and communications also bans the claim that individual Muslims have the duty and the right to "polish their hearts" and prepare for God's grace to receive access to the imaginal realm. Such soul-working is placed, instead, in the hands of "authorized" clergy and no others.

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8   This is a traditional goal of mystical union. Abu Yazid Bustami (d. 874), Abu Bakr Shibli (d. 945), Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), Khwaja Mu'innuddin Chishti (d. 1236), and Farid Ganj Shakkar (d. 1265) are just some who made similar pronouncements. For a thorough account, see the testimony in Aziz (1987).

The specific ban on Ahmadi literature in Pakistan, supported by Muslims elsewhere, makes the epistemological exclusion more pronounced. Such exclusion may well auger further Sunni exclusions of similar epistemologies, including mystical Islam, or Sufism, and Shi'ism. If persecution of Ahmadiyyat is truly a "modern" phenomenon, then further exclusions are inevitably as Muslims continue to modernize. Indeed, evidence is beginning to appear of exclusions of such Islamic traditions long held to be "mainstream." So, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, for instance, it is becoming more common to label Shias as heretical, although Shi'ism has a very long history in the region and Shias could even account for a fifth of the population in Pakistan (Nasr 2006). The community of Ismaili Shias is very small indeed, but also has a long history of charity and business activity in India and Pakistan. Yet, the community's members increasingly face popular violence and discrimination. Further research in intellectual history is needed to probe whether there are epistemological similarities in the traditions being excluded by Sunni Islam in South Asia and around the world. Such was the case for Bahai persecution in late 19th century Iran, for example. The founder, Bahaullah, also claimed to have frequent converse with God besides claiming the title of Imam Mahdi in the Shia sense of the manifestation of the 12th imam.[9] Bahais remain persecuted throughout the Muslim world ever since.

By way of context, 19th century British India (just like Persia) was experiencing a wave of colonial "modernization" at Ahmad's time. Scientific education, often tangentially translated into scientism in the colonies, was being promoted in public policies (Qadir 2013). Even Muslims were internalizing the understanding of Islam as a "world religion," which would therefore be subject to scientific interpretation and development in the same vein as Protestant Christianity. The Persianate, theosophical tradition of Illumination and access to the imaginal—that had roots in South Asia—did not fit into colonial modernity's vision of religion.

When Ahmadi exclusion is connected to the convergence with colonial modernity, as earlier, it is possible to state this as an axiom to be tested: growing scientific modernization is correlated with increasing exclusion (even hereticization) of belief in access to the imaginal. Indeed, it might be revealing to examine modern instances of religious "heresy" and their correlation with perceptions of modernization.[10] In the case of modern Islam, what Bahais, Sufis and Shias may have in common with Ghulam Ahmad's epistemology is the "heretical" notion that Muslims can still knock at heaven's door.

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[9]　A detailed comparison of Bahaullah's thought with that of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad remains to be undertaken. In addition to the claims of converse with God, there are other evident similarities, such as forbidding Jihad by the sword and denying the need for clerical interventions or "instruction." Muslim attacks on Bahais are also discursively similar to Sunni reactions to Ahmadis: challenging the finality of prophethood, collusion with British imperialists and Israel, etc. It is also noteworthy that the lineage of Bahaullah's claims extends traceably to Suhravardi's theosophy of Illumination, as do the claims of the related Shia Shaykhi school. The latter are explicit exponents of the reality of mundus imaginalis and subtle imagination. See, for example, Corbin (1977). An account of how Bahai and Shaykhi were hereticized in Islam is given by MacEoin (1990).

[10]　I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for pointing out this general implication for future research.

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