



# In Defense of Faith: Principles and Guidelines for Islamic Apologetics

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## Introduction

The principles governing Islamic apologetics constitute a field of knowledge that is in need of greater attention from Muslim scholars. Indeed, the term itself is unfamiliar to most Muslims. Typically, Muslims dealing with allegations against Islamic doctrines or practices speak of “*Radd al-shubuhāt*,” or refutation of misconceptions. However, apologetics is not limited to the refutation of misconceptions. It involves establishing a science that is much broader than that; it includes also the rational explication and defense of doctrines and practices.

There is a general principle mentioned by Muslim scholars that states that there is flexibility in using different terminology so long as the meaning and understanding being conveyed are correct.<sup>1</sup> Should we use the term apologetics? First, we must clarify that apologetics is *not* about apologizing. Islam does not need any apology on its behalf. Rather, apologetics refers to intellectual *defense*—it is a systematic discourse in defense of doctrine. The word comes from the Greek term *Apologia*, used by Plato for his account of the speech Socrates made at his trial. The closest word in our tradition is the term *kalām*,<sup>2</sup> which has been used to refer to the rational defense of religious doctrines. So the notion exists in our tradition; however, its use was largely limited to the defense of creedal doctrines, not laws and practices.

Borrowing terminology and developing new terms is a natural consequence of the interface between Islam and other languages (like English), in recent centuries that have not been part of its historical heritage (like Arabic and Persian). Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil īyyāka na‘budu wa īyyāka nasta‘īn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1973), 3:306.

<sup>2</sup> “*Kalām*” is used here simply to refer to rational arguments in theological discourse, not necessarily all the doctrines that were traditionally ascribed to it. For a more detailed explanation of the author’s position concerning the place of *kalām* in defending the scriptural creed, you may refer to Hatem al-Haj, *Between the God of the Prophets and the God of the Philosophers: Reflections of an Athari on the Divine Attributes* (self-pub., 2020).

thought's encounters with languages that were previously not part of its history leads to choices over the best terms to convey concepts and meanings. There are certainly potential downsides to using the term *apologetics*. For one, it has long been associated with Christian apologetics. The goals and objectives of a rational defense of Islamic orthodoxy will differ considerably even though there may be some areas of overlap in responding to secularism and atheism. Christian apologetics may be seen as having gone too far in reconciling Christianity with prevalent thought and norms throughout the ages. However, Islamic apologetics need not follow the same path. In fact, Islam has intrinsic qualities that make it largely immune to that.

The other potential downside to using the term *apologetics* is that people may get stuck on the misinterpretation of apologetics entailing “apologizing” for the faith and that will make them apprehensive of the discourse. Consequently, some may elect not to use the term *apologetics* altogether because of these perceived negative connotations and legitimate considerations, which is entirely their prerogative. If one is not comfortable with the term, they do not need to use it.

My choice to use the term is on account of a number of important reasons. First, it is a recognized term so it spares the speaker having to restate a lengthy definition every time they refer to this discipline. Second, using a formal term, *Islamic apologetics*, that designates a field of study leads one to recognize the complexity of the topic, the academic nature of the science, and the need for one to approach the subject with humility.

## Importance of apologetics

Islamic apologetics is critically important because losing faith is not uncommon.<sup>3</sup> And a rational explication of the faith can often facilitate the path to certainty and conviction for many.

Moreover, Islamic apologetics highlights that there are principles in knowing what answer is most appropriate for which audience. We see the Prophet’s ﷺ wisdom in customizing his approach based on his audience in an incident that occurred when the Muslims were traveling to perform ‘*umrah* (lesser pilgrimage) during 6 AH. The Quraysh prevented the Prophet ﷺ and his companions from making pilgrimage and the situation was on the verge of armed conflict. When the Quraysh sent as a representative al-Ḥulays ibn ‘Alqamah al-Kinānī to parlay, the Prophet ﷺ saw him coming and instructed his companions to send forth the decorated sacrificial animals and to recite loudly the pilgrimage chant (*talbiyah*). The Prophet ﷺ explained this was because al-Ḥulays was from a tribe that highly valued the charitable sacrifice of animals (*al-hady*); so when he witnessed these symbols of ritual pilgrimage he was so overwhelmed with emotion that he immediately turned around and went back to the Quraysh and rebuked them for preventing the Prophet ﷺ from making pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup>

People from diverse backgrounds will need answers sensitive to their understanding and customized to their context. Modifying one’s rhetorical style and argument based on one’s audience is in fact an established concept in Islam. The illustrious companion ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib رضي الله عنه said, “Speak to people in a manner that they comprehend, and do not speak to them in a manner they find objectionable. Do you want people to reject Allah and His Messenger?”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if

<sup>3</sup> Besheer Mohamed and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciupac, “The Share of Americans Who Leave Islam Is Offset by Those Who Become Muslim,” Pew Research Center, January 26, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/26/the-share-of-americans-who-leave-islam-is-offset-by-those-who-become-muslim/>; Youssef Chouhoud, “What Causes Muslims to Doubt Islam? A Quantitative Analysis,” *Yaqeen*, February 13, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/what-causes-muslims-to-doubt-islam-a-quantitative-analysis/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Musnad Ahmad*, no. 18812, with a *ḥasan* (fair) chain of transmission according to the editors. See also comments on the grading in Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Fiqh al-Sīrah* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1427 AH), 328.

<sup>5</sup> The abbreviated form without the middle phrase is found in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* in *mu‘allaq* form: *kitāb al-‘ilm*, *bāb man khassa bi-al-‘ilm qawman dūna qawm karāhiyyata an lā yafhamū* (chapter on one teaching knowledge to some

you speak to people in a manner that disregards their categories of understanding, you may push them into disbelief.

Moreover, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه said, “You will not address the people with a speech that they cannot comprehend except that it will be a trial (i.e., a cause of misguidance)<sup>6</sup> for some of them.”<sup>7</sup> Imam Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790 AH) notes that two things could happen: they will either completely ignore the message or, worse, they will misunderstand it and it will lead them to a trial in their faith.<sup>8</sup> Al-Shāṭibī رحمه الله also devoted considerable discussion to this topic in his work *al-Muwāfaqāt* where he wrote:

And further evidence of this nature indicates that not every piece of knowledge is to be disseminated and spread, even if it were true. In fact, Imam Mālik reported concerning himself that he possessed some *aḥādīth* and information that he never disclosed or narrated.<sup>9</sup> He used to dislike any speech that was not actionable, and reported that those who preceded him used to dislike this as well, so be vigilant about this concept.

And its governing principle (*ḍābiṭ*) is that you measure your issue against the shari’ah; if it conforms to its metrics, then consider its consequences with regards to the conditions of that era and its people. If its mention will not result in [greater] harm (*mafsadah*), then test it with your intellect. If [the faculty of reason] deems it acceptable, then you can speak about it—either publicly if it is an issue that the minds of the masses can grasp, or selectively if it is unsuitable for mass consumption. And if your issue is intolerable [to both], then silence regarding it is warranted in accordance with the shari’ah and sound intellect.<sup>10</sup>

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rather than others out of dislike that the latter may not understand it), <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/3/69>. Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī رحمه الله mentions the report with the full phrase citing Abū Nu‘aym in *al-Mustakhrāj*; Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī* (Beirut: al-Risalah al-‘Alamiyyah, 2013), 1:471.

<sup>6</sup> As explained in the commentary, see Abū al-‘Abbās al-Qurtubī (d. 656 AH), *al-Mufhim* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1996), 1:118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, muqaddimah*, no. 14, <http://sunnah.com/muslim/introduction/13>.

<sup>8</sup> al-Shāṭibī, *al-I’tisām* (Dammam: Dār ibn al-Jawzī, 2008), 2:311.

<sup>9</sup> This doesn’t mean that he possessed knowledge that no one else had but that he demonstrated discretion in what he taught to the public. A similar principle is seen in the discretion shown by Abū Hurayrah رضي الله عنه regarding dissemination of knowledge related to tribulations (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 120); see ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Ṣāliḥ al-‘Izzī, *Difā‘ ‘an Abī Hurayrah* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1981), 79.

<sup>10</sup> al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt* (Khobar: Dār ibn ‘Affān, 1997), 5:171–72.

Someone might say, “If we speak to people according only to what is agreeable, then what *da‘wah* are we doing? Is *da‘wah* not about changing and challenging people’s perceptions in order to lead people to betterment?” The response is that we are not talking about changing the *dīn* (religion) but rather adapting one’s explanation, articulation, presentation, and prioritization based on one’s audience. We can invite people to change and to understand new ideas while still presenting them in a manner that is least objectionable. Wisdom requires selecting the right means of conveying the message with the best choice of words and arguments. Wisdom also requires factoring your audience’s intellectual and educational background into your manner of presentation—speaking to a group of philosophers requires a different manner of presentation than speaking to a group of high school students.

As an example, consider the way the Prophet ﷺ conveyed the immorality of *zina* (fornication) to a young man:

A young man came to the Prophet ﷺ and asked, “O Messenger of Allah, give me permission to commit *ziná* (fornication).” People began to rebuke the young man but the Prophet told him to come close and sit down. He then asked him, “Would you approve of that for your mother?” The young man replied “No, by Allah!” The Prophet replied, “In the same way, people do not approve of it for their mothers.”

[The Prophet ﷺ then proceeded to ask the same question regarding whether he would approve of such a thing for his daughter, sister, or aunts.]

Then the Prophet ﷺ prayed for the young man saying, “O Allah, forgive his sin, purify his heart, and guard his chastity.” After that, the young man never turned his attention to anything of that sort again.<sup>11</sup>

This manner of expression and explanation is culturally dependent. In another society, a different means of explaining may be necessary. Consider another society where a young man may respond to these questions by saying “Yes, I would approve of that for my mother or sister.” In such a scenario, the same line of questioning would not work and would require a shift in focus because the normal

<sup>11</sup> Summarized from *Musnad Ahmad* (no. 22265), with an authentic chain according to al-Haythamī and al-Albānī.

*fiṭrah* (natural human inclination) has been corrupted. Cultures may deviate from their natural disposition since the *fiṭrah* is corruptible, and Islam seeks to rehabilitate the *fiṭrah*. What the culturally aware caller to Islam is doing is ascertaining what aspects of the *fiṭrah* are still intact, in order to build upon them. It is often stated that people resemble their epochs more than their parents (*al-nās bi-zamānihim ashbahu minhum bi-ābā'ihim*),<sup>12</sup> alluding to the fact that people's thoughts are tremendously influenced by the time period in which they live.

As a dynamic discipline, Islamic apologetics is important because for every audience one needs to modify the presentation of the message depending on who one is speaking to. Again, it is mainly the presentation of the message and the manner in which it is defended that needs to be modified and customized, not the content of the message itself. It is still important, though, for the apologist to be aware of the current discourse regarding the content to be presented. Islam is reasonably adaptable to all people, societies, cultures, and eras. The fundamental content and substance of the message itself is not in need of modification, even though within the content there are some secondary issues subject to some latitude and a spectrum of opinions. Thus, wisdom is also required in selecting how one conveys Islam's position on a particular issue subject to different opinions, which will be elucidated below. Furthermore, there is also considerable discussion within Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) with respect to the possibility of some rules undergoing change based on changes with respect to time and place, and how historical context is necessary to understand legal verdicts issued by scholars of the past on those particular issues (refer to the article "[Shari'ah in Today's World: Renewing Islamic Discourse](#)").<sup>13</sup> It is, therefore, important for one engaged in Islamic apologetics to defer such matters to their respective experts in the field of jurisprudence. Even if the apologist is an expert in this field, they may want to consult with others who are not as acutely concerned with the apologetical approach; they may either keep them from caving in to

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<sup>12</sup> This is reported sometimes as a statement of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb or 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله, for instance, expresses the statement to highlight the need for consideration of differences in time and place in the assessment of who can provide legal verdicts. Ibn al-Qayyim, *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn* (Dammam: Dār ibn al-Jawzī, 1423 AH), 6:139.

<sup>13</sup> Hatem Al-Haj, "Sharī'ah in Today's World: Renewing Islamic Discourse," *Yaqeen*, December 13, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/hatem-elhaj/shariah-in-todays-world-renewing-islamic-discourse/>.

pressure or alleviate their fear of presenting certain controversial positions. One must exercise caution in ensuring that one's defense of the faith does not become a narrowly-confined argument in favor of a particular legal position; one should not lose sight of the objective, which is to defend Islam as a whole and instill faith in its teachings in the hearts and minds of the audience with whom one is engaged.

## Concerns and pitfalls

When explaining Islam within different paradigms and engaging with discourses foreign to Islam, there are a number of important pitfalls of which one should be aware, and there are associated measures that can be taken to mitigate the harms associated with those pitfalls. In general, it is from the principles of the Islamic legal maxims that minor harms are tolerated in order to secure major benefits, as mentioned by many jurists including Imam al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salām (d. 660 AH) and others.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the mere presence of pitfalls itself does not preclude the importance and benefit of work in Islamic apologetics. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The believer who mixes with the people and endures their harm has a greater reward than one who does not mix with the people nor endures their harm.”<sup>15</sup> With that in mind, below are some of the key pitfalls to consider.

## Reinforcing the centrality of the human perspective

When one seeks to customize and modify one's discourse in order to suit one's audience, there is inevitably the risk of confirming the problematic paradigm of that audience. The dominant philosophical discourse that one may be inadvertently reinforcing is one that privileges the human perspective above all else and takes human reason as the ultimate reference on matters of truth and falsehood.<sup>16</sup>

Islam by definition means submission to Allah and that means by necessity that the human being must recognize his or her own limitations and yield to the authority of

<sup>14</sup> Al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salām, *Qawā'id al-aḥkām fī maṣāliḥ al-anām* (Cairo: Maktabat Kulliyat al-Azharīyah, 1991), 1:98; see also 'Abd al-Majīd Jum'ah al-Jazā'irī, *al-Qawā'id al-fiqhīyah al-mustakhrajah min i'lam al-muwaqqi'in* (Riyadh: Dār ibn al-Qayyim, 1421 AH), 333.

<sup>15</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 22588.

<sup>16</sup> Some postmodern philosophies do not even accept the idea that absolute truth exists or is attainable.

the Divine legislation. Submission to God is perfectly rational; it is, in fact, *irrational* to exaggerate the office of intellect to the point where you are arguing with God, the Omniscient Creator of the universe. The ultimate reality of matters is known only to God. Allah Most High possesses infinite wisdom and knows all things, while we as human beings are only capable of discerning those truths that He has disclosed to us, be it through the revelation of scripture or through the intellectual or sensory faculties He has endowed us with. Moreover, people differ in their capacity to comprehend matters in different disciplines based on age, education, cultural background, intellectual abilities, and so forth. The attitude that Islam seeks to cultivate in the hearts of the faithful is thus to recognize one's limitations and follow the Divine guidance that God has revealed. It does not undermine the office of reason but rather accords it its most reasonable weight. Once a person has arrived at the logical conclusion that Islam is from God, the Qur'an is Divine revelation, and the Prophet ﷺ is God's messenger, from that point onward the only logical conclusion is to submit. Rather than representing the capitulation of reason, it is the only true fulfillment of reason. Divine revelation requires no external confirmation; rather, through it, one's reasoning develops to see matters as they really are.

Many times, in the interest of answering people's questions about why a particular text or ruling doesn't make sense to someone, we fail to address an underlying issue of concern which is the presumption that the human intellect is the arbiter of truth to which religion should be subservient. In rejecting everything that is beyond our capacity to comprehend, we fallaciously assert the centrality of the human perspective and the human intellect. Many people look for human motivations behind God's actions or evaluate the benefit of God's instructions according to the limited lens of personal profit and materialistic gain. Religion will never make sense to such a mindset unwilling to challenge its own preconceived assumptions and vaunted sense of self-importance and self-aggrandization. It is true that there is always Divine wisdom in what Allah has commanded and that Allah is Most Compassionate and Most Loving towards His Creation; however, our limited human capacity to discern the wisdom behind Divine instructions will be

commensurate with the degree to which we humble ourselves and seek nearness to Him.

While it is important for one engaged in Islamic apologetics to address and explain misconceptions about texts and rulings, it is vital to not lose sight of the importance of cultivating the ethos of submission and a love for following the path of Allah’s Prophets and Messengers عليهم السلام. After all, a person may be committed to following the path that they love, knowing the beauty of its fundamental message and the teachings of the Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم, even if they may not know the answer to every single question or doubt they encounter. That’s because for the average Muslim to experience certainty and fulfillment in their faith does not require encyclopedic knowledge of every single scholarly response to every contention; it requires an understanding of the fundamental message of the faith and a spiritual connection through worship of their Creator. Much of this also relates to the ability to embrace uncertainty about secondary issues, which is a recognized psychological predictor of positive mental health outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

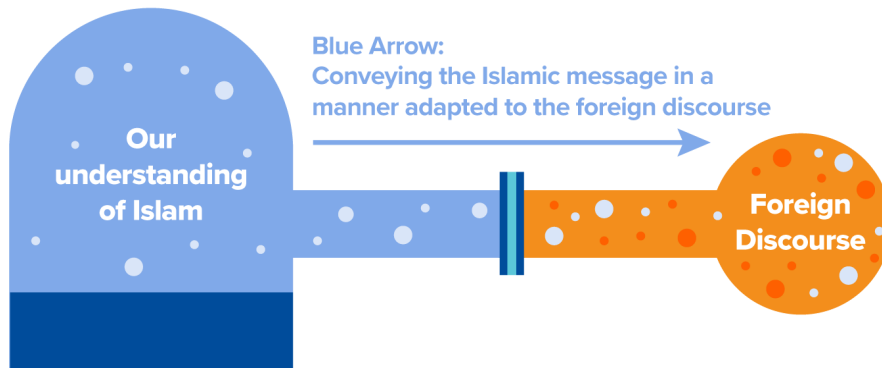
It is important that those in Islamic apologetics develop a two-step system, where we establish our doctrines independent of the dominant philosophical discourse, using the hermeneutical self-sufficiency of the Islamic discourse. In other words, we utilize the timeless scriptural texts and foundational principles (*uṣūl*) to establish the Islamic teachings in the first step. In the second step, we consider how best to convey the message and advance its objectives within the framework of the dominant discourse. However, we need to have a safety valve that prevents our involvement in the external discourse, which is necessarily characterized by some degree of adaptability and modification, from flowing back and affecting our own conception of the message of Islam (see **Figure 1 below**). Of course, no matter how diligent one is in this regard, it remains possible for one’s perception of the message, and what it means, to be affected by one’s continued involvement in a

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<sup>17</sup> Osman Umarji and Hassan Elwan, “Embracing Uncertainty: How to Feel Emotionally Stable in a Pandemic,” *Yaqeen*, March 30, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/embracing-uncertainty-how-to-feel-emotionally-stable-in-a-pandemic/>.

foreign discourse and for this reason, it is important to remain humble, recognize the limits of one's knowledge, introspect, and be open to correction.

## One-Way Safety Valve



**Figure 1.** Safety-valve system - in order to prevent engagement with the foreign discourse from flowing back into the container housing our understanding of Islam and altering it, a safety-valve is necessary.

## Causing an ideological shift in the community

Another concern about the discourse of Islamic apologetics is that there is a potential risk of producing an ideological shift in the community, where certain positions become more widely accepted because they are more convenient to cite when defending the Islamic tradition. It is important that orthodoxy is not sacrificed in the process of developing the discourse of apologetics. This leads to the initial question of what constitutes ‘Islamic orthodoxy’?

Islamic orthodoxy refers to the established mainstream scholarly understanding of Islam based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. But is Islamic orthodoxy a spectrum or a point? One may say that, from the human perspective, there is a spectrum whereas, from the Divine perspective, it is a point because Allah always knows precisely the right answer. This means that there may be a legitimate spectrum of different opinions among Muslim scholars on a particular topic, while the true opinion in the sight of God is singular. However, Allah has permitted and indeed rewarded scholars for expressing their conclusions within

that spectrum of opinions. The Prophet ﷺ said, “If a judge makes a ruling, striving to apply his reasoning and he is correct, he will have two rewards. If a judge makes a ruling, striving to apply his reasoning and he is mistaken, he will have one reward.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, when it comes to matters of legitimate difference of opinion, there are multiple opinions that can be considered valid within Islamic orthodoxy. On the other hand, when it comes to matters on which there is no scope for different opinions, there will be only one orthodox answer (see also [Difference of Opinion - Where do we draw the line?](#)).

Within Islamic orthodoxy, there will be some positions that are culturally on the “left” and some positions on the “right.” On a particular issue, some scholars may view something as *ḥarām* (forbidden) or *makrūh* (disliked), while others view it as *mubāḥ* (permissible) and both sides may be valid, based on sound scriptural support, and upheld by *Mujtahid* Imāms (i.e., those leading scholars of Islamic jurisprudence who reached the highest level in their capacity for independent evaluation of the sacred texts). For instance, the majority of scholars may view drawings of living things as *ḥarām* while those in the Mālikī school apply the emphatic prohibition of images to three-dimensional statues and not to drawings (two-dimensional images).<sup>19</sup> Most of the time, the more permissive position is the left-leaning position, while the more restrictive position (which views a greater number of things as *ḥarām*) is the more right-leaning position.

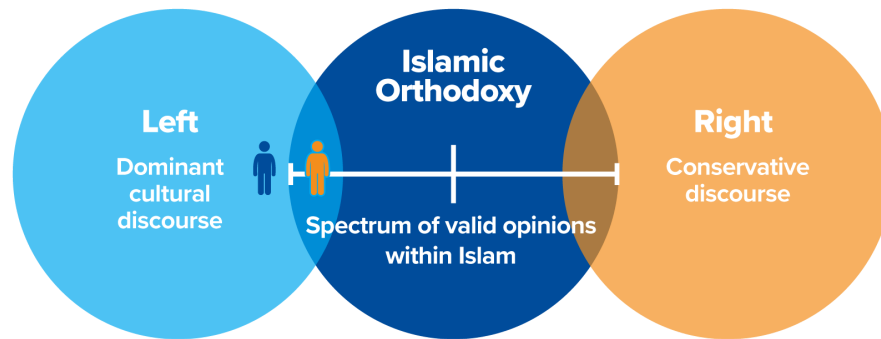
If we imagine Islamic orthodoxy as a circle (**Figure 2**), those inside the circle may be situated to the left (i.e., more culturally liberal) of the center or they may be situated to the right (i.e., more culturally conservative). If the audience they are seeking to connect with outside of the circle is closer to the right, then those scholars to the right within the circle are better situated to reach them. On the other

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<sup>18</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6919. In another narration on this topic, it is mentioned that two men went out for travel when the time of prayer arrived, and they did not have water with them. They performed dry ablution with clean earth and prayed, then they later found water. One of them repeated his ablution and prayer, while the other did not repeat them. They came to the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and mentioned that to him. The Prophet ﷺ said to the one who did not repeat his prayer, “You have followed the Sunnah correctly and you will be rewarded for your prayer,” and the Prophet ﷺ said to the one who repeated his prayer, “You will have a double reward.” *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, no. 388.

<sup>19</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kharashī, *Ḥāshiyat al-Kharashī ‘alā al-mukhtaṣar Sidi Khalīl wa ma‘ahu ḥāshiyat al-‘Adawī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1997), 4:395.

hand, if the audience they are seeking to reach is to the left, then those scholars within the circle who are left of center are closer to them. By way of analogy, if you want to reach out to save someone to your left, you will extend your left hand to them, and to someone on your right, you will extend your right hand.



**Figure 2.** *Islamic orthodoxy has a spectrum of valid positions, some of which are closer to the left and some to the right. Someone influenced by the dominant cultural discourse would find greater affinity to a Muslim scholar who is situated on the left within the circle of orthodoxy, rather than a scholar situated on the right within the spectrum.*

Examining the dominant culture around us, one may ask whether it is generally to the left or to the right with respect to Islamic orthodoxy. On the majority of social issues, one can observe that the dominant culture is to the left of the circle of Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> These people to the left of the orthodoxy circle will find greater affinity with those scholars who are to the left of the center *within the circle*. Sometimes there is overlap between the dominant discourse on a particular issue and a portion of the spectrum of opinions within Islamic orthodoxy, and sometimes there is no overlap. Sometimes the people you are seeking to reach will be so far to the left they are on a cliff, ready to abandon the faith altogether, and those inside the circle on the left are best able to reach them. The goal is to reach such people to bring them back to a secure attachment with their faith and gradually expand the scope of their acceptance.<sup>21</sup> It will thus be natural that a team

<sup>20</sup> There may be some exceptions such as the rural versus urban divide with the former tending towards conservatism.

<sup>21</sup> A similar principle is seen in the statement of Imam Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161 AH), who said, “Verily, *fiqh* according to us is when a trustworthy scholar provides a legitimate concession (*rukhsah*); as for being strict (*tashdīd*), then anyone can do that well.” See Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa faḍlihī* (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1994) p. 784, no. 1467.

dedicated to Islamic apologetics in this type of society would comprise mostly a team of scholars, preachers, researchers, and academics who are situated to the left of the *center of the orthodoxy circle* although still within that circle. The positions of the faith that they defend and promote are generally to the left.

However, the line that defines the boundary of the circle may sometimes be unclear and one undoubtedly runs the risk of researchers at the perimeter of the circle overstepping that line and sometimes falling into something beyond the realm of orthodoxy. Moreover, the constant output of left-leaning positions by an influential organization will influence the trend in the community, producing a gradual drift towards the left. We can term this a *left-shift* of the community. Sometimes also, there is a counter-reaction amongst Muslims to the prevailing trends in society where everything that seems ‘liberal’ or ‘Western’ is rejected as antithetical to Islam, without any critical evaluation or sound scholarship. We can term this a *right-shift*. Those proponents of a right-shift promote the most conservative views and denounce positions that they fail to realize are actually within the spectrum of legitimate opinions in Islamic orthodoxy. In their rush to counteract “leftist” influences, they may actually negate authentic teachings within the Islamic tradition.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the reductionist attitude that regards everything ‘Western’ as un-Islamic is rejected. The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ utilized the experiential knowledge of the Romans and Persians in deciding not to forbid his followers from intercourse during the period of breastfeeding.<sup>23</sup> The noble companion ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ رضي الله عنه was able to testify to the positive traits of Byzantine (Eastern

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<sup>22</sup> Consider for instance the hadith of Umm Salamah where she asked the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, “O Messenger of Allah, why are we [i.e., women] not mentioned in the Qur’an as the men are?” So Allah revealed verse 33:35, “Verily, Muslim men and Muslim women, believing men and believing women . . .” Reported in *Sunan al-Kubrā* of al-Nasā’ī, no. 11405; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 26575; *Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhi*, no. 3295 and graded fair by Ibn Ḥajar and authentic by al-Albānī. Many conservative preachers today would have one think that any such line of questioning regarding gender equality is the result of capitulating to Western feminism, but Allah Himself validated her question by revealing verses in response, emphasizing equal rewards for both genders. However, this would not mean challenging an established ruling after the cessation of revelation. Allah revealed in response to her inquiry about the inheritance, “And do not wish for that by which Allah has made some of you exceed others. For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned. And ask Allah of His bounty. Indeed Allah is ever, of all things, Knowing.” Qur’an 4:32.

<sup>23</sup> The Prophet ﷺ stated “I intended to prohibit intercourse with a breastfeeding woman until I considered that the Romans and the Persians do it without any defect being caused to their children thereby.” *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1442a. See also ‘Abd Allāh al-Fawzān, *Minḥat al-‘allām fī sharḥ Bulūgh al-Marām* (Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1428 AH), 7:361.

Roman) civilization when he said, “They are the most forbearing of people at the time of turmoil, the most resilient of people at the time of calamity, the quickest to attack after flight, the kindest concerning the destitute, the orphan, and the weak, and the most resistant to oppression by their kings.”<sup>24</sup>

What is a balanced institute or organization to do in the midst of such trends? Simultaneously releasing both left-leaning and right-leaning positions may just confuse the audience. Although most of the output may be more left-leaning within the circle of orthodoxy to bring people back into it and afford them an incubatory period after their return, a suitable compromise is often to give a platform to healthy intellectual conversations taking place within Islamic scholarship; it shows people the spectrum of left-leaning and right-leaning positions within orthodoxy and also shows people the proper manners and etiquette of debating and disagreeing.

There are two steps to mitigate the risk of inducing an ideological shift. First, a strong culture and awareness of Islamic orthodoxy must be fostered within the organization in order to avoid excessive laxity or rigidity and reemphasize the need for scholarly rigor in grounding the positions one promotes. One must not invalidate positions either on the left or the right because that will distort the circle of orthodoxy. Being stationed within the left of the circle should not mean that one skews the circle by rejecting the validity of those situated to the right. Criticizing the error of capitulating to the dominant culture should not entail rejecting valid positions within Islamic orthodoxy simply because they align with the dominant culture. It is also important for one to benefit from outside critique particularly when it observes the due *adab al-ikhtilāf* (etiquettes of disagreement) and helps to build, correct, and improve efforts of Islamic organizations rather than denigrate and discredit them. Constructive criticism complements and enhances one’s work in Islamic apologetics.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2898a, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/54/45>.

## Damaging people’s respect for the tradition and its bearers

It is one thing to offer people a more lenient position that is valid, but it is another thing altogether to denigrate or marginalize the equally-valid stricter position. If one continually trivializes or negates something established within the tradition, it brings about a sense of distrust for the bearers of the tradition. If one seeks to connect with people by selecting a position to the left, one should not omit mentioning the positions of those at the center or to the right and contextualizing those positions as necessary. For instance, someone may promote only the position of the Mālikī authorities who do not consider the saliva of dogs to be impure (*najas*) and they may claim that there is no problem in having dogs in the household, without acknowledging that the majority of schools (Ḥanafī, Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanbalī) disagree with that position.<sup>25</sup> It is fine to promote one position so long as one acknowledges the existence and validity of others. People need to know the spectrum of valid opinions in Islam. While customization of one’s presentation for one’s audience is important, when dealing with apologetics, people should be given an honest and accurate representation of the tradition.

If one is not balanced in one’s presentation, one will shake people’s confidence in their tradition. People will begin to think, “Why would so many scholars of Islam convey such strict and unacceptable positions? I cannot trust the Islamic tradition to convey the truth.” Similarly, if one dismisses valid Islamic opinions simply because they seem more “left-leaning” or “liberal” and denigrates the scholars who issue such opinions, they will also shake people’s confidence in the bearers of the Islamic tradition. Once the status of the tradition or Muslim scholars in the collective consciousness of Muslims is sabotaged, one will have done permanent damage and nothing can replace that authority. Once the tradition falls, or qualified scholarship falls, what replaces it is nothing more than a version of ‘Islam’ in which every person comes up with their own understanding, which will largely be based on the dominant social paradigm rather than knowledge of the Qur’an and Sunnah.

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<sup>25</sup> Kuwait Ministry of Awqāf and Islamic Affairs, *al-Mawsū‘ah al-fiqhīyah* (Kuwait: Dar al-Safwah, 1995), 35:129.

## Damaging people’s perception of Islam’s relevance in our times by overstating the historical nature of *fiqh*

Often in the realm of Islamic apologetics, it is common for people to discuss how legal verdicts have changed, how certain discussions in classical works of Islamic jurisprudence are related to a particular historical context that no longer applies, or how certain rulings are contingent on circumstantial variables, and so forth. While this discussion has scholarly merit and validity, and relates to a well-established principle (i.e., *taghayyur al-fatwá*) discussed by scholars like Imams al-Qarāfī, Ibn al-Qayyim, and others, the result of overemphasizing these points leads to the erroneous perception that Islamic law is not really relevant for modern times or that it has no fixed constants. This opens the door for people to dismiss whatever they wish from classical jurisprudence by saying, “Times have changed!” On the other hand, if one is too rigid in one’s conceptualization of Islamic law and dismisses the well-established concept of *taghayyur al-fatwá* as ‘modernist notions,’ one will damage the capacity of Islamic legal thought to accommodate and adapt to new developments.

So how, then, do you balance the flexibility of the legal framework of Islam with the timeless continuity and permanency of the Divine instruction (*al-khiṭāb al-ilāhī*)? The answer is that you explain to people that there is a clearly developed science within Islamic legal theory that accounts for when and how subsidiary rulings undergo change, and that this is a science practiced by the greatest qualified jurists and committees of scholars. Therefore, for scholars explaining to people that a particular ruling is historically contextualized, it is not adequate to simply state that times have changed; rather, scholars must specify the legal mechanism that accounts for that change so people know exactly why this change is one that can be accommodated within Islamic law. This is something that must be undertaken by those with the requisite expertise in Islamic law and such scholars should therefore maintain a presence in the field of Islamic apologetics, to ensure that scholarly rigor is maintained and hollow claims do not become the basis of *da‘wah*.

Similarly, if one explains Islamic law only with reference to *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law), this is not sufficient since one would find that the principles can be easily interpreted to accommodate any ideology. After all, all people agree on these objectives just as they agree on the platonic triad of truth, beauty, and goodness/justice, or the motto of the French Revolution: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. However, it is critical to emphasize that Islamic law did not merely establish abstract objectives but also specified concrete means of achieving these objectives. The fundamental means specified by Islamic law are timeless and unchanging while some areas of rulings are subject to change and accommodation.

## Conclusion on pitfalls

Being aware of the pitfalls of Islamic apologetics is vital for anyone engaged in this discipline. But we must not let fear of the pitfalls paralyze us and prevent us from involvement, given the critical importance of this work for spreading the message of Islam, defending its doctrines, and strengthening the Muslim community. Therefore, we must be cognizant of these pitfalls, we must be ever-vigilant of their presence, and we must pay attention to strategies to minimize and mitigate them while continuing the essential work of apologetics.

## Limitations of apologetics

Islamic apologetics is not without its limitations. For one, most people do not listen with the intent of seeking to understand or seeking truth. This is why people rarely convert simply from listening to a debate or being debated with. Simply overwhelming someone with your intelligence and proof does not open them up to contemplating your message. In fact, it may make them feel defeated, more defensive, and sometimes even more adamant in their position.

The second limitation is that people frequently disguise their emotional discontentment with an intellectual objection. The over-emphasis on rational

arguments and ‘reasoning’ neglects the fact that human choices are frequently driven by social and emotional factors, and often a rational argument is constructed to support a judgment that one has already made.<sup>26</sup> A person may follow a path based on social attachment such as bonds of friendship, or emotional experiences such as a positive or negative experience within the religious community. The Qur’an recognizes this as a matter of fact: “And [Abraham] said, ‘You have taken idols [for worship] instead of Allah, only to keep [the bond of] harmony among yourselves in this worldly life’” (29:25). For instance, a person may go to a church, mosque, or synagogue to meet friends or to have a good time. However, when one feels disconnected from the community or is mistreated by members in the community and decides they wish to leave, they may feel the need to make an intellectual argument to justify what they are doing.

Thus, it is important to not exaggerate the importance of apologetics for conveying the message and inviting people to the truth. Apologetics is not the ultimate goal in and of itself. The goal is to maintain the community upon divine guidance. The brother or sister volunteering in the soup kitchen or helping the homeless or visiting the sick, or the family volunteering at the *masjid* and greeting people may actually be influencing more people than the one engaged in research in apologetics. This doesn’t undermine the importance of apologetics, it simply means that one must diversify one’s approach—or diversify the approaches in the community towards inviting others to the truth. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs reminds us that one of the most fundamental needs is a sense of belonging.<sup>27</sup> The work of the Muslim community should emphasize the importance of these social aspects in the cultivation of faith. This does not in any way negate the fact that convincing intellectual arguments should be provided; it just means that a comprehensive approach should not neglect focusing on the determinants of social discontentment that divert people from the truth.

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, in moral choices, the rationale is often a post hoc construction after a judgment has already been reached. J. Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814–34, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814>.

<sup>27</sup> Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Dr. Nazir Khan, “In Pursuit of Conviction II: Humanity Needs God,” *Yaqeen*, October 11, 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/in-pursuit-of-conviction-ii-humanity-needs-god/>.

The third limitation is that apologetics is usually slanted towards defense, while building certainty will always be superior to answering doubts. Of course, Islamic apologetics should be much larger in scope and much more sophisticated than simply refuting misconceptions. It articulates the Islamic hierarchy of values; it articulates evidence for the truth of principles that Islam advocates. It involves constructing an entire intellectual discourse that advances rational explanations in favor of the doctrines and rulings of Islam. However, intellectual conviction is not the only factor in the attainment of faith and one must not lose sight of that. Divine guidance is a gift bestowed by Allah upon those who seek His pleasure:

There has come to you from Allah a Light and a clear Book by which Allah guides those who pursue His pleasure to the ways of peace and brings them out from darkneses into the light, by His permission, and guides them to a straight path. (Qur'an 5:15-16)

Knowledge becomes a means of guidance when it is accompanied by a sincere pursuit of Divine pleasure. That pursuit is not a matter of mere theoretical abstract arguments; it is about fostering a deep emotional attachment to the faith and developing one's love for Allah and His Messenger. This is what ultimately motivates a person to strive to follow the faith in all aspects of one's life. Nurturing certainty will always be superior to answering doubts because it provides one with the spiritual foundations to contextualize problematic issues and to see the bigger picture behind each individual issue.

## **A general scheme for apologetics**

What kind of work does Islamic apologetics entail? How does one structure an answer to a particular question? A classification can help us understand the different components that make up a satisfactory answer, although we must remember that classifications are flexible and not set in stone. The following are three elements that constitute answers in Islamic apologetics: clarification, justification, and application.

## 1. Clarification - What does Islam say about this issue?

The Muslim apologist seeks to gather information related to the substance of the issue. For instance, if the question pertains to Islamic law, they will consult the relevant manuals of Islamic jurisprudence to research the spectrum of opinions that exist in the Islamic tradition, while privileging the opinions that are the ‘relied-upon’ views of the four schools, also noting other opinions that existed amongst the Prophet’s companions رضي الله عنهم and the relevant evidences from the texts of the Qur’an and Sunnah on the subject. A person researching a particular verse of the Qur’an has the vast tradition of *tafsīr* available to study its explanation. If the question pertains to an issue that requires knowledge of a foreign discourse or novel topic (e.g., What Islamic teachings pertain to cognitive-behavioral therapy? What is the Islamic position on stem cell therapy or bitcoin investments?), this will require integrating novel research with traditional Islamic learning and will require consultation with experts. People may be misinformed about the spectrum of valid opinions on a particular issue such as what Islam teaches about military conquest, for example. So the first segment of the response relates to providing the relevant content from the scriptural sources and the Islamic tradition.

## 2. Justification - Why does Islam say this? Why is this the best view?

This is really the heart of Islamic apologetics, which is systematic argumentative discourse in defense of doctrine. This is where one must take into consideration the aspects of one’s audience including knowledge of culture, background of listener, trends, etc. The goal is to justify those positions outlined during clarification. In other words, the aim is to justify positions within Islamic orthodoxy. Furthermore, one should not present a skewed perception of orthodoxy in the minds of recipients by giving unequal weight to different positions.

In this step, one is focused on explaining a teaching in its original context. Why did this particular ruling occur during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ? What was the context back then? Why did Muslim scholars talk about this issue or

that issue? What were the arguments they used to support their conclusion? For instance, how did the political situation at that time relate to rulings concerning military conquest? This often requires a team with sound scholarship in multiple domains and appropriate analogies to situations familiar to modern audiences.

Bear in mind that in today's era, audiences are somewhat merged. There is no longer a complete partition between the content that is provided for Muslim students and the general public. The material that is used to address misconceptions and refute allegations against Islam may also have a pedagogical function in teaching the next generation of Muslim students, whether directly or indirectly. At the same time, the material used to teach Muslim students may also often be available online for the general public to access and learn from. Therefore, when eccentric opinions are not only mentioned in apologetics but disproportionately emphasized and promoted, this will trickle down and influence what Muslims understand to be mainstream Islam.

### 3. Application - How do these rulings apply to us today?

Once you have clarified the Islamic position(s), and provided rational arguments to defend those positions while analyzing the philosophical background of your target audience, the third step is to talk about how they apply today. How do you cross the bridge between “antiquity” and “modernity”?

Although we want to avoid the pitfall mentioned earlier about “damaging people’s perception of Islam’s relevance in our times by overstating the historical nature of *fiqh*,” we do recognize that there are major differences between cultures today and historical cultures. There is a huge gap between peoples’ lifestyles today and what they were like historically. This will have relevance in many areas, particularly rulings related to sociocultural norms, societal, and political issues.

**Note on sequence:** these three steps will not always occur in the same order. For some issues, the major concern is the application today, and one should first provide disclaimers about application before proceeding to clarifying the original context of the ruling. This needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case scenario. For

instance, on the subject of slavery, the Muslim apologist needs to first stress the emphatic rejection of reinstating slavery in the world today by contemporary Islamic scholarship. After that, one can proceed to clarification, by examining the history of Islamic teachings in response to slavery, the importance of freeing slaves in the early Muslim community,<sup>28</sup> the elimination of many sources of slavery, and the Prophet Muhammad’s condemnation of selling a free person as a slave.<sup>29</sup> Some would also note the vast difference between what was tolerated in the Muslim world and what comprises our collective memory of slavery such that some scholars even refuse to translate “*riqq*” as “slavery”; for instance, ‘slaves’ were leading scholars and army generals, and the path to ascending the social ladder, earning freedom, and even becoming rulers was open. As well, Islam condemned racism (even if some Muslims didn’t always live up to its teachings) and historically slaves in the Muslim world came from all ethnic backgrounds. One would also clarify how Islam provided rulings that curtailed slavery and how it vigorously promoted, and at times mandated, the emancipation of slaves. Then, one can provide justification that explains the original historical context and how this gradual approach was the optimal method for addressing slavery in the pre-modern world.

## Guidelines for the apologist

At this juncture, it is important to reiterate key guidelines for those engaged in Islamic apologetics to keep in mind. Of course, being ‘engaged in Islamic apologetics’ is not limited to those writing academic research papers or participating in online debates. In fact, even a friendly chat with your neighbors, co-workers, or family members could revolve around questions that are addressed by Islamic apologetics. In an era in which so many people are confronted by doubts about religion and social forces that look down upon religious belief, it is not uncommon to be asked questions about why Muslims pray or fast, what Islam

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<sup>28</sup> “The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself personally freed 63 slaves during his life, his wife Aisha freed 69 slaves, and his companions freed numerous slaves, most notably his companion ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf who freed an astounding thirty-thousand.” Nazir Khan, “Divine Duty: Islam and Social Justice,” *Yaqeen*, February 4, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/divine-duty-islam-and-social-justice/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari*, no. 2227, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/34/174>.

teaches about human rights, what do shari‘ah and jihad really mean, and so on. Sometimes people need to be persuaded with a rational explanation in support of what Islam teaches; if they are experiencing a crisis of faith, it can help them rediscover the beauty of Islam and renew their conviction in the faith. So a certain level of familiarity with Islamic apologetics and its guidelines is essential for all of us.

## Intentions and prayer

The first guideline involves renewing your intentions, as with all endeavors in Islam. But for those involved in Islamic apologetics, this is particularly critical for another reason, which is that one must recognize one’s own vulnerability. No one’s faith is guaranteed, and some of those involved in apologetics may themselves fall into a state of doubt and question their own faith. The Qur’an contains the supplication, “Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower” (Qur’an 3:8). No one should consider themselves immune; rather, one should recognize that guidance is in the Hands of Allah, and one must constantly turn to Him in prayer. One’s work in Islamic apologetics must be accompanied by an increase in prayer with sincerity and devout spirituality and reverence, recognizing one’s dire need for Allah and one’s brokenness before Him. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “By Allah, without Allah we would not have been guided, neither would we have fasted, nor would we have prayed.”<sup>30</sup> Without Allah’s guidance, a person will not be able to find truth or obtain certainty in it, no matter how intelligent they are and how many intellectual arguments they examine. Intentions and prayer are therefore indispensable.

## Cultivating respect for scholarship

If one’s objective is to invite people to the path of Allah, then this must be based upon sound knowledge of the religion. The Qur’an states: “Say, ‘This is my way; I invite to Allah *with insight (baṣīrah)*, I and those who follow me. And Exalted is Allah; and I am not of those who associate others with Him’” (Qur’an 12:108).

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<sup>30</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6620, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/82/26>.

The meaning of inviting to Allah with insight is that one invites with clear knowledge of the religion.<sup>31</sup> And if knowledge of the religion is important, then one should recognize one's own limitations and the expertise possessed by those who have devoted their lives to the study of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, hadith, and Qur'anic sciences. One of the most dangerous matters in apologetics is to become so comfortable answering questions that one inflates one's own authority to a point where they casually dismiss the opinions of senior scholars as too strict, too lax, or irrelevant, and instead advance their own personal opinions.

Another danger is some apologists focus their efforts on pointing out the errors of other scholars and apologists rather than substantively advancing the case for Islam through their own work. Their time and efforts are completely consumed by combing the works of their rivals for factual errors instead of addressing the avalanche of anti-Islamic propaganda attacking belief in God, the integrity of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the morality of the Prophet ﷺ, and so on. While all humans are fallible and should be corrected and advised appropriately, social media has created a hyper-critical environment where scholars from all directions and orientations are routinely denigrated for their errors and their positive contributions are dismissed. The net result is that the layperson witnessing all this loses respect for Islamic scholarship altogether and turns instead to the interpretations of Islam offered by those who are unqualified and unschooled in the methodology of understanding the sacred texts.

One must learn to defer to the senior people of knowledge with respect to clarifying the Islamic understanding of matters. Scholars of Islam are indeed the inheritors of the prophets عليهم السلام and play a critical role in spreading the prophetic inheritance, which is sound knowledge of the faith. When it comes to the general scheme for apologetics, one must therefore take very seriously the discussions of scholars in the initial step of clarification; when it comes to justification, the apologist will need to use analogies and language that suit the audience. Indeed, the majority of those engaged in Islamic apologetics should come from the ranks of the scholars in order to provide sufficient grounding in the field and to develop the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār Ḥajr, 2001), 3:378.

discourse appropriately. Those involved in apologetics will become more adept at providing persuasive justifications and interpretations than those who are not.

## Good listening and wise steering of the discussion

The third guideline involves practicing good listening. All too often a person presents a certain objection against Islam that is actually not the root cause of their underlying dissatisfaction and spiritual consternation. If you give them a chance to share their concerns and you listen attentively, you will be in a better position to discover the real root cause of their concerns. Sometimes it is not so much an objection against Islam per se, but rather the unwelcoming image of Islam that has been projected by certain individuals or groups in their life.

Practicing good listening also allows one to see the entirety of what concerns the questioner, or the entirety of an opponent's objections, and then respond with what is best suited to the conversation. We see this in the example of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself:

The Quraysh selected 'Utbaḥ ibn Rabī'ah as the most learned amongst them to go and speak with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. So 'Utbaḥ went to the Prophet and said: "O Muhammad, are you better than [your father] 'Abdullah?" The Messenger of Allah ﷺ remained silent. 'Utbaḥ said: "Are you better than [your grandfather] 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib?" The Messenger of Allah ﷺ remained silent.

'Utbaḥ said: "If you concede that they are better than you, they have worshipped the gods who you reject. And if you claim that you are better than them, speak until we hear your opinion, for I swear by Allah we have not seen someone who was a greater cause of misfortune for his people than you. You divided our people, dispersed our authority, and found fault in our religion, and disgraced us amongst the Arabs until they began to say that amongst Quraysh there is a sorcerer, or amongst Quraysh there is a soothsayer. We are on the brink of falling into a civil war that will eradicate us (lit. we await only a cry like that of the pregnant woman before swords are drawn upon one another).

If you seek leadership, we will select you as our ruler to reign over us as long as you live. If you desire wealth, then we will gather our wealth until

you are the richest man among Quraysh. If you desire intimacy, then choose any of the women of Quraysh, and we will marry you to ten.” Then the Messenger of God, may God’s prayers and peace be upon him, said to him: “Are you finished, O Abū al-Walīd?” He said: “Yes.” Then the Prophet ﷺ began to recite Sūrat Fuṣṣilat.<sup>32</sup>

In this example, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ waited patiently for ‘Utbaḥ to finish before responding to him. Moreover, not every objection is worth addressing directly; sometimes there is an underlying issue that needs to be addressed. ‘Utbaḥ had made a variety of offers premised on the assumption that the Prophet ﷺ was a man seeking materialistic gain. He had also posed certain questions about whether the Prophet ﷺ was better than his ancestors who worshipped idols—questions that the Prophet wisely did not engage with and remained silent. Why didn’t the Prophet ﷺ simply affirm that he was better than ‘Abd Allāh and ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib since we know that to be the case? ‘Abd Allāh and ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib were highly regarded amongst the Quraysh and in their tribalistic society all honor and authority came from one’s lineage. Had the Prophet ﷺ repudiated the virtue of his ancestors, it would have taken the conversation in a very different direction, focused on his rejection of everything the Quraysh upheld as sacred; he instead turned to Sūrat al-Fuṣṣilat in order to focus the conversation on what was of far greater importance, the Quraysh’s rejection of their Creator. Today there are also topics that may evoke strong negative emotions from one’s listeners that will turn them away from one’s message before one has even had the opportunity to raise the message of Islam itself; sometimes unpacking those misconceptions requires a great deal of contextualization and paradigm-shifting that the average person may not be prepared for in the span of a short conversation. This requires wisdom in knowing which topic is most worthy of time and attention.

The Prophet ﷺ listened to ‘Utbaḥ without interrupting him in spite of all the things he mentioned that were worthy of being repudiated. This is wisdom: rather than focusing on everything wrong with what the person is saying, guide them to

<sup>32</sup> Summarized from a report in Ibn Abī Shaybah (no. 37715), Abū Ya‘lá (no. 1818), ‘Abd ibn Ḥumayd (no. 1121), Ibn Hishām, and al-Ḥākim (no. 3002) and declared authentic by al-Dhahabī. See Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah* (Beirut: DKI, 1990), 1:322–23; al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘alá al-ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: DKI, 2002), 2:278; al-Bayḥaqī, *Dalā’il al-nubuwwah* (Beirut: DKI, 1988), 2:204–6.

something that is better. Sometimes a person is so focused on refuting what another person is saying that they don't pay attention to the root cause of that person's condition in the first place.

## Intellectual humility

Francis Bacon said, “A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.”<sup>33</sup> The famous British philosopher and leading advocate of atheism in his time, Antony Flew, later changed his opinion and embraced belief in God after some sixty years of repudiating it.<sup>34</sup> Many people, prematurely impressed by their own rationality, make grandiose claims without spending time gaining proficiency in the relevant intellectual discourses, learning from the experts, and pondering over the matter in depth. A sure sign of failure in any intellectual endeavor is to fall prey to arrogance and the harms of the ego.

In order to have a beneficial conversation, what is required is humbleness. The importance of humbleness applies to both the listener and the presenter. The apologist should exemplify humbleness and invite their audience to it as well, in the interest of a fruitful conversation. The impact of personal ego on a discourse is detrimental and will render it futile. Anyone engaged in apologetics should seek to develop more conversations that occur in situations in which each person is seeking to listen and consider the points shared by the other person, rather than in situations of hostility and animosity which lack the same benefit and utility. Personal pride and ego are not the only threats to humbleness. Humbleness also entails being cognizant of what our minds are capable of, the natural limitations of the human faculties, and recognizing that there are matters that transcend them.

Some people may feel that science provides answers for everything but, in fact, the majority of people's most valuable beliefs are not ones that can be verified in a scientific experiment or by direct empirical observation. One finds the philosopher

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<sup>33</sup> “Francis Bacon,” in *Oxford Essential Quotations*, ed. Susan Ratcliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00000644>.

<sup>34</sup> For his story, refer to Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

David Hume arguing that one cannot even prove the relationship between cause and effect; they are merely repetitive impressions that are vivacious enough to produce belief. People think that they witness cause and effect in the natural world, like a fire burning wood, but all they really witness is that two processes coincide temporally and they infer a connection between them. Although I affirm natural secondary causes based on the potency that Allah constantly creates in them, I use this example only to illustrate the limitations of rationality. Something as integral to our reasoning as cause and effect cannot itself be demonstrated empirically.

Many concepts in science itself are useful to explain phenomena but are not themselves observable—have you directly observed electricity itself or have you observed phenomena accounted for by electricity? Moreover, much of what we believe about the natural laws has been conveyed to us on the authority of other experts and we are content accepting their testimony rather than attempting to repeat the scientific experiments ourselves.

Additionally, many of our thoughts are merely the product of the dominant culture in which we were raised. A person presenting an objection to a religious concept, teaching, or text will not be successful in finding a satisfying answer until they come to terms with their own ideological and cultural presumptions and move to a stance of neutrality and intellectual humility. Take, for example, the penal code in Islam; much of the reaction towards it is emotionally driven and based on imagery consumed in popular media and news reports. For someone to objectively contest the efficacy of the system, instead of basing their objections on their feelings, they should provide academically sound and statistically significant studies that prove its cost-benefit ratio for the society to be unfavorable and inferior to other legal systems.

When we talk about matters of the unseen, matters of theology, we have to recognize the limits of the human mind. In the Western philosophical tradition, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, it was always essentially assumed that the mind could answer these questions and construct answers to metaphysics; hence, we have Aristotelian metaphysics, Neoplatonic metaphysics, etc. Arguably one of the most influential philosophers in the Western world in the last 200 years,

Immanuel Kant, turned this entire paradigm on its head. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explored the question of what the mind is really capable of, and he argued that the *synthetic a priori*<sup>35</sup> propositions that characterize metaphysics are not really possible independent of subjective human experience. All that we know is filtered through the structures and concepts inherent in the human mind and/or those largely or entirely determined by human experience (depending on one's position on the rationalist-empiricist spectrum). Since we can never get beyond that, we can never know about the reality of things in themselves. Metaphysics that transcends our experience is therefore impossible.<sup>36</sup> The human mind cannot empirically examine the unseen and does not possess *a priori* knowledge to make assumptions about the unseen. This led Kant to state, "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith."<sup>37</sup>

As Muslims, we take a balanced position on the role of the intellect. We recognize it has fundamental limitations and therefore needs divine guidance, and yet we do not negate its capacity to provide basic indications of truth and to assist in the journey to faith. The intellect (*'aql*) is able to grasp universal categories abstracted from particulars in the external world, issue judgments concerning particulars, and draw inferences and comparisons.<sup>38</sup> The potency of the intellect works in tandem with sensory perception to utilize experiential data so as to form judgments about particular existents. When it comes to perception, Muslim scholars also recognized the epistemic role of internal sensations and emotions and thus described

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<sup>35</sup> Two pairs of terms in Kant's terminology are important to understand in this regard. Knowledge that is known without reliance on the senses is *a priori* (before experience), while empirical knowledge based on the senses is *a posteriori* (after experience). Knowledge that is true by virtue of its definition is analytic (e.g., triangles have three sides), while knowledge that yields new concepts is synthetic. While traditionally, philosophers before Kant had regarded all *a priori* knowledge as analytic and all empirical knowledge as synthetic, Kant argued that some knowledge could be synthetic and *a priori* (e.g., mathematics).

<sup>36</sup> Sebastian Gardner, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 33; Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/kant/>.

<sup>37</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant's Philosophical Revolution: A Short Guide to the Critique of Pure Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 103. In other words, according to Kant, belief in God and immortality is not knowledge that can be demonstrated by pure reason but something that is psychologically necessary to postulate in order for our moral striving to not be in vain; see Will Dudley and Kristina Engelhard, *Immanuel Kant: Key Concepts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 208. This is a limited conception of what knowledge entails, however; the Qur'an states, "So have knowledge that there is none worthy of worship except Allah" (Qur'an 47:19).

<sup>38</sup> Carl Sharif El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Dar' ta 'arud al-'aql wa-l-naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 253; see also 244–45, 271.

knowledge of God as being something that is reinforced by both intellect (*‘aql*) and perception (*ḥiss*), and rooted in primordial nature (*fiṭrah*).<sup>39</sup> Therefore, aside from inferring from the universe about the existence of God and the perfection of His essential attributes, the mind cannot, independent of Divine Revelation, issue declarations about the unseen.

Therefore, in matters of Islamic apologetics, it is important that we do not irrationally exaggerate the role of rationality. We should recognize that so long as the fundamental message of Islam is evident to us, that is sufficient for us to follow it dutifully. We do not need to derive rational explanations for every matter of the afterlife, angels, *jinn*, questions about the nature of the Divine, and so forth. When the Prophet ﷺ told his companions that the deceased will be questioned in the grave and be made to sit up (which seems physically impossible in the grave), his companions did not feel the need to ask how that would be possible since they recognized that it pertains to a reality that completely transcends that which is accessible to the human mind.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, to subject such matters of the unseen to the human faculty of rationality would itself be irrational.

## Invoking the power of Qur’anic arguments

Another general guideline for apologists is to ground their work in Qur’anic discourse and to enrich their discussions by referring back to the Qur’an as much as possible. The eloquent words and message of the Qur’an are proofs in and of themselves and a soul constantly exposed to its beautiful verses will be able to reawaken its *fiṭrah*. For instance, prior to accepting Islam, Jubayr ibn Muṭ‘im رضي الله عنه heard the Prophet ﷺ reciting the following verses of Surah al-Ṭūr:

Were they created by nothing? Or were they themselves the creators? Or did they create the Heavens and the Earth? Nay, but they have no firm belief! Or do they own the treasures of Your Lord? Or have they been given the authority to do as they like? (Qur’an 52:35-37)

<sup>39</sup> El-Tobgui, 230–31, discussing the concept of “internal sensation” (*ḥiss bāṭin*).

<sup>40</sup> “When the servant is placed in his grave, his companions retrace their steps, and he hears the noise of their footsteps, two angels come to him and make him sit and say to him: What you have to say about this person (the Prophet)? . . .” *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2870.

Jubayr said, “I felt as though my heart would fly (from my chest)!”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the profundity of the questions posed in these verses recited melodiously by the Prophet ﷺ struck Jubayr on a deep level and planted the spiritual seeds that would eventually lead to him embracing Islam. The power and perfection of this Qur’anic argument are seen in how it progresses from an ontological impossibility (being created by nothing) to an even greater ontological impossibility (creating oneself), to yet an even greater ontological impossibility (creating the universe that predates one’s existence and that one inhabits). The Qur’an provides a level of discourse that is persuasive and sound on multiple levels: rhetorical, dialectical, and philosophical. It appeals to individual human emotions and phenomenology (the way in which a person consciously reflects from the first-person perspective) as well as sophisticated intellectual discourse in metaphysics.

A similar ontological procedure is seen in the Qur’anic fashion of negating multiple deities and affirming monotheism. There are two passages in the Qur’an that explicitly discuss this, one in Sūrat al-Isrā’ and the other in Sūrat al-Anbiyā’. Let us consider the reasoning in the first passage:

Say, ‘If there were other gods with Him, as they claim, they would have sought a way to the Lord of the Throne.’ (Qur’an 17:42)

This passage in Sūrat al-Isrā’ invalidates the possibility of multiple unequal gods. If they are unequal, then the lesser gods would have sought the pleasure of the Lord of the Throne, and if they are in fact dependent on the Lord of the Throne, then they are not truly divine omnipotent beings and cannot be described as gods. It would be more logically sound to conceive of them as angels rather than deities.

Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they would have been ruined. So Exalted is Allah, Lord of the Throne, above what they describe. (Qur’an 21:22)

This passage in Sūrat al-Anbiyā’ discusses the possibility of gods of equal power, equal jurisdiction, and equal authority. If they had disagreed, this would result in conflict between their forces and would entail chaos in their commands. If

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<sup>41</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 4854.

someone were to argue that they always agree, there are two options: either their agreement is necessary or it is merely possible. If it is necessary, then they do not in fact possess two distinct minds since their will is one, and they are in that case one conscious being. If it is possible for them to disagree, then the very possibility of their disagreeing would invalidate this proposition since it would entail an existential self-contradiction.

The Qur’anic discourse is readily comprehensible to the average human being who reflects on it. It does not require knowledge of any of the complex jargon or abstruse terminological distinctions found in philosophical theology, such as the famous arguments relating to the origination of accidents and bodies, or the createdness of entities that are characterized by composition (*tarkīb*).<sup>42</sup>

The power of the Qur’anic discourse is that it engages the human mind directly, asking questions for the sincere human being to contemplate and ponder. It does not present complicated dialectical arguments that are beyond the capacity of the average human being to understand, but rather it presents vivid examples (*amthāl*) and signs (*āyāt*) that powerfully provoke the soul to contemplate the very nature of existence.

The Qur’an and Sunnah also teach human beings which questions are most worthy of our attention in the first place. All too often we are focused on asking the questions posed in the dominant culture around us while neglecting other questions that are more beneficial for our learning and self-development. If one is lost and searching for directions, it will not avail them to ask what the weather is like at their destination. In a job interview, the relevant question to ask is “What are your qualifications?” not “Where are you from?” If a ship is sinking, the question to ask is where are the lifeboats, not who installed them in the first place. Thus we see the

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<sup>42</sup> “This theory proposes that accidents such as stillness and movement cannot simultaneously subsist in one entity, so they happen in succession, and thus must be originated, not eternal... Bodies (*ajsām*) cannot exist without certain accidents (*a’rād*) such as movement and stillness, for instance. If so, and we have established that accidents are temporal not eternal, then all bodies are temporal as well, thus, the world originated at some point. This would then lead us to ask who originated it, and through *sabr* and *taqsīm* (enumeration and division, or the process of elimination) we can establish that God is the one who created it. To the Mutakallimīn, this was their strongest rational proof regarding the creation of the universe by God.” Hatem Al-Haj, *God of the Prophets*, 108. See also Al-Haj, 53 and 115.

wisdom in the Prophet’s response when he was asked by a man “When is the hour?” He ﷺ replied by directing him to the more useful question, “And what have you prepared for it?”<sup>43</sup> In modern culture, we have largely been conditioned to ask irrelevant questions, to pursue pedantry and triviality that will not benefit us in the long run. The Qur’an rescues us from this and directs us to pursue beneficial knowledge that will lead to the purification of our souls.

It is therefore important for the apologist to not be hostage to the questions posed by an external agenda, leaving the conversation forever circulating around issues that will not lead people to an appreciation of the need for turning back to Allah. Rather, the questions to discuss and the matters of importance are those set by the agenda of the Divine revelation, questions that awaken humans to the reality of their journey toward Allah *subhānahu wa-ta’ālā*. Those involved in Islamic apologetics must bear in mind that their primary goal is not to convince their audience of a particular viewpoint on matters of contemporary events or politics; the *primary* goal is to call to Allah and His Messenger ﷺ. If even one person is led to Islam through these efforts, it will be a greater reward than possessing fine red camels.<sup>44</sup> One’s entire strategy in Islamic apologetics must be appropriately structured toward this goal, as will be noted in the subsequent section.

## How to reconcile science and scripture

Muslims involved in the field of Islamic apologetics will inevitably encounter instances where there is a perceived conflict between certain statements in scripture and the empirical sciences. Some may unnecessarily interpret scripture in ways that affirm contradictions with science when there are other equally plausible routes of interpretation. Meanwhile some reject the apparent meaning of a scriptural text when presented with even the slightest tension with claims in the empirical sciences. It is essential that one is equipped with the principles to evaluate the strength of different pieces of evidence appropriately to understand

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<sup>43</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6171.

<sup>44</sup> The Prophet ﷺ said, “Even if a single man is led on the right path (of Islam) by Allah through you, then that will be better for you than the fine red camels.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4210.

how to reconcile presumed contradictions. To this end, Muslim scholars and theologians discussed this subject extensively and arrived at various positions.

The universal law (*al-qānūn al-kullī*) addresses the possibility of conflict between reason and revelation. It was first suggested by Imām al-Ghazālī (rA), and later developed by Imām al-Rāzī (rA) in *Asās al-Taqdīs*<sup>45</sup> where he said that if the outward meaning of the revealed texts and the definitive conclusions of rational thought are in conflict, then we must give precedence to reason and either make figurative interpretation of scripture (*ta'wīl*) accord with reason or refrain from assigning meaning to it (*tafwīd*). To do otherwise would amount to a rejection of both reason and revelation since revelation is grounded in reason. Imām Ibn Taymiyyah (rA) critiqued Imam al-Rāzī's universal law, and provided in *Dar' Ta'āruḍ al-'Aql wa-l-Naql*<sup>46</sup> his alternative, which could safely be described as the Modified Universal Law.

Ibn Taymiyyah argued that there is no simple binary of 'reason versus revelation' and that reason is not one undifferentiated category of conclusive (*qaṭ'ī*) rational output. He argued that instead most rational propositions are speculative (*ẓannī*). Similarly, revelation is also not a homogenous category, but rather contains some scriptural texts that are clear and definition alongside other scriptural texts that are subject to varying interpretation, and also includes hadith of varying levels of authenticity. Therefore, what is required is to give precedence to what is conclusive, regardless of whether it is rational or scriptural. When both scriptural texts and empirical data on a matter are *ẓanni*, then one must look for the more probative (*rājih*) proofs.

While al-Rāzī may have been addressing the conflict with the conclusive indicants of reason, Ibn Taymiyyah denied that they ever conflicted with the obvious implications of revelation. This disagreement defined the borders of orthodoxy. These luminaries agreed that conclusive (*qaṭ'ī*) rational knowledge cannot be

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<sup>45</sup> Fakhr al-Deen al-Rāzī, *Asās al-Taqdees*, ed. Ahmad Hijāzi al-Saqā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah, 1406/1986), 220. Translation adapted from El-Tobgui, *Reason, Revelation & the Reconstitution of Rationality*, 133-134.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqi al-Deen Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Haleem, *Dar' Ta'āruḍ al-'Aql wa al-Naql*, 2nd ed., ed. Muhammad Rashād Sâlim (Riyadh: Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1411/1991), 1:79.

dismissed. They agreed that the truths of revelation accord with the truths of sound reason. An attack on reason's conclusive output is in fact an attack on revelation as well. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah who had a more pro-Athari approach here also concluded that when *ẓanni* conclusions conflict, we look for the more probative (*râjih*) proofs.

While this framework was discussed by Muslim theologians with reference to conflicts between reason (*'aql*) and scripture (*naql*), a similar framework can be implemented for conflicts between scripture and empirical knowledge from the senses (*ḥiss*), which may have the same weight as rational knowledge. From the foregoing discussion we learn that when we are confronted with a potential conflict between the scriptures and reason or the empirical findings of science, we should think of the quaternary division of conclusive scriptural, conclusive scientific, speculative scriptural, and speculative scientific proofs. Then, we should determine the value of the different proofs and seek to reconcile between them. If the conclusive proofs appear to contradict, we need more research because they would never contradict in actual fact.

If we ascertained that the conclusive proofs of science conflict with the speculative proofs of the scriptures, we should re-examine our interpretation of the scriptures and seek a better understanding, or provide an explanation for the conflict. For example, it is known that the shortest duration of pregnancy is less than six months (24 weeks gestation). How do we explain the consensus reported by many scholars to the contrary?<sup>47</sup> This would require us to visit the different wordings of this consensus, and how it was derived from the Qur'anic verses, as well as the strength of what is known as 'tacit consensus' (*ijmā' al-sukūṭī*). One potential reconciliation

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<sup>47</sup> According to Muslim jurists, the minimum duration of pregnancy is 6 months; Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī*, ed. A. al-Turki and A. Al-Hilu (al-Riyad: Dar 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1417/1997), 11:231. This corresponds to approximately 176-177 days, or 25 weeks 1-2 days. They calculate this based on conceptional age, not gestational age, which would instead be 27 weeks 1-2 days. With modern medicine however, the minimum gestational age is between 22-24 weeks, or a conceptional age of 20-22 weeks, approximately 140-154 days. If the sacred texts are interpreted to imply the logical impossibility of a fetus surviving birth at less than 27 weeks gestation, this would contradict the empirical reality of babies surviving as early as 22 weeks gestation (albeit with frequently poor outcomes despite the advances of modern medicine); <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-50144741>.

of the perceived conflict is through qualifying the original understanding with caveats that take into consideration our new empirical knowledge, as follows:

What is meant by the minimum duration of pregnancy is the period in which the newborn usually lives without external medical assistance, and this does not conflict with the pregnancy that was born in less than this period and lived, because this type of birth survived thanks to Allah's Will because of external medical care, and this is not a normal case like all other newborn children. Those who live in our age of these children—who are rarely born in a period of less than six months—is not due to the fact that the minimum duration of pregnancy is less than six months but it is due to the development of medicine and ways of rescuing these premature babies from death, by Allah's Will.<sup>48</sup>

This is supported by certain reports of the consensus that speak of the possibility of a fetus being born alive at less than six months, but not surviving afterwards. While this may be an adequate reconciliation for some, it is not for others. It seems from the language of some reports of consensus that the scholars understood from the subtle scriptural inferences the impossibility of their survival at less than six months. For those discontent with this reconciliation, the next question would be the definitive nature of tacit consensus. The answer is clear: they are not definitive. Therefore, we do not have an irresolvable conflict between two definitive conclusions of the scriptures and science.

In summary then, the definitive conclusions of the scriptures should never be challenged by the speculative proofs of reason or science, nor should the definitive conclusions of the latter be dismissed in favor of a speculative interpretation of the scripture—no matter how popular it is. When there is a conflict between speculative *zanni* conclusions of the scriptures and reason, we look for the more probative (*râjih*) proofs.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.islamweb.org/en/fatwa/400039/a-child-born-in-less-than-six-months-pregnancy-rarely-lives>

## Latitude in apologetics

Earlier we learned that it was the way of the Prophet ﷺ and his companions to speak to people according to their level of understanding; therefore, in Islamic apologetics, we need to take into account the target audience in the language and framing used to discuss Islamic teachings. We should also understand that there is greater leniency, latitude, and flexibility in how matters are presented in Islamic apologetics compared to how they are presented in the framework of traditional Islamic studies in jurisprudence or theology.

## Who is your audience?

If you have five minutes to explain Islam's rulings on a subject to someone who is unfamiliar with Islam or someone who has an antagonistic view towards Islam, how will that differ from having one hour to explain it to someone who has already studied Islam? Undoubtedly, there will be differences in the style of the response, the choice of content emphasized, and the take-home points. When one has acquired a basic understanding of Islam and has committed to study the Islamic tradition as part of a curriculum, they will study and encounter rulings and teachings in a particular format that is conducive to their ability to understand that tradition. The methodical and systematic way in which they study various opinions in such a curriculum may be totally different from how an opinion is presented by a Muslim apologist during the course of dialogues with those of other faiths or debates with Islamophobes. Both the student of the tradition and the Muslim apologist are interested in an accurate representation of the truth but they are addressing different questions. For instance, the former may have the scope to study in detail the range of views on military intervention and conquest in classical discourse on jihad, while the latter is focused specifically on repudiating the misconception that Islam is a violent religion. The former will be interested in the classical juristic difference of opinion over the maximum duration of peace treaties with foreign nations, while the latter will be interested in emphasizing the

prophetic prohibition of killing civilians, women, children, the elderly, and anyone who is not fighting you.<sup>49</sup>

We should consider, therefore, a number of different domains, each of which will have its own discourse: *iftā'* (giving edicts), *ta'līm* (teaching), *naẓar* (research), *munāẓarah* (debate) and *da'wah* (invitation to embrace Islam). In the case of *iftā'*, the scholar will generally provide one answer to the questioner based on what they believe is the strongest interpretation of the evidence and most applicable to the scenario of the questioner, or the ruling most suitable based on the methodology they follow in *fatwá*. In the case of teaching Islam, the student will be exposed to what they should be taught at their level of learning, which could sometimes be limited to one *madhhab*. In the course of conducting research, one may present and discuss viewpoints even outside of orthodoxy on certain topics. In the course of debate, one will specifically present those viewpoints that best illustrate the fallacy of one's opponent's antagonism towards Islam. In the course of *da'wah*, one will deliberately aim to simplify the message, avoid confusing or contentious matters, and focus on what will best guide the heart and mind of the recipient. The degree of latitude differs depending on the scenario and context. It would be frivolous for a *mufti* to critique a researcher or one engaged in a debate and say, "This is not the relied-upon position for *fatwá*" since that was never the aim of those in research or debate. It would be absurd for a religious teacher to critique a *dā'ī* and say, "You did not explain the positions of scholars proportionately or the way these matters of Islamic law are understood by the experts." The audience and context are critical.

Of course, with the advent of the age of global communication and social media, a statement in the context of explaining the nuances of Islamic law for students of knowledge can be misrepresented to non-Muslim audiences on the internet and, likewise, a statement to an audience of non-Muslims countering anti-Islamic allegations may seem overly simplistic to scholarly audiences. This certainly presents greater challenges as a Muslim apologist must keep in mind not only the level of understanding of the immediate audience being addressed in the present moment but also the audience viewing the message later on the internet. It also

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<sup>49</sup> Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 3:291.

means that Muslims should keep in mind the original audience the speaker was addressing before jumping to criticize perceived inadequacies in language or presentation. With this in mind, it will be possible for Islamic apologetics to continue to tailor the discussion to the target audience at hand.

## Does your answer change depending on the audience?

On some matters in Islam subject to differing opinions, some opinions are unpalatable to some audiences because of their cultural or ideological backgrounds. Would we rather such people reject the message of Islam altogether and meet their Lord in the afterlife in a state of disbelief or would we rather they follow Islam even if they adopt a weaker position on a subsidiary issue? The goal is to call people to Islam, not to a particular school of thought or particular opinion. The guidance of the person is the prime objective. Is it not better for the person to be guided to Allah, even if they hold a weak or mistaken viewpoint on a certain secondary matter? The ultimate goal is to receive the card of faith on the Day of resurrection:

Narrated ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Indeed Allah will distinguish a man from my *ummah* before all of creation on the Day of Judgment. Ninety-nine scrolls will be laid out for him, each scroll is as far as the eye can see, then He will say: ‘Do you deny any of this? Have those who recorded this wronged you?’ He will say: ‘No, O Lord!’ He will say: ‘Do you have an excuse?’ He will say: ‘No, O Lord!’ So He will say: ‘Rather you have a good deed with us, so you shall not be wronged today.’ Then He will bring out a card (*biṭāqah*); on it will be: ‘I testify to *Lā Ilāha Illā Allāh*, and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.’ He will say: ‘Bring your scales.’ He will say: ‘O Lord! What good is this card next to these scrolls?’ He will say: ‘You shall not be wronged.’ He said: ‘The scrolls will be put on a pan (of the scale), and the card on (the other) pan: the scrolls will be light, and the card will be heavy,, nothing is heavier than the Name of Allah.’”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2639; *Mustadrak al-Ḥākim*, no. 1937 and authenticated by al-Dhahabī.

Is it not better that a person follows the truth in the greatest matters of faith, even if they are mistaken on lesser issues, than to lose out on faith altogether? Certainly, one must always be truthful in speech and never present something that is false or erroneous about Islam. And yet, it would be tremendously unfortunate if someone turned away from Islam because the one speaking to them was more interested in correcting them on a secondary matter or a matter that is a legitimate difference of opinion among scholars. Building on an example used earlier, let's say that a dog-owner wants to embrace Islam and their local imam insists that they must get rid of their dog or they are living in sin, and the dog-owner says, "I love my dog like family, how can I follow a faith that tells me to part from him?" If this is an obstacle to such a person embracing the faith, should they not be informed that there are eminent Mālikī scholars who considered it permissible? Would that not better serve the interest of guiding another soul to Islam? Would it not be a major failure of prioritization to focus one's attention and effort on convincing this man that keeping his dog is impermissible instead of focusing on guiding his heart and mind to His Creator?

Imam Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله devoted considerable effort to demonstrating the invalidity of Hellenistic philosophical methods in establishing the truths of religious doctrine, such as using syllogistic arguments to prove the existence of God. However, in spite of this, he took into account the personality and background of the questioner when he wrote:

And there are some people for whom, the more obscure, prolonged, and abstruse the method and the more numerous its premises, the more it benefits him. This is because his mind has become habituated to prolonged investigation into subtle matters, so when the proof contains fewer premises, or is self-evident, his soul does not rejoice with it. So for such a person, one could utilize philosophical *kalāmī* methods due to its suitability for what he is accustomed to, not because the desired knowledge is actually contingent upon such a method.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd 'alá al-mantiqiyyīn* (Lahore: Idārat Turjumān al-Sunnah, 1976), 1:255. See Nazir Khan, "Atheism and Radical Skepticism: Ibn Taymiyyah's Epistemic Critique," *Yaqeen*, July 7, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/atheism-and-radical-skepticism-ibn-taymiyyahs-epistemic-critique/>.

In other words, despite the numerous problems he raises about Hellenistic philosophical discourse and its ramifications, this did not prevent him from adopting a pragmatic approach in *da‘wah* and acknowledging that a complicated philosophical argument may be useful for some select audiences.

This leads to a very important question: when a Muslim apologist is asked ‘What does Islam say about X?’ by someone who doubts the veracity of Islam, is it possible for them to give a different answer than they would give to an observant Muslim or student of knowledge? In other words, is it allowed for someone in Islamic apologetics to mention a minority position or even an eccentric viewpoint with respect to the Islamic tradition? In order to answer these questions, we need to first discuss what constitutes a minor position or an eccentric position. We will also consider examples in Islamic jurisprudence where the rulings may vary and the answers may be different for different people; because if this is the case in matters of *fatwá* and legal rulings, it is more certainly the case for matters of Islamic apologetics and guiding others to the faith.

## What is an eccentric (*shādhah*) position?

The correct understanding of Islam is based upon the divinely revealed speech of Allah (the Qur’an) and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (the Sunnah). This understanding was taken up by the companions of the Prophet ﷺ and taught to subsequent generations. The four major schools of thought (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi‘ī, Ḥanbalī) represent the dominant approaches to understanding and interpreting the scripture on matters of Islamic law. There were also many notable *mujtahid* imams in every generation; some were as great as the founders of the four schools, like al-Layth, al-Awzā‘ī, Sufyān al-Thawrī, رحمهم الله etc. This background is important to understand the scope for valid differences of opinion. There are some positions that are clearly strong because they are well-grounded in the texts of the Qur’an and the Sunnah and they enjoy a wide range of support from notable *mujtahid* imams. An invalid (*bāṭil*) position is one that contradicts the explicit texts of the Qur’an or the definitively transmitted Sunnah or the uncontested consensus

of scholars. A minority position would be a view that is advocated by only one of the schools or some scholars in some of the schools or some *mujtahid* imams outside the four schools.

Somewhere between a minority position and an invalid position lies the eccentric (*shādhah*)<sup>52</sup> position.<sup>53</sup> It is a position that meets the following two criteria: (1) it has been advocated by very few scholars;<sup>54</sup> and (2) it has weak or very weak evidence to support it and may even have evidence against it. At the same time, however, it is not definitively ruled out by explicit texts of the Qur'an, Sunnah, or uncontested consensus.<sup>55</sup> We cannot say with certainty that it is false, like the invalid position, however it seems significantly less plausible. Of course, there is still some degree of subjectivity in what people consider weak evidence and, therefore, what they consider to be eccentric. It is also worth noting here that some may consider any position that is counter to the agreement of the four schools of law to be eccentric by definition or even invalid (within the context of *fatwā*). While it may be rare, to claim that it is altogether impossible for the truth to exist outside of the four *madhāhib* would be to add something to the religion that Allah and His Messenger ﷺ did not. For more details, refer to the discussion “Can there be truth outside the four *madhāhib*?” in the article, [Shari'ah in Today's World: Renewing Islamic Discourse](#).<sup>56</sup>

Although an eccentric position was defined earlier as a viewpoint that has weak evidence and is espoused by a very small minority of scholars, remember that some people may label any small minority viewpoint as eccentric regardless of the

<sup>52</sup> Also sometimes translated as “anomalous” or “irregular,” the linguistic meaning relates to something being an outlier from the rest of the group. Note that the technical meaning of *shādhah* differs depending on which discipline of Islamic studies one is discussing. Its technical meaning discussed here differs from its technical meaning in hadith sciences or in *qirā'āt* for instance.

<sup>53</sup> Note that some scholars used the term *shādhah* to refer to that which is invalid and contradicts clear texts or consensus, in which case it becomes synonymous with *bāṭil*.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Ibn Taymiyyah's characterization of the permission of praying while reclining without a need. Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad Ibn Muṣliḥ (d. 1362), *al-Nukat wa-al-fawā'id al-sanīyah 'alā mushkil al-muḥarrar li-Majd al-Dīn Ibn Taymīyah*, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1983), 1:151.

<sup>55</sup> After reviewing the various definitions, 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Namlah prefers the following definition for a *shādhah* opinion: “A position upheld by a small number of *mujtahid* scholars without any acceptable evidence” (*qawl infarada bihi qillat min al-mujtahidīn min ghayri dalīl mu'tabar*). See 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Namlah, *al-Ārā' al-shādhah fī uṣūl al-fiqh* (Riyadh: Dār al-Tadmuriyah, 2009), 1:89.

<sup>56</sup> Hatem al-Haj, “Shari'ah in Today's World.”

strength of evidence in its favor. As a result, sometimes viewpoints that seem “eccentric” at some point in history thereafter become mainstream due to widespread acceptance. A seemingly “eccentric” position may even become mainstreamed by scholars when it is founded in acceptable evidence from the Qur’an and Sunnah, when there is precedence for it among the early Muslim community (*ṣaḥābah* and *tabi‘īn*), and when it has been upheld by a *mujtahid* imam. An example is Ibn Taymiyyah’s رحمه الله view that triple pronouncement of divorce on a single occasion constitutes only one divorce. This is not the position of the four *madhāhib*; however, it has become mainstream today, supported by vast numbers of scholars around the world, and has become the law in many Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Syria, etc). This position enjoys strong evidence in its favor as well as overwhelming considerations for the benefit (*maṣlaḥah*) of families. Not only is this the most rationally defensible position, it has already been incorporated into orthodoxy on the strength of evidence in its favor.

It is vital to remember that the goal of apologetics differs from the goal of edicts (*fatwá*). The apologist is focused on calling people to faith in Allah and helping them embrace the message of Islam. It is far better for a person to believe in Allah and His Messenger صلى الله عليه وسلم and follow an eccentric view on some secondary or tertiary matter of the religion than for them to reject Islam altogether. In the area of apologetics, one’s aim is to defend the mainstream positions but simultaneously keep an eye on the people on the fringes and seek to gradually bring them back from the cliff. This means that the mention of some eccentric positions may be deemed necessary.

Let’s consider, for instance, the concept of eternal torment in Hell. This is a difficult concept with which Muslims and non-Muslims have to grapple. The mainstream position among Muslim theologians is that the punishment of Hell is ever-lasting, except for sinful believers who will eventually emerge from it. The question Muslim apologists and others frequently encounter is why would the Most Merciful God create a creation knowing that He will send most of them to eternal torment? A defense of the mainstream position must rely on people’s established

faith in the justice and wisdom of God and their comfort in delegating the whole matter to Him. However, such an approach may not work for those who find intractable difficulty with the concept, and it may be a stumbling block for someone who is still considering Islam. It is natural that the apologist may scan the tradition for possible solutions. Among the heterodox views, they will find that amongst the Mu‘tazilah, some maintained that the people of Hell will turn into motionless entities that do not feel anything, and some Sufi scholars maintained that they will turn into creatures of fire that will find pleasure in the Fire.<sup>57</sup> These positions may be mentioned, but they are too difficult to reconcile with the normative discourse. Another position was presented as a possibility by Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله and (arguably) his shaykh, Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله. It maintains that Hell and its dwellers will cease to exist at some point. Ibn al-Qayyim supported this position using reports from the companions and other scriptural and rational arguments. He wrote extensively on this topic in his works *Hādī al-Arwāḥ*, *Shifā’ al-‘Alīl*, and finally in *al-Ṣawā’iq al-Mursalāh*.<sup>58</sup> He used an orthodox methodology to build his case and did not argue this position on the basis of scarce proof or weak evidence. However, this position is not mainstream; it does not enjoy wide acceptance amongst Sunni imams. Until today, it remains a minority position (whether or not one would call it an eccentric position depends on how persuasive one finds the evidence). Yet, there are countless people who can find comfort only in this position.<sup>59</sup> We can justify the mainstream position as much as we can. However, a fair mention of this position in any eschatological or theodical discussion is important out of concern for people who will have intractable difficulty with the mainstream position. We should not neglect the mainstream position and we should provide rational arguments in its defense.<sup>60</sup> Yet, at the same

<sup>57</sup> al-Safārīnī, *Lawāmi‘ al-anwār al-bahīyah* (Beirut: DKI, 2008), 2:250–51.

<sup>58</sup> For an overview see Jon Hoover, “A Muslim Conflict over Universal Salvation,” in *Alternative Salvations: Engaging the Sacred and the Secular*, ed. Hannah Bacon, Wendy Dossett, and Steve Knowles (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 160–71.

<sup>59</sup> For many people it will be direly needed as they simply cannot wrap their minds around the concept of a benevolent God sentencing people to eternal torment no matter how extensive the rational justifications are, as this requires a degree of faith and trust in Divine Justice that some simply do not yet possess. To appreciate how compelling some of these objections to eternal torment are, one need look no further than the fact that some of these very same objections were persuasive enough for scholars as great as Ibn al-Qayyim to include them in support of eventual vanishing of hellfire.

<sup>60</sup> See Mohammad Elshinawy, “The Infinitely Merciful and the Question of Hellfire,” *Yaqeen*, July 10, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/mohammad-elshinawy/the-infinitely-merciful-and-the-question-of-hellfire/>.

time, one must recognize the potency of some eccentric positions in Islamic apologetics.

Consider the controversy over the age of ‘Ā’ishah رضي الله عنها at the time of her marriage to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. We have a text in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* where ‘Ā’ishah herself states that she was 9 years old when she consummated the marriage with the Prophet. Most apologists defending this position cite extensive historical evidence concerning the cultural norm of early marriage in pre-modern society, the fact that ‘Ā’ishah was actually engaged to Jubayr ibn Muṭ‘im before marrying the Prophet ﷺ, the data concerning early physical maturation prior to the industrial revolution, other physiological and psychological data, and so on. Naturally, these justifications require some time and effort, as well as educational background on the part of one’s audience to comprehend. Some apologists instead have relied on extrapolations and inferences from other evidence (including other hadith as well as biographical *sīrah* works) to build a case for an older age at the time of marriage, saying she was 18 years old. Is this an invalid (*bāṭil*) position or an eccentric (*shādhah*) one that may be still mentioned in the course of our apologetics? Here, methodology is critical; how you arrived at your conclusion is more important than simply looking at the conclusion itself while disregarding methodology. If someone rejects the hadith in *Bukhārī* because they do not believe that the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ or the Sunnah have a role to play in Islam, their opinion will be considered void and invalid (*bāṭil*), since their approach does not align with orthodox methodology and accepting such a viewpoint entails nullifying the scriptural sources upon which Islamic teachings are built. On the other hand, however, if a scholar argues that the collective weight of inferences from other reports raises the possibility of a subtle flaw (*‘illah*) or discrepancy (*shudhūdh*) in the particular report mentioning the age of 9, their argument may be speculative and deemed less probable but it does not rely on methods foreign to Islam.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> “Criticism of the ‘Āisha-age ḥadīth has been mounted on this basis by the traditionalist Syrian scholar of ḥadīth, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī. He determines the content of the ‘Āisha-age ḥadīth to be discrepant (*shādhah*) and defective (*ma‘lūl*) on the basis of numerous evidences which collectively suggest that ‘Āisha was born four years prior to the start of the Prophetic mission, betrothed to the Prophet ﷺ in the tenth year of prophethood at age fourteen, and married to him one year after the migration at the age of almost 18.” Arnold Yasin Mol, “Aisha (ra): The Case for an Older Age in Sunni Hadith Scholarship,” *Yaqeen*, October 3, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/arnold-yasin-mol/aisha-ra-the-case-for-an-older-age-in-sunni-hadith-scholarship/>.

While there are some who have advocated this view, like the contemporary Hadith scholar Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī<sup>62</sup> and others, this position, while being alluded to by some imams, has not been explicitly upheld by any of them in Islamic history. How one interprets the various hadith on this topic does not impact one's theology nor does it have a real impact on Islamic law (since any rulings derived from this hadith are also established by other evidences in Islam).<sup>63</sup> So it's important to ask what is truly at stake here. While the view that 'Ā'ishah is 18 years old may be an eccentric view, the speculative inferences from other reports in combination with the historical evidence drawn upon make it a possibility that could still be mentioned to leave a crack open and not shut the door completely in the face of an audience that will be unable to comprehend the justification of the mainstream position. **If we take the route of mentioning the eccentric position to facilitate an easy answer to a problem many find otherwise intractable, we must also ensure that the majority of energy in one's apologetics is focused on justifying the mainstream position.**

Eccentric positions are not all of equal weight. Some may be closer to invalid positions than minority positions, while others may be plausible interpretations. It is important that the mention of those positions for the sake of debate is done in a way that will guard against their promotion as viable alternatives to the mainstream ones. As well, it is important to note that in an academic discussion of a subject, the mere mention of an extremely *shādhah* or even *bāṭil* position, for the sake of comprehensiveness and thoroughness in one's treatment of the subject, does not constitute endorsing or promoting such positions. This is well known in Islamic scholarship. In fact, scholars in almost every Islamic discipline frequently enumerate long lists of opinions on a particular matter, some of which are so far-fetched that they do not even warrant a rebuttal.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, when dialoguing with

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<sup>62</sup> Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī, "Ḥadīth miqdār 'umr al-Sayyidah 'Ā'ishah yawm al-zawāj," Idlibi.net, March, 19, 2020, <http://idlibi.net/marriageage/>.

<sup>63</sup> This is a critically important condition since matters of Islamic theology and Islamic law that are agreed upon cannot be opened for such reevaluation.

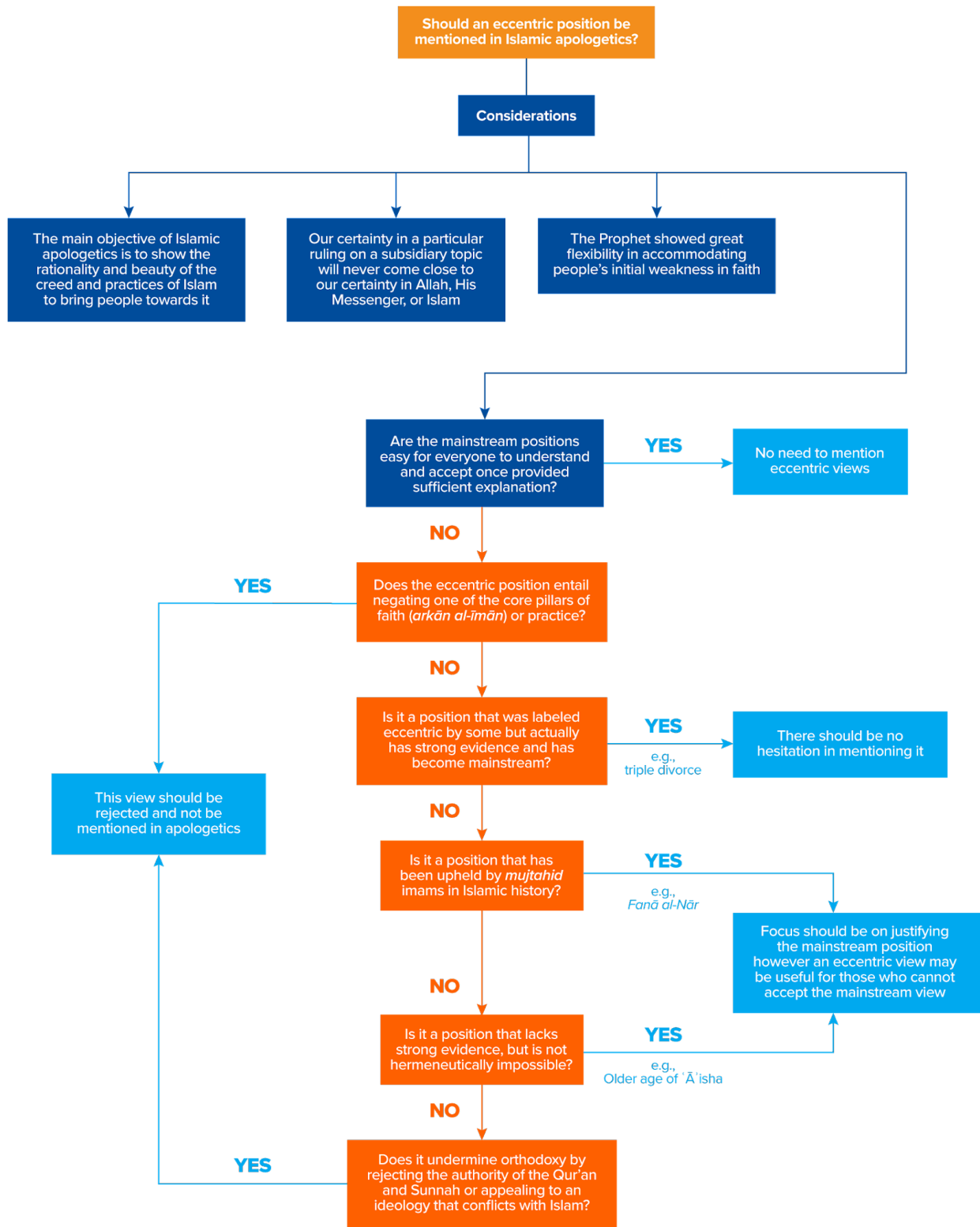
<sup>64</sup> For example, Ibn al-Jawzī's work of *tafsīr* entitled *Zād al-masīr* is entirely written in this manner. Similarly, this can be seen with many works of comparative *fiqh*, as well as commentaries on hadith. For instance Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath*

audiences that are familiar with heterodox views, it may compromise the credibility and persuasiveness of one's approach to omit such positions and thereby appear less familiar with the breadth of views expressed on the subject.

The main objective of an apologist is to show the rationality and beauty of the creed and practices of the religion to bring people into the faith (or to maintain and support people within the faith). Our certainty in a particular *fiqhī* (juristic) position will never come close to our certainty in Allah, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and Islam. The good thing is that these are the first three questions we have to answer when we enter *al-barzakh* (the period of the soul's journey between death and the resurrection). In Islamic apologetics, we try to help people answer those very same questions as well. A goal of mentioning eccentric positions is to bypass many of the unnecessary debates which serve as distractions from the important core matters of faith. If effective strategies are applied, the mere mention of the eccentric positions will not necessarily entail mainstreaming them.

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*al-Bārī*, 14:303. *Wa min al-ta`wīl al-ba`īd qawl man qāl al-murād bi-al-qadam qadamu iblīs . . . wa zuhūr bu`d hādhā yughnī `an takalluf al-radd `alayhi.*



**Figure 3.** The main goal of Islamic apologetics is the rational defense of the faith. When the mainstream position on a particular subsidiary issue of Islam (i.e., not a major point of creed or practice) is simply unfathomable to some people, it may be wise for the apologist to mention an eccentric view, provided that eccentric view has some plausibility and does not undermine the foundational sources of the faith.

## Examples of answers changing depending on the questioner

It is important to remember that even in matters of *fatwá* and legal rulings, the answer may differ depending on changes in time and place since these are circumstantial variables that can affect rulings. Moreover, there are cases where the *fatwá* itself may be different depending on the questioner. For instance, Imam al-Ghazālī رحمه الله tells us in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* how the Prophet ﷺ gave 'Adī ibn Ḥātim, a rich man, a *fatwá* to avoid a game animal from which a hunting dog had eaten, out of fear that the dog may have caught it for himself<sup>65</sup> but in a different hadith,<sup>66</sup> he allowed Abū Tha'labah, a poor man, to eat such an animal.<sup>67</sup> In Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shaybah, it is reported that Ibn 'Abbās رضي الله عنهما was asked about whether the repentance of the murderer would be accepted and he looked at the questioner before answering in the negative. His students, thereafter, pointed out to him that his *fatwá* was counter to what he had taught them before, and he said that the enquirer looked angry, like someone who was about to commit murder.<sup>68</sup>

In *al-Maslak al-'Adl*, al-Kurdī رحمه الله reports from 'Umar al-Baṣrī that he said about the different views supported by different scholars of the latter Shāfi'īs:

If the enquirers are those with strong religious commitment who uphold that which is stricter and more cautious, he would answer them according to the stricter view. However, if they are weak and under the captivity of their self-interests, that he fears they may neglect the stricter position and fall in the abyss of disobedience of the rulings of the Sharia, then he should relay to them the lighter view.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> “If the hound eats of the game, then you must not eat of it, for I am afraid that the hound caught it for itself.” *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 5487.

<sup>66</sup> *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 2857, with an authentic chain of narrators according to Ibn Mulaqqin in *Badr al-munīr* (Riyadh: Dār al-Āshimāh, 2009), 23:13. The Prophet ﷺ said: “If you have trained dogs, then eat what they catch for you.” Abū Tha'labah asked: “Whether it is slaughtered or not?” He replied: “Yes.” He asked: “Does it apply even if it eats any of it?” He replied: “Even if it eats any of it.”

<sup>67</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2005), 543.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Kitāb al-musannaf fī al-aḥādīth wa-al-āthār*, ed. Kamal Yūsuf Hūt (Beirut: Dar al-Taj, 1989), 5:435. Ibn Ḥajar said “Its narrators are reliable.” Ibn Ḥajar, *Talkhīṣ al-ḥabīr* (Cairo: Mu'assasat Qurṭubah, 1995), 4:343.

<sup>69</sup> al-Baghawī, *al-Tahdhīb fī fiqh al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī* (Beirut: DKI, 1997), 1:51.

By way of example, let us consider the difference of opinion concerning the *niqāb* (face veil). The authorized (*mu'tamad*) position in the Ḥanbalī *madhhab* is that the face of a woman is part of the *'awrah* that should be covered in front of non-*maḥram* men. While acknowledging that, we find the erudite Ḥanbalī scholar al-Mardāwī (d. 885 AH) رحمه الله saying about the counter position allowing her to uncover the face, “And this position is the only one that suits the people, particularly among the neighbors and non-*maḥram* family members,” and he then goes on to say that this lighter position is the one held by al-Shafī'ī.<sup>70</sup>

## Precedent for mentioning eccentric views in Islamic apologetics

What precedent can we look towards in mentioning eccentric positions in Islamic apologetics? When we cite examples from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, we have to remember that we cannot draw a direct comparison between his situation and ours since he was infallible in conveying the message of Islam, so there was nothing coming from him that could be considered an “eccentric” position. The idea of a position being “strong,” “weak,” or “eccentric” only arises because of our epistemic limitations in trying to determine the intended instructions of Allah and His Messenger ﷺ. So while we have a spectrum of possible views, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ had a unique vantage point in knowing precisely the intent of the Law-Giver; for the Prophet ﷺ, the spectrum was a point.

While a direct comparison with the example of the Prophet ﷺ concerning eccentric positions is not possible, we can still see the extent to which he went in order to bring people into the fold of Islam. We see his example in accepting the Islam of someone who would only submit on condition that he pray two prayers out of five as in the hadith of Naṣr ibn 'Āṣim.<sup>71</sup> The same could be said for the

<sup>70</sup> al-Mardāwī, *al-Inṣāf fī ma'rīfat al-rājiḥ min al-khilāf* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 1:452.

<sup>71</sup> The hadith states, “A man came to the Prophet ﷺ and accepted Islam upon the condition that he only perform two prayers, so the Prophet accepted that from him.” Reported in *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 23079 with a reliable chain according to al-Būṣīrī in *Ithāf al-khīrah al-maharah* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan lil-Nashr, 1999), 1:132. Imam Aḥmad used this narration to establish that a person's acceptance of Islam is valid even with such unacceptable

Prophet ﷺ accepting Islam from *Thaqīf* who would only submit without fulfilling the obligation of *zakāt* or jihad. The Prophet ﷺ taught us that people’s faith grows with practice when he said, “They will [eventually] give charity and perform jihad.”<sup>72</sup> **The Prophet ﷺ did not change Islam for them but accommodated the weakness of their faith.**

Hanbalīs have referred to this as “the validity of Islam despite an invalid condition.” While the other *madhāhib* may not use such terms, the hadiths are established and the general principle is clear that someone’s Islam would not be negated by the mere failure to perform such actions. The statement of Imam Aḥmad on the subject drives the message home in reminding *dā’īs* (callers to Islam) to not lose sight of their focus. When someone is outside of Islam, the focus is to show them how to enter the gate of Islam. Imagine someone is lost in the perilous wilderness and your intention is to direct them on how to find the nearest city for safe refuge and enter its gate, and you focus instead on debating with them over where they should stay within the city. Perhaps their desire is to spend the night at a less reputable accommodation that they think is better; debating over such details may put them off entering the city altogether. For people outside the city and for those seeking to leave the city, the focus is simply on entering the city and endearing it to them. With those who are established city-dwellers within Islam, the focus may be directed to specific details about in which parts of the city they should conduct their affairs.

It must be noticed, however, that there is no way, in our times, to build complete partitions between teaching the masses and apologetics. Therefore, a fine balance must be struck to alleviate those tensions some have with certain issues in the religion without promoting eccentric positions and mainstreaming them when they do not meet the criteria for being mainstreamed. This can be done by giving

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preconditions, and such a person is later required to fulfill the rulings of Islam. See Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmi’ al-‘ulūm wa-al-ḥikam* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2008), 208; Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Medina: Maktabat Ghurabā’ al-Atharīyah, 1996), 4:199–200.

<sup>72</sup> Wahb said: “I asked Jābir about the condition of *Thaqīf* when they took the oath of allegiance. He said: ‘They stipulated to the Prophet ﷺ that there would be no *sadaqah* (i.e., *zakāt*) on them nor jihad (striving in the way of Allah).’ He then heard the Prophet ﷺ say: ‘Later on they will give *sadaqah* (*zakāt*) and will strive in the way of Allah when they embrace Islam.’” *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, no. 3025, graded authentic by Ibn al-Wazīr and al-Albānī.

enough space and focus to defending the mainstream positions without failing to mention the eccentric ones and giving them their due right, whatever that may be. Staying within these limits is our advice for individual researchers. The question that may arise is whether this balance has to be struck in every publication of a given organization or platform? The difficulty here is that when you assemble a group of distinguished scholars and researchers, strict policing of their output may actually be counterproductive. People naturally have some measure of disagreement over what is eccentric and whether the situation is dire enough to merit advancing particular positions. Some otherwise mainstream scholars may themselves hold some eccentric positions. The best option seems to be to allow the evidence to stand on its own merit and allow intellectual conversations to guide people to the strongest positions by the strength of persuasion and evidence. Attempting to tightly control people's intellectual choices could backfire and people may feel they are not being given the capacity to discuss matters with the aim of arriving at the truth. The additional danger of being too rigid and hostile towards eccentric positions is that we undermine our own capacity to reflect and examine matters that are worthy of further study, in addition to neglecting the positive contributions of others.

Therefore, a certain degree of latitude must be maintained for the mention and discussion of eccentric positions in Islamic apologetics. While clearly defined lines may not be possible, the least an organization should do, in addition to demanding factuality and respect of the mainstream position(s), is to require reference within works that seem to promote, not only mention, eccentric positions to others that defend the mainstream ones.

## **Methods in conversations**

When one seeks to engage with others in conversation, there are many important guidelines that the Muslim apologist should take into consideration in addition to the aforementioned general guidelines about apologetics.

## Be a role model in your conduct and connect with your audience

Sometimes the most important messages we communicate are not expressed by our words at all but by our character and conduct. It is imperative for those involved in Islamic apologetics to place their greatest focus on improving themselves spiritually and morally and striving to exemplify the very best manners in their behavior and speech. When engaging with others, one is serving as an ambassador of Islam. For the general Muslim community, as well as for non-Muslims, scholars and preachers are often the “face” of Islamic scholarship, and they will invariably be influenced by those individuals’ actions and behavior. Just as parents must model good conduct to their children and teachers must model good conduct to their students, scholars and public speakers must model good conduct to the community.

What does this mean practically? It means that someone engaged in Islamic apologetics should never underestimate the importance of their moral qualities. Foul speech and rude behavior are simply incompatible with the Islamic message and totally unbecoming of a public *dā‘ī*. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The believer is not one who insults (*ta‘ān*), one who curses (*la‘ān*), one who speaks obscenely (*fāhish*), or speaks rudely (*badhī*).”<sup>73</sup> The Muslim apologist who engages in such unbecoming conduct in debates damages not only their own image but also the image of Islam in the minds of their audience.

Muslims should manifest the teachings of Islam in their character since this is part and parcel of the Islamic message to which they are inviting other people. The Prophet ﷺ said, “I was sent to perfect good character.”<sup>74</sup> Expressing respect, kindness, grace, affability, dignity, and even humor when appropriate, can have a very positive effect on the reception of one’s message.

<sup>73</sup> *Jāmi‘ at-Tirmidhī*, no. 1977. Graded authentic by al-‘Irāqī and by al-Albānī.

<sup>74</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 8939 and *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 273. Graded authentic by al-Zarqānī and al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Adab al-Mufrad*.

Different audiences may connect better with different styles in language, tone, and even voice. Formal discourse may better appeal to a group of academics while a casual style may better appeal to youth. We see instances where the Prophet ﷺ demonstrated this; for instance, when a Bedouin called out to him roughly, “O Muhammad!” we read that “the Messenger of Allah ﷺ responded to him with a similar voice and said, ‘Come!’”<sup>75</sup> Matching one’s audience is integral to ensuring one speaks with people in a manner that they can relate to.

## Language and civility

Language is something that must be carefully crafted in one’s conversation and tailored to address one’s audience effectively. The Qur’an states:

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is Most Knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is Most Knowing of who is [rightly] guided. (Qur’an 16:125)

Civility is a characteristic of the Islamic approach towards *da’wah*. In general, the style to adopt with those sincerely seeking the truth is an open and inviting style avoiding condescension that may turn away one’s listener. In an interesting passage, the Qur’an instructs Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to say to the *mushrikīn* (idolaters):

Say, “You will not be asked about the sins we have committed, and we will not be asked about what you do.” (Qur’an 34:25)

This shows the greatest level of courtesy and deference to one’s opponent. The first part of the verse speaks of our sins, but the second part speaks of their actions instead of saying, “We will not be asked about your sins.” This illustrates the dialectical wisdom of taking one’s opponent’s perspective and reasoning with them from their own assumptions as a starting point. However, this is also contingent on

<sup>75</sup> *Jāmi’ at-Tirmidhī*, no. 3536, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/48/167>. al-Tirmidhī graded it *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*.

having confidence that one’s opponent will respond positively to the gesture and open up to examine the matter further and consider your perspective. For others, if you give them an inch they will take a mile and will not reciprocate the courtesy. Thus, one must not forget that the Qur’an also instructs one to say:

Say: “If I have fabricated it, upon me be my crimes, but I am innocent of (all) those crimes which you commit.” (Qur’an 11:35)

This style reflects parity and does not give the same level of deference to one’s opponent found in the other verse. The style that is selected, therefore, depends on the audience. The Prophet ﷺ spoke to everyone according to the style appropriate for them. Not all those who disbelieve are the same, just as the Prophet’s opponents from amongst Quraysh differed. Abū Jahl was not the same as ‘Utbah ibn Rabī‘ah, nor were either of them the same as Suhayl ibn ‘Amr, who eventually embraced Islam. With those who are belligerent and hostile, a firmer course of speech is required. Of course, one’s style should never involve obscenity; with those who are particularly vulgar in their discourse, engaging them directly may give them more attention and publicity than they deserve. With those who are open for dialogue and courteous, one should be appropriately welcoming and inviting.

## **Don’t be afraid to say ‘I don’t know’**

It is said that half of knowledge involves saying, “I don’t know.” Unfortunately, many of those engaged in Islamic apologetics find themselves unwilling to defer to those with greater knowledge and may propose answers to questions that are factually incorrect or misguided. It is never a shortcoming to tell your audience that you are not aware or not sure of the answer but will take the effort to find out from those who know. If anything, it shows maturity and intellectual integrity when one admits the need to refer to those with expertise in a field.

On one occasion, a man traveled for six months in order to ask questions of Imam Mālik on behalf of the people of his locality. For the majority of the questions he

asked, Imam Mālik replied, “I do not have a good answer.” The man was stunned and asked what he should tell his people when he returned to them. Imam Mālik said, “Tell them that Imam Mālik says, ‘I don’t have a good answer.’”<sup>76</sup>

## Build certainty

The overall goal of apologetics is to build certainty in faith and build one’s connection with Allah. How does one go about that? There are two ways of acquiring faith, there is natural faith and probabilistic faith. The British empiricist John Locke is famous for his notion that assent has degrees (you can believe some propositions more strongly than others), and that one’s assent to a proposition should be proportionate to the degree of evidence in favor of that proposition.<sup>77</sup> In other words, the more evidence you have for a proposition, the more likely you should consider it to be true. This is the presumption underlying much of the apologetics geared towards probabilistic faith. As a result of this attitude, many Christian apologists attempted to amass a large number of arguments and evidence in order to substantiate probabilistic faith.

However, other Christian apologists like Alvin Plantinga argued for natural faith: in essence, the idea that belief in God emerges as a natural result of belief-forming mechanisms. In Islam, we have the understanding of the *fiṭrah*. Natural faith does not reduce belief in God to a proposition that one must evaluate on the basis of probability. Scholars of Islam spoke of an interior sense of knowing that allows one to recognize and know their Creator, as well as exploring the signs of Allah. As Allah says:

We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. But is it not sufficient concerning your Lord that He is, over all things, a Witness? (Qur’an 41:53)

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<sup>76</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi‘ bayān al-‘ilm wa-faḍlihi*, 838.

<sup>77</sup> For more information, see William Uzgalis, “John Locke,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/locke/>.

While the one engaged in Islamic apologetics will be interested in intellectual arguments, they must also realize that, in an important sense, the ‘answer’ has to come from within during a soul’s journey towards Allah. They have to appreciate the important role of inviting others to sincerely take the time to reflect, consider the message, examine and research further, and to ask questions with the intent of seeking to understand and benefit from the answers rather than seeking to augment one’s preconceived notions. People need to be reminded that there is an internal drive to find God and find purpose in their lives, and they need to reflect seriously on that.

Building certainty happens through association, persuasion, and actualization. One’s faith receives spiritual, social, and emotional input in addition to intellectual input. While apologetics is naturally focused on persuasion (systematic argument in defense of doctrine), the key to unshakeable faith is actually to achieve experiential faith. Faith is fully actualized when you *taste* it.<sup>78</sup> Spiritual labor is required for your faith to be actualized. When you savor the sweetness of supplicating to Allah and you savor the taste of Allah’s promises, you feel the comfort of Allah’s closeness in your prayers; when you feel the reality of the transience of this life and the inevitability of the next, these are matters that render one’s faith securely attached to the core of one’s being. When faith reaches this level, it can never be shaken. So it is important to produce output that guides people towards the actualization of faith.

Actualization can happen in different ways for different people (see “[Souls Assorted: An Islamic Theory of Spiritual Personality](#)”).<sup>79</sup> Reflecting on the signs of Allah in the Qur’an and in the life of the Prophet ﷺ is one source, and reflecting on signs in the universe and the features of creation around us is another. Acts of charity and service to others can also be an important part of actualizing one’s

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<sup>78</sup> The Prophet ﷺ said, “He has tasted faith (*īmān*) one who is content with Allah as his Lord, with Islam as his religion and with Muhammad ﷺ as his Prophet.” *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 34. See the discussion on the station of spiritual taste (*dhawq*) in Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-sālikīn*, 3:90.

<sup>79</sup> Zohair Abdul Rahman and Nazir Khan, “Souls Assorted: An Islamic Theory of Spiritual Personality,” *Yaqeen*, October 18, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/zohair/souls-assorted-an-islamic-theory-of-spiritual-personality/>.

faith. The Prophet ﷺ said, “If you wish for your heart to soften, then feed the needy and pat the orphan’s head.”<sup>80</sup>

Association with others striving to actualize their faith is also very important for building certainty. It helps those in the faith to stay within it and receive support from those around them. The Prophet ﷺ mentioned that a lone rider is (accompanied) by Satan.<sup>81</sup> There is a wisdom behind the prescription of congregational acts of worship in Islam. The community dimensions of faith and social connectedness play an important role as discussed earlier. So it is important to emphasize work within the community that reaches people and brings them together, to develop close ties within the community, and help people feel their hearts attached to their community. The Qur’an describes the community of the faithful as follows: “As a plant that produces its offshoots and strengthens them so they grow firm and stand upon their stalks” (Qur’an 48:29). The importance of community in the development of faith is thus a central message in Islamic teachings, so it is important to produce output that guides people towards community building.

## Don’t magnify doubt

There are some methods of conversation that apologists use that actually serve to magnify doubts rather than addressing them effectively. The first mistake is failing to recognize the appropriate audience with whom to address the doubt. The doubts encountered by high school students facing peer pressure to engage in alcohol and drug consumption, for instance, will differ from the type of doubts against religion raised by atheist philosophers, and these also will differ from the doubts against specific hadith texts raised on social media by those actively militating against Islam. Sometimes a doubt is only known to a small circle of students of knowledge engaged with academic polemics of orientalists; it would not help the goal of

<sup>80</sup> *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 7576, and graded fair by Ibn Ḥajar and al-Albānī.

<sup>81</sup> *Jami’ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1674. al-Nawawī declared it authentic in *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1998), 299, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/7/4>.

building certainty for such a doubt to be brought into discussion with the masses in the *masjid*.

Secondly, when an apologist speaks about a doubt, they have the option of trivializing it to their audience or magnifying it. If they feel that people do not take the issue seriously, they may be tempted to emphasize the magnitude of the doubt and how significant it is. But this method again does not help garner certainty and conviction, and many people may leave the gathering remembering only the significance of the doubt without learning a satisfying answer. A doubt should only be discussed if the speaker is planning to devote greater attention and emphasis to the answer to that doubt.

Thirdly, some speakers go to great lengths to accumulate a large number of arguments in support of their position in order to impress their audience with the sheer quantity of their proofs or because they have excessive faith in the probabilistic approach. However, sometimes these arguments take different positions on issues and end up being mutually contradictory. Or the speaker inadvertently will mention weak arguments alongside the strong ones, which creates an opportunity for an opponent to dismantle the weak arguments and leaves the audience assuming that the remaining arguments are similarly fragile. Another harm of mentioning too many proofs is that the audience gets the impression that the doubt is so significant that it requires a great deal of proof in order to successfully address it.

## **Resisting doubts and making a reasonable wager**

The first important thing to remember is that not all thoughts that occur to the human mind are alike. Some thoughts are merely questions and points of contemplation for further learning; they do not threaten one's relationship with Allah.

Some thoughts are fleeting impressions in the mind that one does not entertain, while some are more persistent and nagging, and though the latter may be more distressing, one remains a believer regardless. It is reported that a group of the companions came to the Prophet ﷺ and complained to him that they found thoughts passing through their minds, which they felt embarrassed to even mention. The Prophet ﷺ then said: Do you really find that to be the case? They said yes. He ﷺ said: “That is pure *īmān*.”<sup>82</sup> These noble companions of the Prophet ﷺ exemplified the reality of faith in being aware of these thoughts and concerned about them. Doubts can demonstrate your true faith because they show that you’re distressed about something concerning your belief.

Don’t seek out doubts, and don’t overexpose yourself to doubts. If a doubt enters your mind, seek clarification regarding it so that it does not settle and fester. If you encounter a doubt, examine it objectively. Imam Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله wrote,

After I began to present to him one allegation after another, Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, may Allah be pleased with him, advised me as follows: “Do not allow your heart to be a sponge for every doubt and allegation so that it absorbs them and is saturated with nothing else. Instead, make your heart like solid glass; doubts pass over its surface but do not settle on the inside. Thus, the doubts are seen through the clearness of the glass but are repelled by its firmness. Otherwise, if you allow your heart to drink every doubt you encounter, it will end up affirming them.” Or he said something to that effect. I do not know of any advice that has brought me greater benefit in fending off doubts than this one.<sup>83</sup>

For one who recognizes within himself a natural proclivity towards skepticism, there is an antidote in taking the appropriate course of examining faith. Indeed, if properly channeled towards seeking knowledge, someone inclined to investigate matters thoroughly and extensively may acquire even stronger faith than one who

<sup>82</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 132a, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1/247>. The phrase means that the fact that they regard such matters as grave is an indication of pure faith (*ṣarīḥ al-īmān*). al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāj sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bin Ḥajjāj* (Cairo: Mu’assasat Qurṭubah, 1994), 2:205.

<sup>83</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa‘ādah* (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 2010), 1:395.

accepts something passively. While explaining the different reasons why some may have stronger faith than others, Imam Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله writes:

One who bases their belief and love on many evidences that bring about certainty and reveal the invalidity of the passing misgivings is not like one who bases their belief on factors inferior to that. Moreover, the one who was granted some knowledge that compels them to believe is not like one who is exposed to misgivings and willingly seeks to remove them through contemplation and research. No sane person would doubt that knowledge that is based on a multiplicity of strong evidence—as well as proofs of the invalidity of the counter misgivings and the invalidity of the opponents’ arguments—is not like that which is based on one proof without knowing the counter-arguments.<sup>84</sup>

Some people suffering from doubts feel a sense of overwhelming anxiety and urgency about their unanswered questions. A spiritual crisis can be a debilitating experience that sometimes can even precipitate a mental health crisis.<sup>85</sup> What should a person do when their crisis of faith reaches a breaking point? They should be reminded that there is no reason to rush to renounce the faith, or feel a pressing urgency to become an atheist. They need to take their time in seeking people of knowledge, studying, reflecting, and finding the answers, and also turning back to Allah with sincere devotion and prayer. Deliberation is a part of faith and hastiness is from Shaytan. If they carefully weigh the consequences of their decision, they will realize that they are better off taking the path of faith than the path of disbelief. There is no loss in being wrong about believing in God but there is a severe loss in wrongly choosing the path of disbelief and being resurrected and brought before God as a disbeliever. The Qur’an alludes to the consideration of consequences,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā* (Medina: Wizārat, 2004), 7:565–66.

<sup>85</sup> Research examining the relation between religious doubts and negative mental health outcomes has found that “religious doubt is associated with depression, general anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, paranoia, hostility, and obsessive-compulsive symptoms. To start, religious doubt undermines a potentially important spiritual resource—a cohesive religious worldview via which individuals can interpret and make sense of their daily affairs, as well as major chronic stressors and personal traumas.” Kathleen Galek, Neal Krause, Christopher G. Ellison, Taryn Kudler, and Kevin J. Flannelly, “Religious Doubt and Mental Health Across the Lifespan,” *Journal of Adult Development* 14 (2007): 16–25.

“Say: Have you not considered, what if this revelation really is from Allah and yet you reject it?” (Qur’an 41:52).<sup>86</sup>

This comparison between the consequences of believing in God and the consequences of disbelieving in God and choosing to side with the less riskier option is famously known today as Pascal’s wager after the French mathematician and Catholic theologian Blaise Pascal (d. 1662 CE). In fact, it was a notion that was widely familiar to Muslim theologians long before Pascal. It has been captured in the following poetic couplet:

قال المنجم والطبيب كلاهما لا تُحشر الأجساد قلت إليكما  
إن صح قولكما فليست بخاسر أو صح قولي فالخسار عليكما

The astrologer and physician both claimed that bodies will not be resurrected; I said, go away

If what you say is true, I lose nothing, but if it is true what I say, the loss is all yours<sup>87</sup>

Put another way, if the afterlife is real, then the consequences of believing in God are infinitely good and the consequences of disbelieving in Him are infinitely bad, while if the afterlife isn’t real, there is only finite pleasure and pain in this life of which both believers and disbelievers partake.

Up until recently, Pascal’s wager was treated with universal derision by philosophers, but the counter-arguments they developed seem to miss the point

<sup>86</sup> The Qur’an also presents the case of a fallacious wager in the story of the man with two gardens. Justifying his ingratitude, the man states that the afterlife is unlikely to come and even if it were to come, God would grant him a better reward (Qur’an 18:36). This is an example of a foolish wager based upon false presumptions as the Qur’an illustrates.

<sup>87</sup> Cited in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Rāzī* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), 17:25, under the eighth argument proving the reality of resurrection, under the commentary of the Qur’anic verse 10:4, “Indeed, He begins the [process of] creation and then repeats it that He may reward those who have believed and done righteous deeds, in justice.” This should be considered a point of reflection for the person to probe further, but can this argument in and of itself provide a basis for belief? After citing this couplet, Ibn al-Qayyim argues that one is to base their faith on certainty and not mere caution, which is the way of the “people of doubt and suspicion.” See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn*, 1:463 under his discussion of the station of holding fast (*al-i’tisām*). Evidently, this wager is not what ultimately grounds one’s faith but is useful in considering the consequences of one’s choice.

entirely or fail to be substantive.<sup>88</sup> The point of the ‘wager’ is not to provide a philosophical justification for faith in God but to provide a practical heuristic for a person to seriously evaluate the spiritual consequences of his or her actions. If there’s even a 1% chance of being wrong about a matter of eternal salvation, it behooves a rational mind to give the matter due deliberation, humble reflection, and careful examination. The wager is thus not about fictitious philosophical scenarios one can invent of alternative imagined outcomes (e.g., a blissful atheist afterlife<sup>89</sup> or a religion that provides eternal salvation only to those who wear purple slippers),<sup>90</sup> it is only about the real-life decisions of a person confronted with a serious choice about embracing or rejecting faith.<sup>91</sup> Holding on to faith by this wager is undoubtedly a flimsy form of faith, as faith should be based on certainty and not mere caution. Nonetheless, people still need to be reminded of the principle of caution because it allows people to take stock of the potential consequences of their actions.

One common objection to the wager argues that since there are multiple religions with different deities, then a believer could potentially be worshipping the wrong deity; however, this falsely assumes that one has no means of distinguishing between religious belief systems, identifying those with greater credence and coherence, and factoring that consideration into one’s decision-making. Moreover, the objection is also theologically confused in that it fails to appreciate that God is the Most Just and the Most Perfect. Choosing God is not about gambling between names of deities but rather it entails following the only path that describes God with the Perfection that befits His Majesty. If one’s goal is to worship the sole

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<sup>88</sup> It has been noted that “many objections to Pascal’s Wager can actually be incorporated into the wagerer’s decision matrix, and thus do not provide reason to refrain from wagering altogether.” Elizabeth Jackson and Andrew Rogers, “Salvaging Pascal’s Wager,” *Philosophia Christi* 21, no. 1 (2019): 59–84.

<sup>89</sup> A counterexample to Pascal’s wager proposes that “after they die, splendid things happen to atheists and horrible things happen to theists.” Gregory Mougin and Elliott Sober, “Betting against Pascal’s Wager,” *Noûs* 28 (1994): 385.

<sup>90</sup> Lawrence Pasternack, “The Many Gods Objection to Pascal’s Wager,” *Philo* 15, no. 2 (2012): 158–78. The author writes, “So long as the classic ‘philosophers’ fictions’ are understood as stipulating something that appears to us to be of trivial value is rather of profound intrinsic value properly suited to being the requirement for what happens to us in our afterlives, we have grounds internal to the Wager for rejecting this category of hypotheses. Such hypotheses imply that we cannot trust an important aspect of our cognitive activity; and without such trust, we cannot consider ourselves fit to engage in wagering.”

<sup>91</sup> James Franklin, “Pascal’s Wager and the Origins of Decision Theory: Decision-Making by Real Decision-Makers,” in *Pascal’s Wager*, ed. Paul Bartha and Lawrence Pasternack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 27–44.

Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, the One who is Most Just and Most Kind, then there is every reason to believe He will sincerely reward the one who strives towards Him by blessing them with true guidance.<sup>92</sup> The Qur'an states, "And those who strive for Us, We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good" (Qur'an 29:69).

The other common objection to the wager is one that presumes that the faithful may miss out on the opportunity to live life without fear or inhibitions. This, however, has been debunked by multitudes of studies showing that, overall, religious people tend to live healthier and happier lives:

Study after study has found that religious people tend to be less depressed and less anxious than nonbelievers, better able to handle the vicissitudes of life than nonbelievers. A 2015 survey by researchers at the London School of Economics and the Erasmus University Medical Center in the Netherlands found that participating in a religious organization was the only social activity associated with sustained happiness—even more than volunteering for a charity, taking educational courses or participating in a political or community organization. It's as if a sense of spirituality and an active, social religious practice were an effective vaccine against the virus of unhappiness.<sup>93</sup>

The reality of the matter is that without a worldview that grounds one's purpose in life, it is far more likely that one regards life as pointless pain and suffering rather than finding it to be limitless pleasure. The atheist existentialist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer believed that life intrinsically was characterized by suffering and

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<sup>92</sup> In Islam, we are also told that one may receive guidance right before the departure of their soul. The Prophet ﷺ said, "So a man may do deeds characteristic of the people of the (Hell) Fire, so much so that there is only the distance of a cubit between him and it, and then what has been written overtakes him, so he starts doing deeds characteristic of the people of Paradise and enters Paradise. Similarly, a person may do deeds characteristic of the people of Paradise, so much so that there is only the distance of a cubit between him and it, and then what has been written overtakes him, and he starts doing deeds of the people of the Fire and enters the Fire." *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3332.

<sup>93</sup> Bryan Walsh, "Does Spirituality Make You Happy?," *Time*, June 10, 2016, <https://time.com/collection/guide-to-happiness/4856978/spirituality-religion-happiness/>. See also "Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health Around the World," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2019/01/Wellbeing-report-1-25-19-FULL-REPORT-FOR-WEB.pdf>.

that it would be better if we did not exist at all.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, anti-natalists are of the view that it is morally wrong to have children and thus inflict upon them the suffering of existence. If anything, it is the rejection of faith that renders existence ultimately pointless and thus forfeits true happiness, both in this life and the next. Meanwhile, it is in the worship of God that the faithful find true bliss and happiness. Thus, Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله writes in his work *al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib*:

Hastening towards Allah and turning to Him, finding contentment through Him, filling the heart with His love, remembering Him continuously, experiencing happiness and joy with knowing Him—all of this constitutes a hastened reward, a paradise in the present world, and a life to which the lives of kings cannot even compare. I heard Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (may Allāh sanctify his soul) say: “Indeed, there is a paradise (*jannah*) in this world. Whoever does not enter it will not enter the Paradise of the Hereafter.”<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the one who pursues the path of closeness to Allah in reality loses nothing, and only gains in this life and the next. If one seriously reflects on one’s spiritual condition and what brings one meaning and purpose in life and sincerely turns towards Allah, they will undoubtedly find true guidance and happiness.

## Conclusion

We live in a world today where innumerable forces are gathered against religion in general and Islam in particular. There is a well-funded Islamophobia industry that operates continuously with the aim of disparaging and dismantling the faith of Islam. Confronted by a variety of irreligious ideologies, it is the stark reality today that many Muslims experience considerable confusion and doubts on critical questions of faith, and some have even abandoned the faith altogether. On a daily basis, arguments are disseminated on the internet aimed at casting Islamic teachings in a negative light, attacking the character of the Prophet ﷺ, or

<sup>94</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the Word,” in *Life, Death, & Meaning: Key Philosophical Readings on the Big Questions*, ed. David Benatar (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 433.

<sup>95</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Wābil al-ṣayyib*, ed. Bakr Abū Zayd (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 1425 AH), 108–9.

undermining the Qur'an. Many people do try to find satisfactory answers to their questions; however, much of the knowledge to address such doubts has not been made accessible in the English language or articulated appropriately. It is of paramount importance for Muslim scholarship, therefore, to pay attention to the nascent field of Islamic apologetics and work together to develop the resources that will provide assistance to those experiencing a crisis of faith, provide strong intellectual responses in defense of the faith, and show people the true beauty of Islam unmarred by the distortions others project upon it. This will require patiently listening to those with concerns, developing community resources, taking a balanced approach that is mindful of pitfalls, engaging in sound academic research, collaborative efforts across many disciplines, and cooperation between scholars and students of knowledge, recognizing the urgent need for this work. This is one of the most important endeavors one can take up as the Qur'an states, "And who is better in speech than one who invites to Allah and does righteousness and says, 'Indeed, I am of the Muslims'" (Qur'an 41:33).