In Search of a Lost Paradigm
- A case study approach to retracing traditionalist influence in the fatwas of Ali Goma, Grand Mufti of Egypt

Fredrik Brusi
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Author: Fredrik Brusi

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to describe how two religious edicts by the current Egyptian grand mufti relate to an ongoing theological debate in the Muslim world on the nature of miracles and the state of mankind between life and death. The study illustrates how the mufti adheres to the Sunni theological school of Ash’ariyya and in what way said school has emerged as a theological middle ground between the literal and interpretative schools of thought. The study also reveals how the Mufti as a guardian of the faith must operate within a secularising context and what strategies are possible for him to utilise if he is to meet the demands of a modernised society whilst retaining a coherent religious explanation. In his office as grand mufti, Ali Goma may well be described as a traditionalist where theological matters are considered even if the governmental institute of Dār al-iftā has been modernised under his supervision and now uses 24 hour phone lines, e-mail, facebook and has an official webpage and translates many of its edicts into other languages than Arabic. This means that Dār al-iftā and Ali Goma are communicating an official Islam not only to the Muslims of Egypt, but has transformed from a national institute to a player in the era of globalisation.

Nyckelord/Keywords

Ali Goma, Fatwa, Dar al-Ifta, Islam, Egypt, Theology, Sunni, Modernity, Tradition, Religion
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We are all interested in truth. As of myself I believe we may only approach it with humbleness and humility for even in its more concrete forms, the truth will slip through our hands once we highhandedly claim that we are sole possessors of it. To borrow freely from the language of Rumi, the truth is a blushing and veiled bride who will only reveal her beauty to us if we approach her with care and caution. If we try and force her, she will resist us.

This paper is truly a labour of love. Love of the study itself, love for knowledge and love for all the people who have knowingly or unknowingly participated in its making and I am ever so grateful for your help, friendship and assistance or mere existence. I still feel however, that I would like to single out a few for the reasons mentioned below:

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Lastly but mostly I would like to thank my _Mother_ for enabling me to break out from a social heritage and venture out in a world bigger and more mysterious than anyone dared to believe.
On Translation & Transcription

Although this is not a paper on Arabic linguistics and to utmost extent a simplified form of transcription of Arabic has been used. Where statements in Arabic are directly used, the transcription utilises the following transcription table used by the Arabic department of Stockholm University.

Names, Places and common expressions are usually done in a simplified form.

The name of Mufti محمد جمعة علي, has been simplified to Ali Goma, which denotes the hard G common in Egyptian dialect as well as for ease of writing in stead of the correct ʿalī jumā muḥammad. Other names in Arabic has been treated in the same similar simplified transcription, unless it has been deemed necessary otherwise for the sake of comprehension, where the transcription according to the table has been used. An example being that the paper quotes two Arab writers with the last name Ḥaddād where one retained his name in transcript and the other is kept simplified as to not confuse the two. Thus the paper quotes: ibn Khafif, al-Ashʿari, Muḥammad ibn ʿAlawi al-Maliki, ibn Taymiyya, ibn Ḥazm, al-Shafīʿī, imam Malik, abu Hanifa and Ahmad ibn Hanbal when the allusion to their person is without doubt. The name of the archangel Jibrīl, is realised as Gibril and thus follows the original translation of ibn ʿAlawi’s book. The same principle applies to much of the terminology. Fatwa in plural becomes fatwas and not fatawa. Some frequent words will be presented as their original Arabic in transcription but then used subsequently in a simplified and simplified anglicised form, such as maḏāhib - madhhabs, the anglicised form will still appear in italics as to denote that it is a borrowed form. Dār al-ifṭā is transcribed as such, which follows Skoovgaard-Petersen’s simplification and not the more accurate dār al-ifṭāʾi. Sun- and moon letters are consequently not transcribed, thus the definite article is always transcribed as al- and never ʿash-, ʿad- etc. Names that have already been anglicised retain their English name and spelling, Mecca, Muḥammad etc.
"We lost the methodology, and we are in dire need of it in Muslim thought now. We are not trying to rejuvenate a history that is archaic; we are trying to rejuvenate a paradigm. This paradigm consists of a holistic vision of the universe that includes humanity and animal kind. A Muslim deals with reality, he deals with this door you see here, realising it too worships God; he deals with natural resources respectfully while other cultures are only beginning to think of protecting the environment. He deals with animals respectfully as well, so that a woman who locked up a cat will go to hell because she dealt with the universe violently, while a prostitute who saved a dog from thirst will go to paradise. What beauty! This is the foundation of a whole man, a man who has a certain understanding of the universe."

Ali Gomaa

Introduction: homo religiosus revisited

By the mere feat of reading this thesis, it is probable, almost certain that you, just like the author, belong to the jet-propelled choice-making select elite of modern man. You make an endless array of choices on a daily basis which were assumably not possible before the technological revolution we now consider normal.

You may propel yourself to the other end of the world in less than twenty four hours, eat from a diet which is not in season nor possible to sustain under normal agricultural conditions in your biotope or you may speak through copper wires or via a satellite orbiting earth to someone way beyond the physical reach of your voice. All of the above are in reality quite extraordinary but familiarity has accustomed us to modernity’s never ending stream of choice.

To paraphrase Irvine Welsh’s novel *Trainspotting*, in modernity you choose your life, job, career and family. You choose gadgets, brands, clothes and social life. You choose your health, leisure and membership in clubs, fraternities and associations. All of these choices are yours for the reason that you are no longer to the same extent bound by a tradition that constrains your options. In that pluralism it would be plausible that we also choose our faith and in what way we believe in that faith.

Sociologist Peter L. Berger wrote in 1979 that the transition to modernity is signified by a movement from fate to choice. Pre-modern man was unlikely to choose otherwise even if the opportunity presented itself, hence the term tradition. But all of this is somewhat superficial. What are the implications of modernity on what lies at the core of our beings, how has modernity affected the great metanarratives that earlier provided us with a sense of rootedness, purpose and value? Religion since the 20th century is not only a question of do or don’t, it is increasingly a question of personal choice and preference.

It is impossible to say whether modern man is less religious than his predecessors but we can utilise religion as a sociological field which permits us to observe interactive human collective and individual behaviour, thus speaking to us on the topic of humanity, where we’ve been, where we are and maybe whereto we are heading. In this perspective, the sociology of religion suggests that God is not dead at all, but Nietzsche, ironically, is.
Aim of study

The aim of this research is to investigate how the current (2012) Egyptian state mufti Ali Goma relates to creedal matters in two fatwas of his published in 2003 and 2005. The study will use these two fatwas and examine their purpose and rationale by building on theories on how orthodoxy is formulated and how secularisation processes may affect metanarratives.

The study will translate and describe the content of the fatwas and how they relate to what historically has been described as correct belief by Muslim scholars and also how they relate to contemporary Muslim debates on what Islam is, was and should be.

The study aims not only at just being a descriptive study of two religious edicts from the current grand mufti but also by utilising a holistic approach to say something about the discourse that the mufti is situated in. By looking not only at the answer to a question but attempting to understand the question itself and the reason for it being asked, we are, at least ideally, allowed a deeper comprehension of contemporary trends and debates in the religious Muslim sphere and from what and where they originate.

It is often that research on Islam and Muslims tend to focus on what Muslims do, but more rarely on what they believe and what they are supposed to believe. This study will hopefully serve as a broadening of the academic field of islamology by focusing on what is communicated by a particular religious institution as the correct Islamic opinion.

Research questions

i) Does Ali Goma’s two fatwa accommodate modernist interpretation of the topics presented in them, or do they re-establish a theological view wherein miracles are acceptable explanations of reality?

ii) How do the fatwas relate to traditional theological positions?

iii) What can be understood from the results of the study about the mufti’s position in the contemporary struggle for interpretational precedence in the Muslim world, can secularisation processes be discerned?
Theoretical Perspectives

The secularisation of modern society did not bring about the ultimate destruction of religious narrative, nor that of religious rite. At least it hasn’t been proven to have done so yet, human beings and institutions have so far stubbornly lived on into the modern and post-modern eras. However, secularisation processes and modernisation have had significant impact on theological and sociological aspects of religious beliefs. No living religion is by any means a monolith in praxis, unchanging and immune to the vicissitudes of time and space, although it is not uncommon for it to be described as such by either its critics or by its adherents.

On religion and secularisation

Talking about secularisation in the Muslim world, Skovgaard-Petersen reminds us that we must first define what kind of secularisation we are talking about. Skovgaard-Petersen utilises a definition borrowed from Peter Berger, where a distinction between a subjective and a structural secularisation is made. In the case of the Islamic world, Skovgaard-Petersen asserts that a structural secularisation has definitely taken place. By way of example, Islam in Egypt, from the 19th century on, has been allotted to the private sphere in law and inferior schooling in the sphere of education. It is however much more difficult to assess if the same diminishment has taken place in the subjective realm.²

Peter Berger has written on how religion is realised in a pluralistic society where he means that religious pluralism aided in the spreading of rationalistic tendencies, such as the Protestant disenchantment (Weber’s entzauberung) of the world “an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality”³ and prepared the way for non-religious discourse in a field traditionally navigated by religion. What Berger calls ‘the market place of religion’ where one is free to choose a worldview of one’s prerogative one is also free to chose no religion. This leads, in Berger’s view, to a devaluation of religious authority.

The process of secularisation was surveyed by Shiner to include six different meanings, none that are mutually exclusive: 1) Loss of prestige and significance of religious symbols, doctrines and institutions. 2) A shift of focus away from the supernatural towards the pangs and pains of ‘this life’. 3) Religious withdrawal from public to a private sphere. 4) Transportation of religious beliefs into non-religious forms. 5) Desacralisation of the world. Man and nature become

objects of rational-causal explanation. 6) The abandonment of commitments to traditional value and practices for the benefit of rational and utilitarian foundations.\textsuperscript{4}

Berger suggests that there are three basic strategies, or options for man to utilise in dealing with religious thought in a pluralistic society, meaning three different strategies for keeping religious thought coherent in a gradually secularising society. These three are typologies and shall be regarded as what Weber would entitle ideal types. They do not represent an observable existence as such but are intellectual constructs for the aid of understanding a social reality.

**The Deductive Option:** Reasserting the authority of a religious tradition. The tradition is regarded as something given \textit{a priori}, which translates epistemologically into self-sufficing justification or knowledge independent of experience. Berger exemplifies: “[T]he individual who takes this option experiences himself as responding to a religious reality that is sovereignly independent of the relativizations of his own sociohistorical situation.”\textsuperscript{5}

**The Reductive Option:** This is the diametrical opposite of the deductive option, an interchange of authority: “The authority of modern thought or consciousness is substituted for the authority of tradition, the \textit{Deus dixit} of old replaced by an equally insistent \textit{Homo modernus dixit}.”\textsuperscript{6} What this option means is that the thoughts and ideas of contemporary man is turned into the only valid criteria of religious thought, it is so-to-speak a re-interpretation of religion in order to fit it into modern thought.\textsuperscript{7}

**The Inductive Option:** By utilising experience, personal or the full historical experience of human history, religious traditions are comprehended as masses of evidence and insights derived from religious experience, Berger writes. This option is necessarily empirical in its nature, unwilling to pronounce a final verdict in its quest for religious truth, either by the authority of tradition nor by the authority of modern thought. “The disadvantage, needless to say, is that open-mindedness tends to be linked with open-endedness, and this frustrates the deep religious hunger for certainty.”\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{5} Berger, Peter, L. \textit{The Heretical Imperative}, Garden City: Anchor Books. 1980 p. 56

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Deus dixit} = God spoke, \textit{Homo modernus dixit} = Modern man spoke

\textsuperscript{7} Berger, Peter, L. \textit{The Heretical Imperative}, Garden City: Anchor Books. 1980 pp.56-58

\textsuperscript{8} Berger, Peter, L. \textit{The Heretical Imperative}, Garden City: Anchor Books. 1980 p. 58
Method & Research strategy

The study was conducted between January and March 2012. The empirical data was accessed from the official webpage of dār al-iftā. By selecting any fatwa listed under the subheading ‘matters of the unseen’ al-samīyāt, that, regardless of looking at the English or the Arabic version of the website, were just two, a natural limit of the scope of the study presented itself.

Utilising a qualitative design, treating the limited empirical material as two separate yet thematically interconnected cases enabled the study to be both suitable, feasible and ethical. The case-study approach was deemed suitable in order to decode the empirical stuff which is embedded in a complex historical and social context. The research is an illustrative, theory led study into how Berger’s three options of coming to terms with cognitive pluralism can be applied in analysing contemporary Islamic thought.

The two cases, even though quite different in content, share contact surface in that they both address matters which are contested, regarded as supernatural or miraculous by ordinary physical and medical standards. By Berger’s account however, if there are religious dogma like it, it must be interpreted according to one of his three typologies, if the religion itself shall survive as a coherent map of reality. Both cases were thus translated into English and put in a sociohistorical framework subsequently viewed through Berger’s filter to derive which of the three typologies could be discerned.

The complete Arabic texts has been translated by the author, except for the Qur’an, where Pickthall’s translation has been used and some of the hadith-texts where the institute’s (Dār al-iftā) official English translation has been used. As far as possible the paper utilises the official translation which is a natural part of the study but occasionally a alternative translation is presented for the sake of clarity. Which translation belongs to whom is indicated in the notes.

All propositions have been rooted in scientific and theological literature that have been annotated according to the Oxford referencing system. Where claims are made without a reference, they shall be interpreted as the author’s own. Arabic text is presented without quotation marks due to limits in formatting when switching between Latin and Arabic script. This means that the quotation marks and the note is connected to the English translation directly under the Arabic text, yet it should be interpreted as the Arabic being the quoted text, unless otherwise noted.

http://www.dar-alifta.org/home.html
Problematic Areas

The study is limited by the absence of empirical material on the webpage under the subheading ‘Matters of the Unseen’. Whilst being motivation for treating the material as cases it also restrains the study severely on how much it can reveal about the larger area of study: modernisation processes and the construction of orthodoxy in the contemporary religious realm.

The fatwas of Ali Goma are contemporary which means that they are situated inside a modern context yet we know very little of the petitioner or the reason of raising the question. This means, so to speak, that we are like a prince with a glass shoe which we need to try on several different feet and once we find one that fits we have found our princess. But unlike the fairy-tale, the research might find several feet that match and verifying which one is the correct could prove an arbitrary endeavour. On the other hand, this does not mean that the study is pointless. It may very well be that several factors could coexist as rationales for raising the issues treated in the fatwas but they never arise from a vacuum. They spring from a religious tradition framed by rules and principles meant to be the tools for explaining divine will in the world.

The restriction in empirical material may also affect the outcome of the study. It may be that the study finds a certain result which is applicable to the two fatwas and only those two fatwas. If for instance the study shows that the mufti utilises the deductive option in these two cases, it does not entail that he does so in all fatwas, nor that he does not.

That there might be several ways of interpreting the empirical material and that, that interpretation will produce several explanations, is not unique for this study, nor any study of religion. The justification for proceeding with the study comes from Paul Feyerabend (d. 1994) who discovered and promotes an anarchical method in science:

“No theory ever agrees with all the facts in its domain, yet it is not always the theory that is to blame. Facts are constituted by older ideologies, and a clash between the facts and theories may be proof of progress.”10

In the author’s view, any research is relatively useless without the proper context. This means that the study is very much centred on the historical background of Sunni theology and heavy laden with theories on secularisation processes. As stated above this means that the research will find that the fatwas do have a relation to secularisation processes, but it does not claim nor prove causality in any direction, which might be seen as either a weakness or a strength of the paper.

Another field that is problematic is the religion itself. Islam has no clergy in the sense that Catholicism does. This means that there is no infallible pope in Islam who’s word is the absolute highest (living) authority. This becomes problematic when one wishes to study Muslim “orthodoxy”. It is difficult for the researcher to justify any chosen measuring rod. In this study, the researcher therefore opted to use al-Azhar’s own definition of orthodoxy as a comparative horizon, namely the *Ash’ari* creed. What it means is that whenever the concept of orthodoxy is discussed in the paper, it refers to what the majority of Egyptian scholars of al-Azhar have referred to as orthodoxy. Ahmed El Shamsy argues that orthodoxy is not a fixed thing but rather a process. Theological doctrines are established through being placed within the spheres of changing social relations and institution in society. Further he puts forth that the process goes two ways. Doctrinal ideas can influence said relations but institutions or social relations may also promote, channel or suppress doctrine. In El Shamsy’s view, orthodoxy is formulated within three social or institutional environments, the (religious) scholarly, the governmental and amongst ordinary believers.11

This paper utilises El Shamsy’s definition of orthodoxy as a social construct, meaning that when reference to *Ash’arism* is made as Islamic orthodoxy, it is presupposed that this shall be understood as a thing in constant negotiation among El Shamsy’s three social environments.

A final note that needs to be addressed is that of the researcher’s role in the study. By being a Muslim who is inclined towards the Islam which is promoted by the grand mufti Ali Goma, it is reasonable to assume that the researcher might unawarely contaminate the material or fail to regard it critically enough. Even though this argument may be regarded as an *ignoratio elenchi* or a red herring, since no researcher of humanities or social sciences approach their field of interest without biases and presuppositions, the author has progressed in the study with constant self-reflection and in dialogue with colleagues, teachers at the section for Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures at Stockholm University as well as professors and tutors at other universities, in order to avoid falling into what’s avoidable considering circular reasoning.

**Literature Review**

The defining research on *Dār al-Iftā* was made by professor Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen in his 1997 doctoral thesis *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al Ifta*. Skovgaard-Petersen work is a historical overview on the evolution of *Dār al-Iftā* and its muftis from the late 1800s up until 1997. The research focuses on the problem area where the state mufti balances the act of being part government employee whilst being responsible for the transmission of

a religious tradition which necessarily must prove relevant in its contemporary age. Skovgaard-Petersen also demonstrates how the study of fatwa may be utilised for broadening the field of research to extend beyond the religious edict itself thus speaking on social, legalistic and intellectual aspects of islamology.

Another very useful study is Indira Falk Gesink’s *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* which is a historical study on the power struggle at the famous university at the time of Muhammad Abduh’s. Falk Gesink’s study targets the educational reform that took place in and around al-Azhar and the important role played by the conservative traditionalist Azhari scholars in this process. She also writes insightfully on how Abduh’s of *ijtihād* has taken an unexpected and for Abduh perhaps unintended socialised form, turn in the twentieth century when *fiqh* and *iftā* has become property wrested from the hands of scholars into the hands of the lay.

Tim Winter has edited the *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, a compactly written collection of essays that are rudimental for any studies that go into the academically neglected field of Islamic theology. From the collection, the author of this study is keen on mentioning especially the chapters by Khalid Balankinship: *Early Kalām*, Ahmed El Shamsy: *The Social Construction of Orthodoxy*, Steffen A. J. Steltzer: *Ethics*, Umar F. Abd-Allah: *Theology and Jurisprudence* and Marcia Hermansen: *Eschatology*.

Carl W. Ernst is the author of what must now be regarded as a classic and a bedrock for Islamic studies: *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary world*. Ernst has successfully been able to demonstrate how Islam has come to be misunderstood and often misrepresented in the sphere of western scholarship but also how these obstacles may be traversed by the researcher. Ernst’s book also contains a very insightful section on how contemporary Muslim movements, like the salafists, may be interpreted.
On Islam, ethics and iftā

In contrast to Christianity, where theology was regarded as the queen of sciences, Islam (and Judaism for that matter) is sometimes described as a religion more focused on religious law, the main point for either the Muslim or the Jew is to conform to the laws of God, rather than formulating the correct opinion about the Almighty. This theoretical assumption is not uncommon in entry level studies in islamology and whilst not completely untrue, it still represents an academic discourse which is unfair to all of the Abrahamic faiths for the sake of being an oversimplification.\(^{12}\)

Armstrong has argued that religion is really not something which is believed but something which was practised, at least in earlier modes of Abrahamic and pre-Abrahamic religion. “Without ritual, myths made no sense and would remain as opaque as a musical score, which is impenetrable to most of us until interpreted instrumentally. Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought but something they did.”\(^{13}\)

As Armstrong questions the truism about faith without practice, Ernst makes an interesting observation about Islam in the Qur’an and the evolution of Muslim theology. He asserts that the keyword in the Qur’an is faith īmān and believer mūmin whom are referred to hundreds of times rather than Islam which is mentioned only eight times. In the same passage, Ernst also mentions that the influential Sunni theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111) stresses the importance of faith in his exposition of religious identity.\(^{14}\)

The argument here is not that faith and practice are mutually exclusive, but rather that they are coexisting, equally important aspects of religion. As far as islamology is concerned, one explanation for the preponderance for studies on religious law over dogma may be due to the historical fact that the Christian world for a long time largely only recognised Christianity as a religion and Islam was at best described as the “Saracen Law” but never as a faith in its own right.\(^{15}\)

Steltzer defines ethics as a knowledge (in the Greek sense of the word) who’s object is human action and that the cause of Islamic ethics, the sciences of fiqh (jurisprudence) and kalām (theology), is sought in the event of the death of the prophet. Since the prophet was regarded an absolute trustworthy source of knowledge in all matters relating to the conditions between mankind and the Godhead, his departure from the worldly realm caused insecurities about the nature of this relationship and Islamic scholarship may be regarded an attempt to bridge the gap created by the


loss of the highest human source of divine knowledge. Accordingly, the central question for the devout is not only “What does God want me to do?” but also “Which means do I have to find this out?” Steltzers review is cause for establishing, in the interest of scholarly research, that fiqh and kalām are Muslim tools of (an Islamic) epistemology. The role of the Islamic scholar is thus to present a coherent narration of religious truth by the means of religious scholarship.

A note on the madhhabs

The guardians of the faith and practice, perhaps self-acclaimed, as Hourani has it, but more likely by virtue, as is argued within the religious tradition itself, became the cadre of religious scholars al-ulamā versed in the book and the prophetic traditions. By the eleventh century Sunni Muslim scholarship within the scope of jurisprudence had evolved into four discernible schools of religious law, collectively known as the madhhabs, maḏāhib.

The madhab is, simply put, a codification of Islamic rite according to a set interpretational methodology which originates with an individual mujtahid scholar which would then be refined and extended by his students and student’s students according to circumstances as they developed throughout history. They are named after their founders (Abu Hanifa, Malik, al-Shafi’i and ibn Hanbal) and are today distinguished somewhat geographically and by what weight they ascribe to the different sources of religious law.

Al-Shafi’i (d. 820) was the first among the four scholars to pronounce, in a systematic way, the sources from where to derive Islamic law and which has since then been the norm within all four schools, albeit with some distinguishable features remaining that are specific to each school. These roots, or sources of law, uṣūl al-fiqh, literally the roots of understanding, are the Qur’an, the Sunnah, consensus of opinion and finally, analogy.

“On matters of substance as well as on principles of interpretation there were some differences between the various madhhabs, but most of them were of minor importance. Even within a particular madhhab there could be differences of opinion, for no code, however detailed and precise, could cover all possible situations. A maxim often repeated declared that from the tenth

18 mujtahid meaning a scholar capable of independently deriving religious law (ijtihād) from the legal sources; uṣūl al-fiqh
century onwards there could be no further exercise of individual judgement: where consensus had been reached, ‘the door of *ijtihad* is closed’. There seems to be no clear evidence, however, that this precept was ever formulated or generally accepted, and within each *madhhab* *ijtihad* was in fact carried on, not only by judges who had to make decisions, but by jurists (muftis). A *mufti* was essentially a private scholar known for his learning and his ability to give rulings on disputed questions...”\(^{21}\)

The founding scholars, and later their most distinguished students, were practising the art of opinion-giving, *ifrā*, as religious authorities. It has been reported for instance that it was said about Malik (d. 795) by his contemporaries that: No-one should give legal judgement while Malik is in the city (i.e. Medina): *lā *yifrā* *wa mālik fī al-madīna*\(^{22}\)

Some students would be considered independent within their own school, such as ibn Abd al-Barr in the Maliki-school and al-Nawawi among the Shafi’is, which qualified them as *mujtāhid fī al-madhībab*, independent to formulate differing opinion within the *madhhab*, yet never diverging from the methodological principles of their founding school.\(^{23}\)

Skovgaard-Petersen makes it a case in point that Islamic jurisprudence is not restricted to that which western people would intuitively consider to be in the realm of law or jurisprudence, in that *fiqh* extends to such disparate areas ranging from personal hygiene to religious liturgy. A *fatwa*, is generally not very spectacular, but serves as a non-coercive piece of information on a point of (Islamic) law which might have been forgotten or, every once in a while, as a religious edict on a new phenomenon. What Skovgaard-Petersen denotes is that the *fatwa* can be seen as an important link between the religious specialist and the layman, revealing attitudes and norms at a given point in time as well as details and specifics of ritual.\(^{24}\)

**The mufti in modernity**

As Skovgaard-Petersen has illustrated, the role of the mufti has changed distinctively in the modern era. As political states gradually gained control over more or less all spheres of public life, so has the mufti changed from being a local jurisconsultant to a government employee, a bureaucrat who is paid, holds vacations and eventually is allowed to retire with a pension. Most interesting in

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this relationship with the state is that the mufti becomes a prime interpreter for a standardised Islam in the context of the modern nation state.\textsuperscript{25}

1789-1939 is a period commonly referred to as the reform period in the Muslim world, \textit{tanzimat} in the Ottoman-Turkish experience and \textit{al-nahda} in Arabic.\textsuperscript{26} Falk Gesink asserts that no history about the reform period in Egypt and subsequent debate within its religious institutions can ignore the figure of Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). However important Abduh is in the perspective of the history of ideas, Falk Gesink suggests that his role and impact as a reformer of al-Azhar (and subsequently the dār al-ifṭā) should be downplayed somewhat in regards to how previous researchers have estimated him and his ideas. What Falk Gesink finds noteworthy with Abduh is foremost two things. His expansion of the concept of \textit{ijtihad} to a wider meaning than that of his predecessors and his use of modern media for the distribution of ideas, Abduh actively working as a journalist and editor for several years of his life.\textsuperscript{27}

Most accounts of Abduh’s ideas do illustrate that he must have been very controversial amongst his more conservative peers. Although not in the form of \textit{fatwa}, Sedgwick recounts that Abduh promoted:

\begin{quote}
“A ‘scientific’ worldview, arguing for naturalistic, non-miraculous understandings of events related in the Quran. References to angels, for example, might be to ‘natural forces.’ References to ‘seven heavens’ might be the seven planets (the accepted number in 1900). The famous story of an Abyssinian army that was besieging Mecca being destroyed by stones from on high might refer to the impact of microbes, perhaps smallpox. Stories such as this were anyhow in the Quran to give lessons, not to teach history.”\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

The transformation into modernity or any reform of the religious institutions of Egypt did not start nor did it end with Muhammad Abduh. It must be studied in due context and understood as an ongoing process where truths and values are constantly reassessed by those who ascribe themselves to that particular tradition, on whatever grounds such claims are made.

‘Abduh’s prime concern was what he perceived a stagnant Muslim society, succumbed to the blind following of religious authority, \textit{taqlid}, and the need for revivification. In the modernist

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Sedgwick} Sedgwick, Mark. \textit{Muhammad Abduh: A Biography}, Cairo: Cairo University Press. 2009. pp 86-87
\end{thebibliography}
spirit, he suggested that this must be done by accepting the need for change and not by a return to the past.

“First, to liberate thought from the shackles of taqlid, and understand religion as it was understood by the elders of the community before dissension appeared; to return, in the acquisition of religious knowledge, to its first sources, and to weigh them in the scales of human reason, which God has created in order to prevent excess or adulteration in religion, so that God’s wisdom may be fulfilled and the order of the human world preserved.”

Skovgaard-Petersen begins his study of the muftis of dār al-iftā with a mufti who preceded the establishment of the institution as a national project. Muhammad al-Abbasi al-Mahdi (d. 1897) was in fact the last Hanafi mufti of Egypt pre-dār al-iftā, serving as a primus inter pares in Egypt where al-Azhar university for a long period had accommodated four separate grand muftis, one for each madhhab. Al-Mahdi was even appointed shaykh al-Azhar by the khedive Isma’il Pasha (r. 1863-1879) in hopes that he would have the courage to initiate reforms of al-Azhar. The appointment of a Hanafi jurist in a university and a population which was dominated by the Maliki- and Shafi’i schools further enhanced the Hanafi madhhab as state religion, what Skovgaard-Petersen recognises as the “Hanafication” of al-Azhar perhaps adding to alienation of the majority of scholars with the state.

What is remarkable about al-Mahdi is that not only did he print his fatwas, thematically arranged according to customary practice in writing fiqh literature but also chronologically within each topic. Al-Mahdi had been keeping notes of his fatwas since the age of 21 and although it is impossible to say whether this was done as an aid to his memory or if he had been set on publicising them from a very young age, Skovgaard-Petersen believes that this reveals his view on fatwas as such. They were not simply advice for a singular receiver at a given moment in time, but a matter of public interest.

The highest religious authority in Egypt is al-Azhar university which has been a centre for training Muslim scholars since the 10th century. In this sense, the university is an important actor in reproducing theological positions among its students. Al-Azhar has been outspoken supporters of

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the Ashʿari creed which has lead in later times to a confrontational relationship with some of the more puritanical salafist groups in Egypt.\textsuperscript{33}

What Oliver Roy suggests might be a crisis of authority in the Muslim world is with al-Azhar is a crisis of legitimacy which tends to spill over to the dār al-iftā, both whom are finding themselves increasingly exposed to a free market in where anyone may preach the faith. This new area of play, where the lines between the secular and the religious spheres are blurred, has also amounted to the mufti being exposed to competition.\textsuperscript{34} Whoever can produce the more agreeable interpretation may thereby also enjoy a larger following and for that reason perhaps claim greater authority.

**An official portrait of Ali Goma**

Ibrahim Negm, senior advisor to the grand mufti has written a biography entitled *the epistemology of excellence: A journey into the life and thoughts of the grand mufti of Egypt*, which was published in 2012.\textsuperscript{35} It is probably the most comprehensive biography published so far on the current mufti with over 160 pages recording the life and works of Ali Goma. The text is of course problematic in the sense of it obviously carrying a biased position yet it might prove valuable in our study of the grand mufti since we can assume that it represents the official image of the mufti, at least in the form that Negm wants it to appear in. Although the grand mufti is well-known in Egyptian society, appearing regularly on TV and in the press, Negm’s book is most likely the first major effort to present an extensive review of the mufti’s work to an English-speaking audience. The reasons for this will be discussed further in the conclusion of this paper.

Ali Goma was born in Bani Suwayf in Upper Egypt in 1952. Negm describes his family as traditional and religious with a father who was specialised in law. As a child he was subject to parallel education, memorising the Qur’an, studying hadith and learning the maliki madhhab on the side whilst enrolled in secular schooling. In 1969 he moved to Cairo for obtaining a high school diploma. In college he enrolled at the faculty of commerce at *Ayn Shams* university, something which apparently allowed him to follow his extracurricular studies in religion, the young Goma

\textsuperscript{33} Jamestown Foundation.”Salafists challenge al-Azhar for ideological supremacy in Egypt”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8, No. 35 (16/09/2010)
NOTA BENE: Jamestown foundation has been criticised for being a stark neo-conservative think-tank which should make the reader take heed in that the information communicated by them may be part of a secondary agenda. However, the author of this paper has deemed the article credible in substance based on similar reports from other media.


\textsuperscript{35} Negm, Ibrahim. *The Epistemology of Excellence: A Journey into the Life and Thoughts of the Grand Mufti of Egypt*. Beirut: InnoVatio Publishing Ltd. 2012 (The author has repeatedly tried to contact Ibrahim Negm for confirmation that the biography has been endorsed or approved by Ali Goma but has yet to receive an answer by Negm.)
committing himself to reading and memorising all religious texts pertaining to al-Azhar primary-, preparatory- and high schools. He graduated from Ayn Shams in 1973 with a BA in commerce.36

Goma then earned a second Ba in 1979 from al-Azhar university in Arabic and Islamic studies where he continued to graduate with a MA in 1985 from the faculty of shari’ah and law. His doctoral dissertation, which according to Negm was hailed as one of the most sophisticated and thorough ever submitted, earned Goma a PhD in 1988.37

The former state mufti Gad al-Haqq (1978-1982) was maybe the greatest influence on Goma’s career, not only for leaving a tangible mark on Goma’s personality and intellect but also for the fact that Gad al-Haqq submitted a young Goma to the al-Azhar fatwa council and as a researcher at the Islamic Research Academy. Under Gad al-Haqq’s wings, Ali Goma became a notable presence at al-Azhar.38

A notable feature of Goma’s time at the university is that he during the nineties revived the tradition of public study circles at al-Azhar mosque. Negm claims that Goma for over a decade could be found in the alcoves of the medieval mosque, giving lessons from just after dawn prayer until noon. In 1998, he was appointed ḥāṭīb, preacher, of Sultan Hassan mosque, where his Friday sermons would attract large numbers of devout who were to receive the message of Islam in a context which was relating to their contemporary milieu.39 Ali Goma was appointed grand mufti and head of the dār al-iftā in 2003.40

The epistimology of excellence must of course be read as a party plea and as an insert of data in the field of the history of religion, which means that it is not without merit, especially not for the researcher who’s aim is set at contemporary religious thought in Egypt, yet treated with care as it (probably) represents an officially sanctioned narrative.

Dār al-Iftā has expanded considerably under Ali Goma. The staff has increased from 40 to some 250 permanent employees which has allowed for an increase in production as well and the institute could report a total number of 900 321 fatwas produced in 2010-2011. Over half of these

40 http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/658/eg8.htm 2012-03-12
fatwa were delivered through telephone, a 24 h service which the institute provides together with
the option of e-mailing the institute for a scholarly opinion on a certain matter.41

In 2005 the Atlantic magazine published an article by G. Willow Wilson that described the
grand mufti as a new type of radical; promoting “traditionalism without the extremism.”42

Responding from tradition

Another interesting recent publication is the 2011 Responding from the Tradition: one
hundred contemporary Fatwas by the Grand Mufti of Egypt,43 which is an anthology of Goma’s
fatwas translated into English. The fact that the fatwas are published as a book in English, as well as
some fatwas on the website that are available in French, German, Indonesian, Russian, Urdu and
Turkish echoes previous Egyptian mufti’s sentiments that fatwa is a matter of public interest and in
Goma’s case not just Egyptian public but a global public.

Responding from tradition is no ordinary collection of fatwa, but the editorial work must
have been done with certain receivers in mind. The title in it self reveals that the anthology is a
response to someone or something. By looking at a few of them, we are able to understand a little
more of the battle of ideas in which the mufti is involved. Question no. 17  establishes the authority
of al-Azhar and the institution of the mufti (of any Islamic country).  Question no. 44 is a very long
fatwa that sets clear that the Muslim is not only allowed but encouraged to seek the means
(tawassul) through the prophet even after his death. The idea of supplication to God through the
prophet, especially after his death can be seen as a watershed between Muslims of a Sufi inclination
and those Muslims of a more puritanical sway that collectively go by the description Salafist.44
Question nos. 56 and 57 are also a defence for the Sufi practices of invoking Gods names out loud
(dhikr) and in group. The Question which serves as an excellent background for this study is no. 33;
Who are the Ash‘aris: are they true upholder of the Sunnah, possessing sound theological doctrines,
or are they a sect involved in reprehensible innovation? Breaking the fatwa down, we may derive
from it that:

i) Ali Goma concludes that Ash‘arite creed is equal to the prophet’s creed.

Module.aspx?Name=IVR 2012-03-12
43 Gomaa, ‘Ali. Responding from the Tradition: One Hundred Contemporary Fatwas by the Grand Mufti of Egypt,
Loisville: Fons Vitae. 2011
44 for a lengthy treatise on the subject of tawassul in this context see; bin ‘Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, Muhammed. Notions
that must be corrected, Holland: Sunni Publications. 2008. pp. 82-171
ii) Ali Goma quotes Taj al-din al-Subki in that Ash'arite creed is also the creed of all the Malikis, Shafi‘is, Hanafis and Hanbalites, and that creed is formulated in the Aqidah of al-Tahawi.\textsuperscript{45}

What then is the Ash’arite creed?

**Scripturalism, Interpretation and the Ash‘ari amalgamation**

Going down what may be perceived a middle way, choosing neither the strict literalist nor the problematic rationalist method which in consequence would tax God’s sovereignty and independence, Sunni Muslim theology became centred around the theological school of imam abu al-Hasan Ali al-Ash‘ari (d. 935).\textsuperscript{46}

Blankinship relates that Ash‘arism evolved very much as a counter to Mu‘tazilism, a quasi-rationalistic string of thoughts who’s origins are attributed to Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ (d. 748) of Basra in modern day Iraq. Early Mu‘tazilite theology was formulated on five principles, or roots; ╲uṣūl. 1) God’s unity and uniqueness; 2) His justice; 3) The promise (of heaven for the pious) and the threat (of hell for the wicked); 4) the intermediate state (between belief and unbelief) of a Muslim sinner; 5) the command to enjoin good and prohibit iniquity.\textsuperscript{47}

Al-Ash‘ari had been a former moderate Mu‘tazilite and a student of the Mut‘azilite theologian abu Ali al-Jubba‘i (d. 915) in Baghdad, who seems to have undergone a significant spiritual transformation around 913 after which he changed his position to that of the Hanbalis’ with the addition to their literalistic, borderline anthropomorphic understanding, that God’s attributes should be a-modally interpreted, that is, the doctrine of ‘without [asking] how’.\textsuperscript{48}

What al-Ash‘ari succeeded in doing was to create a theological position more refined than the blunt literalism of the Hanbalis whilst drawing from the methodic rational theological discourse of the Mu‘tazilite. This means that reason and logic could be instrumental in defending and explaining religious beliefs but it could not topple or subordinate revelation itself. By the eleventh century the Ash‘ari theological school had consolidated into becoming the leading school of theology amongst Sunni Muslims, especially those who would adhere to the Maliki and Shafi‘i schools of jurisprudence.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{47} Blankinship, Khalid. \textit{The Early Creed}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008 pp. 47-48

\textsuperscript{48} Blankinship, Khalid. \textit{The Early Creed}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008 (The Arabic gloss is كيف لا يكفي)

Leaman outlines the development of *kalam*, rational theology, as born out of a myriad of opinions that gradually solidified into three ideal positions. The Mu'tazilite rationalist first becoming politically dominant with the patronage of the caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833), the Hanbalite strict literalism that was perhaps a reaction to the Mu'tazilite and finally the Ash'arite middle position.50

What Leaman proposes is that Ash‘arism in turn was criticised by a small group of Hanbalite revivalists in particular through the voice of ibn Hazm (d.1064)51 of Cordoba and ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) for being a too liberal. The gist of Hanbali criticism to the Ash‘ari creed lies in the Hanbali rejection of the use of philosophical ideas and the ability of the intellect by language to understand problematic statements of the Qur’ān about the nature of God.52

The theological question is quite pregnant given that ibn Taymiyya’s critique has been recently revived in a simplified form by the Wahabiyya in Saudi Arabia and in some branches of the globalised Salafiyya movement, this gives, in Leaman’s opinion, the question of Sunni orthodoxy a political dimension even though ibn Taymiyya was in reality quite a marginal figure and Ash‘arism has dominated amongst the scholars53 throughout history.54

For matters of clarification, we should be able to understand the trends in Islamic theology with the help of three ideal types: The Literal, the Interpretational/Metaphorical and the Amalgamation. If we look at the Qur’ān, which in comparison to the Bible, contain relatively few anthropomorphic references yet a common one is the expression “God’s hand or hands” we are able to outline how the three different approaches could interpret such a statement as the first verse of Sura 67, *al-Mulk*:

\[ \text{“Blessed be He in Whose hand is the sovereignty, and, He is Able to do all things”} \]55
At face value, the literalist approach to such a statement would be that God possesses a hand in which He holds sovereignty since the word “in His hand” bi-yadihi clearly indicates so. What seems problematic with this corporeal position is that it goes against other Sunni theological prescripts, foremost that it implies an anthropomorphic Godhead, a deity that is like its creation something which the Qur’an denies in other passages:

\[
\text{وَلَا مَنْ كَفَرَ لَهُ كَفَرَ أُحْدَٰٰ}
\]

“and there is non comparable unto Him”\(^56\)

Wanting to stay clear of anthropomorphic or corporeal descriptions of God who cannot have a hand like humans, the interpretationalist would so claim that “hand” in the former passage was to be understood as a metaphor for God’s dominion and ability, rather than a reference to an actual hand, which is what the Mu’tazilites would uphold.

The Ash’arite scholar would probably refute the later position on the lines of it overemphasising God’s transcendence as that the statements in the Qur’an about God’s face or hands are realities yet not corporeal nor metaphorical:

“When any form of resemblance, similitude or analogy between God and anything in the world of His creation is refuted, this applies to linguistic, ontological and logical reflections on the essence-attributes question. [...] To hint that God resembles worldly beings is absurd. A semblance of linguistic affinity in reference to attributes does not affirm a similitude in signification. as Ash’ari holds, ‘God is not in His creatures nor are His creatures in Him’.”\(^57\)

The Ash’ari scholar ibn Khafif (d. 982) reports in his treatise Correct Islamic Doctrine that “He created Adam with His hand - not ‘the Hand that is His Power’ but ‘the Hand that is His Attribute.’”\(^58\)

Conceptualising Ash’arism as a go-between in those points of tension in a rationalist-literalist spectrum that Hermansen identifies in the history of Islamic theology\(^59\) allows us to go into to the

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\(^{56}\) Qur’an 112:4 (Pickthall)


\(^{58}\) ibn Khafif, *Correct Islamic Doctrine*, Fenton: As-Sunna Foundation of America.1999 p. 8

fatwa of the Egyptian state mufti Ali Goma, better equipped for understanding the underlying theological currents of thought which precedes it.
Case study 1: Concerning the punishment and the bliss of the grave

On April 15, 2005, the Mufti of Egypt Ali Goma issued a *fatwa* which rigidly asserted that the punishment and the bliss of the grave is a well-established fact, supported in the Qur’an, the Sunnah and consensus of the Muslim scholars, furthermore, denial of the dogma is impermissible for any Muslim.  

**Barzah - the intermediate state**

Before going into the *fatwa* itself, a few words need to be said in order to understand the theological topic of the *fatwa* because it deals with a concept of life and death which is particular to the Muslim faith, the intermediate state between life and death, the barzah.

Imam ’Abdallah ibn ’Alawi al-Haddād (d. 1634), a Yemeni Shafi’i and Ash’ari scholar writes in his book “The lives of man” that any human goes through five stages of existence. The first is the realm in which the supreme God summoned all the souls and made them testify of Him, which is described in the Qur’an:

> ﻣَأۡيَدُ ﻋَلَّمُ ﻣُؤَدَّبَ ٥٦٠
> ﻣِنْ ﺻَبِبٕ ﻣِنْ ٥٦١
> ﻣِنْ ٥٦٢

“And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify.”

The first stage is henceforth the passage down from the beginning, through the loins of his ancestors to just before his birth. The second stage is the period of worldly life beginning at birth and ending with his death. After death, man begins life in his third stage, in an intermediate realm which extends to the fourth period which is the realm of the resurrection and final judgement where finally passage is granted to the abode of permanence, being either the delight of paradise or the

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chastising flames of hell.\textsuperscript{63} It is to this third realm, the \textit{barzaḫ}, which is at the heart of the mufti’s \textit{fatwa}, that we shall now turn our attention to.

A \textit{barzaḫ} means a partition, a barrier or a dividing space in Arabic. It is a word which occurs in the Qur’an:

\begin{quote}
\textit{وَمِنِّمَ وَرآئِهِم بَرْزَخُ إِلَى يَوْمٍ يَجْعَلُونَ}
\end{quote}

“and behind them is a barrier [\textit{barzaḫ}] until the day when they are raised”\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{al-Haddād} explains that the abode in the grave has aspects of both the worldly life and the life to come in the hereafter, but that it has more affinity with the hereafter and is, in fact, a part of the afterlife. It is a world dominated by spirits and spiritual things where physical bodies, though secondary, share the experience of the souls.\textsuperscript{65}

In Islamic thought it is believed that the dead once in place in their graves will be visited by two interrogators who emerge to ask the departed about his status as a believer. Imam \textit{al-Ghazali} (d. 1111), one of the most influential Muslim theologians writes in his monumental work \textit{Revival of the Religious Sciences} that:

\begin{quote}
“The first of these matters is the questioning of Munkar and Nakir, two tremendous, awe-inspiring personages who sit a servant upright in his grave, body and soul, and ask him about the unity of Allah and the messengerhood of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), saying, “Who is your Lord, what is your religion, and who is your prophet?” It is they who try people in the grave, their questioning being the first ordeal after death. It is also obligatory to believe in the torment of the grave, that it is a fact, is just, and affects both body and soul, in the way Allah wills.”\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

This isthmus-life between death and resurrection was, according to Hermansen, the topic of medieval debates as to whether it was indeed physically experienced or whether it was experienced thorough some sort of psychological form, a dreamlike state or through images. While Ash‘arites

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{63} Al-Haddad, Abdallah ibn Alawi, \textit{The Lives of Man}, Louisville: Fons Vitae. 1991
\textsuperscript{64} Qur’an 23:100
\textsuperscript{66} Quoted from Keller, Nuh Ha Mim, \textit{Reliance of the Traveller}, Beltsville: Amana Publications 1994 p. 822
\end{flushleft}
(and Maturidis) insisted on the barzah as an article of faith, the mainstay of the Mu'tazilites and possibly rigid literalists would not, due to a somewhat weak scriptural evidence.  

The Fatwa

The question raised in fatwa no. 260 (2005/04/15) is:

أرجو بيان الحكم الشرعي فيما يسمى عذاب القبر ونعيمه.

“I request a clarification on the legal ruling in what is called punishment and bliss of the grave.”

The mufti’s response is indeed very straightforward and to the point:

من المقرر عقيدة أن عذاب القبر ونعيمه حق، أخرج البخاري عن عائشة رضي الله عنها قالت: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: (عذاب القبر حق).

“What is established in the creed [is] that the punishment of the grave and its bliss is true. Al-Bukhari has narrated from A’isha may Allah be pleased with her, she said [that] the Messenger of Allah peace and blessings be upon him, said: ‘Punishment of the grave [is] true.’”

The mufti commence by stressing the prophetic injunction by adding:

ومенно ثابت في الإسلام بدلالة متكررة

“and this is established in Islam by multiple proofs”

The fatwa then proceed by first referring to three Qur’anic passages:

The fatwa

69 http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&m&Home=1&LangID=1 2012-02-23 (Author’s translation)
“A dreadful doom encompassed Pharaoh’s folk, The Fire; they are exposed to it morning and evening; and on the day when the Hour upriseth (it is said): Cause Pharaoh’s folk to enter the most awful doom.”71

Pickthall uses the word ‘doom’ to translate ḍāb, yet the meaning ‘torment’ or ‘chastisement’, seems more adequate under any circumstance, not less so in the context of the topic treated in the fatwa at hand. Dār al-iftā’s own English translation of the fatwa uses the expression “punishment” consistently for ‘ḥāb.72

The mufti comments the Qur’anic verses quoted by saying that the punishment lies in being exposed to Hellfire in their graves until the day of resurrection:

“It is so that the evil torment falls on Pharaoh’s people, and it [is] that they are exposed to the fire in their graves day and night up until the hour is at hand, meaning the resurrection, so when the resurrection is at hand it is said to the angels of torment: ‘Cause Pharaoh’s folk to enter the most awful doom’ [The Qur’an, chapter 40:] The forgiving: [verse] 46. And that [which the Qur’an speaks of] is the torment of the grievous fire.”73

The mufti then mentions another passage from the Qur’an where a reference to a lower and a greater punishment is made:

وقال الله عز وجل عن الفاسقين الكافرين: {ولَدَعْتُنَّ تَبَيِّنَهُم مِّنَ الْعَذَابِ الْآتِيِّ دُونَ الْعَذَابِ الْأَكْبَرِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يُرِجُونَ} السجدة: 21. فقد ذكر المفسرون أن العذاب الأدنى − أي الأقرب أو الأقل − هو عذاب القفر، وإن العذاب الأكبر هو عذاب يوم القيامة.

71 ibid. (Quotation from the Qur’an is from 40: 45-46 according to the fatwa, the English translation is Pickthall’s)
73 http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&m&Home=1&LangID=1 2012-05-11 (English translation by the author except the verse of the Qur’an which follows Pickthall)
“And God, exalted and powerful, said about the unbelieving sinners: ‘And verily We make them taste the lower punishment before the greater, that haply they may return’ [Qur’an chapter 32:] the prostration, [verse:] 21. So the commentators [of the Qur’an] has mentioned that the smaller chastisement, that is the one nearer [in time] and lesser [in severity], is the chastisement of the grave, and that the greater chastisement is the chastisement of the day of resurrection.”74

Here, Pickthall uses the translation ‘lower’ when he translates the above mentioned verse yet in how it is contextualised in the *fatwa*, it should be realised as ‘lesser’ or ‘smaller’ as comparative to the ‘greater’ chastisement. Pickthall also utilises the word ‘punishment’ for ‘aḏāb, where the author consequently opts for ‘chastisement’ instead.

The third Qur’anic reference is taken from chapter 20, verse 124, where the *fatwa* mentions that the prophetic companions Abu Sa‘id al-Khudri and Abdallah ibn Mas‘ud had declared that the arabic word *ḍank*, meant the chastisement of the grave.

> قال الله تعالى: ﴿وَسَيَمْلَأُ الْأَعْرَضَ عَنِ الدِّيَارِ فَإِنَّهُ مُعَمِّدًا صَلَّيْلًا ﴾ ١٢٤. قال أبو سعيد الحدري وعبد الله بن مسعود: ضنكًا: عذاب القبر

> “Allah most high says: ‘But he who turneth away from remembrance of Me, his will be a narrow life’ [Qur’an chapter 20:] Ṭa-ha: [verse:] 124. Abu Sa‘id al-Khudri and ‘ Abdallah ibn Mas‘ud said: *dankan* [means] the chastisement of the grave.”75

It is notable that the mufti does not cite the verse in its entirety. The full verse reads in Pickthall’s translation: “But he who turneth away from remembrance of Me, his will be a narrow life, and I shall bring him blind to the assembly on the Day of Resurrection.”76

Later in the *fatwa* the mufti mentions a *hadith* that like the Qur’an speaks of blindness on the day of resurrection and the paper shall discuss this topic further into the case.

The mainstay of the supportive arguments in the *fatwa* are however not from the Qur’an but from the *hadith*, in the English translation arranged under the subtitle “evidence from the sunnah”


76 The Qur’an 20:124 (Pickthall)
which comprises of six different hadith and two comments and interpretations by prophetic companions on of the meaning of certain Qur’anic verses or prophetic statements.\footnote{ibid.}

What is noticeable is that the fatwa is very modest in commenting the hadith quoted but rather choses to let the prophetic words speak for themselves, as it were. The only comment that the mufti really adds is to the first hadith:

\[\text{ وقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: (إنما النَّارُ وَرَضْمَةَ مِنْ رِيَاضِ الجَنَّةِ } \text{ أو حَفْرَةٌ مِنْ حَفْرَةِ النَّارِ).}\]

\[\text{رواه الترمذي. فقوله صلى الله عليه وسلم (} \text{ أو حَفْرَةٌ مِنْ حَفْرَةِ النَّارِ).} \text{ دليل على أن عذاب القبر ثابت.}\]

“The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him, said: ‘The grave is either a garden from the gardens of Paradise or a pit from the pits of Hell’. Narrated by al-tirmiḏī. His saying, peace and blessings upon him, ‘or a pit among the pits of Hell’ is proof that the punishment in the grave is established.”\footnote{http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&mu&Home=1&LangID=1 2012-02-27 The hadith translation taken from Dār al-iftā}

Otherwise the mufti lets the authority of companions interpret the Qur’an and Sunnah. Such as the passage where Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet as well as the fourth caliph, interprets verse 1-3 of chapter 102 of the Qur’an, the mufti only clarifying Ali’s words by adding that he meant the graves:

\[\text{وروى زرٌّ بن حبَّيْش عن علي رضي الله عنه قال: كنا نشكك في عذاب القبر حتى نزلت هذه السورة (} \text{ لَا يَكُونُ النَّكْرُ حَتَّى رُزْمَ المَقَابِرَ كَلَا سُوَّفَ تَعْلَمُونَ} \text{ التكاثر: 1: 3 يعني في القبور.}\]

“And Zir Ibn Hubaysh also narrated through ‘Ali, may Allah be well pleased with him, that he said: ‘We were uncertain about torment in the grave till this chapter was revealed: ‘Rivalry in worldly increase distracteth you until ye come to the graves. Nay, but ye will come to know’ [Qur’an chapter 102:] al-takāṭur [verses 1-3]. This means in the graves.”\footnote{http://www.dar-alifta.org/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=260&LangID=2&MuftiType=0 2012-02-28 English translation by Dār al-iftā, Qur’an quoted from Pickthall.}
The official English translation again uses the word ‘torment’ for ‘adāb where this paper suggests ‘chastisement’ yet it does not change the overall meaning. Following this there are two hadith mentioned in the fatwa which are both attributed to Bukhari and Muslim, in Arabic referred to as “the two shaykhs” al-ṣayḥān, and also ibn ‘ābi ṣaybah, the first one on the authority of A‘isha, the wife of the prophet:

“The two shaykhs and ibn abi Shayba a related from A‘isha may Allah be well pleased with her, that the prophet, peace and blessings upon him said: ‘Verily, they are greatly tortured in their graves and the animals hear it’. musnad ’ahmad”

The Arabic original text do do contain an adjective or adverb that corresponds to the English ‘greatly’ which must be ascribed to the translator’s interpretation and the verb yu‘adḏabūna, ‘they are tortured’, is preceded by the intensifying article la- which gives the meaning ‘certainly’ or ‘without a doubt’.

The second hadith is on the authority of ‘ibn ‘Abbās, the prophet’s paternal cousin, which is similar to the hadith from A‘isha. “These two [in their graves] are chastised and they [are] not chastised for [a] great [sin].”

“(…) through Ibn ‘Abbas who said: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, happened to pass by two graves, then said: ‘These two people are being tortured and not for a major sin. One of them did not make sure that he was free of
traces of urine, while the other engaged in tale-bearing.’ Then, he took a fresh stalk of a palm-tree, split it into two and planted one on each grave. They asked: ‘O Messenger of Allah, why did you do that?’ He said: ‘So that their punishment might be reduced as long as these stalks remain fresh.’”

The English translation is quite interpretative and there is no mention about ‘stains’ of urine but it rather reads something like ‘he did not protect himself from urine’ which means that the interpreter has explained how the urine affected the man’s state. This relates to how urine is considered to be ritually impure in Islamic fiqh and that for instance acts of worship are considered null and void without purification from them.82

The fatwa then mentions the prophetic companion Abu Hurayra’s narration on what awaits the disbeliever in his grave, a constriction to the point that his ribs split apart, which is a life of đank. Abu Hurayra’s interpretation of the word đank is in this case equal to that of his peers Abu Sa‘id al-Khudri and Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud, mentioned earlier in the fatwa.

Abu Hurayra is also the authority of the next hadith in the fatwa, which is a bit lengthier and a lot more graphic than the previous ones:


83 Literarily: to differ, to vary, to be dissimilar.

84 http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&mu&Home=1&LangID=1 2012-05-11 English translation by the author. Note: The official English translation translates đank to mean ‘the life of great hardship’ where this paper has retained the original Arabic word as it is in itself interpreted in the Arabic texts cited in the fatwa. A translation therefor seems redundant.
“Abu Hurayrah, may God be well pleased with him, narrated that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, asked: ‘Do you know what the life of 

\[\text{dank}\] is?’ They said: ‘Allah and His messenger are more knowledgeable.’ He said: ‘The chastisement of the disbeliever in the grave. By Him in whose hands my life is, ninety-nine dragons will be directed against him. Do you know what the dragons are? - Ninety nine vipers, on each viper nine heads filling his body [with venom] and stinging him and scratching him until the day of resurrection. He will be assembled from his grave to stand blind before God.’”

‘Blindness’ was mentioned above and the mufti does not explain the theological content of the hadith or the omission of the Qur’an where it speaks of a blindness. Although he’s activating them merely as a proof texts for establishing the dogma of life in the grave and its torment or its bliss, something should be explained about the unbeliever’s blindness. The vision of God is a contested belief amongst Muslim theologians throughout history. A schism which has its roots in the Qur’anic verses from sura 75 al-qiyāma:

\[
\text{٤٣-٢٢} \quad \text{٣٢٢} \quad \text{٢٢٢}
\]

“That day will faces be resplendent, looking toward their Lord”

Al-‘Alawi relates that ibn ‘Abd al-Barr stated that Malik and al-Shafi‘i’i used the above mentioned verse as proof that God would be seen by the believers. Al-‘Alawi also states that it was only the mu‘tazilites and a few other groups that would persist in that that the vision of God was an impossibility, even on judgement day, but for the majority of Sunni scholars, the vision of Allah was seen as a well-established fact.

Following this is another hadith, narrated from Ahmad, al-Hakim, al-Tirmdhi and al-Bayhaqi, on the authority of Hudhaifa, where the prophet at a funeral addresses the companions about how the grave presses on the believer and how fire is poured on the disbeliever:

85 http://www.dar-alifta.org/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=260&LangID=2&MuftiType=0 2012-02-28 English translation by the author. Note: As above, the official English translation translates \[\text{dank}\] to mean ‘the life of great hardship’ where this paper has retained the original Arabic word.

86 Qur’an, 75: 22-23, English translation by Pickthall

“We were attending a funeral with the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, and when we reached the grave, the prophet sat at its brink and kept looking into it then said: ‘The grave is pressed on the believer to the extent that the veins of his testicles [\textit{hamāʾ ilūhu}] are removed, and fire is poured on the disbeliever’...”

The final \textit{hadith} mentions a constriction, \textit{ḍīq}, in the grave similarly to the other reports.

“Ahmad, al-Hakim, al-Tirmidhi, al-Tabarani and al-Bayhaqi narrated from Jabir ibn Abdillah al-Ansari, he said: We went out one day with the messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, to Sa’d ibn Mu’adh when he had died [i.e. his funeral].’ He [Jabir] said: ‘After the messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, prayed on him he was laid in his grave and it [the grave] was smoothed, the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, glorified Allah\textsuperscript{89} so we glorified Allah for a long time. Then he magnified Allah\textsuperscript{90} so we magnified Allah.’ It was said: ‘O messenger of Allah, why did you glorify and then magnify?’ He said: ‘The grave had become too narrow for this righteous servant until Allah, glorious and exalted, made an opening in it for him.’

After listing all the evidence the mufti sees fit, the ruling in the \textit{fatwa} subsequently follows:

\textsuperscript{88} \url{http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&mu&Home=1&LangID=1} 2012-03-25 English translation by dār al-iftā. The word \textit{ḥamāʾ ilū} is difficult to translate and the author has found no support in Wehr for the official English translation of it. The root meaning of the word is connected to the act of carrying.

\textsuperscript{89} Glorifying Allah; saying \textit{subḥān allāh}

\textsuperscript{90} Magnifying Allah; saying \textit{ʾallahu akbar}

\textsuperscript{91} \url{http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=260&mu&Home=1&LangID=1} 2012-03-25 English translation by the author.
Based on the preceding, chastisement of the grave is established in the Qur’an, Sunna and consensus and it is impermissible for any Muslim who believes in Allah and the Last Day to deny the chastisement and the bliss of the grave. And Allah, glorious and exalted, knows best.”

By Berger’s account, this fatwa seems to be quite clearly formulated with the deductive option. Although Ali Goma does not comment or discuss the scriptural and prophetic evidence he presents, the direction is pointing clearly towards a reaffirmation of scholarly tradition. Notably he says in the very beginning of the fatwa that what is established in the creed is that the punishment of the grave and its bliss is true. The creed he alludes to must be interpreted as the Ash’ari creed, although other interpretations are possible.
Case study 2: Was the Prophet’s night journey in spirit or corporeal?

The many narratives about the prophet’s night journey to Jerusalem and the ascension to heaven has been the topic of numerous books and oral traditions in the Muslim world. In order to familiarise the reader with the topic, the author has chosen to present the subject in a collated form, published in 1999.

The collated narration of the ‘isrā’ and miʿrāj

Al-Sayyid (meaning descendant of the prophet) Muhammad ibn ‘Alawi al-Maliki (d. 2004) collected the different narratives on the night journey and the ascension in a collated format, meaning that he took several of the existing narratives and pieced them together in one single report. The following account of the night journey is thus an abstract of ibn ‘Alawi’s collated narration from a translation into English by G. F. Haddad.

According to ibn ‘Alawi, the Prophet was visited in Mecca by the angels Gibril, Mika’il and Israfil one night as he had laid down to rest by the semi-circular space under the waterspout at the Ka’ba, known as al-Hijr. The angels split open the prophet’s breast and washed with water from the well of Zamzam, three times. During this the angels also filled his chest with wisdom and belief, knowledge, certainty and submission. After this the prophet was brought the Buraq, a tall white winged beast, larger than a donkey yet smaller than a mule that could traverse vast distances in a single leap. On this winged beast flanked by the angels Gibril and Mika’il the prophet departed. They travelled until they reached a land filled with datepalms where Gibril said to the prophet, ‘Alight and pray here.’ Then the angel told the prophet that the place was called Tayba and that the migration will take place there. Then they reached a place called Madyan (on the shore of the Red Sea) at the tree of Musa (Moses) where the angel again told the prophet to alight and pray. Then they travelled again to mount Sinai and the angel told the prophet again to alight and pray at the mountain where God addressed the prophet Musa. The story then recounts how they travelled to the lands where the palaces of al-Sham (the Levant) became visible and again the angel told the prophet to alight and pray. This time in Bayt Lahm, where ‘Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus) was born. The company then continues their voyage on the winged beast and the prophet is subjected to a display of quite

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graphic visions of peoples of yore, their destiny conditioned by how they would behave whilst alive.94

The angel says about the some people who’s head are being shattered over and over that they are the people whose heads were too heavy on their pillows to get up and perform the prescribed prayers. As for some other people who are presented with the choice of eating from two pots of stew, one with excellent meat and one with putrid foul meat of which they chose the foul meat, they are the people of the Muslims who had a lawful wife or husband but would spend the night with someone not lawful for them. They see a man swimming in a river of blood who the angel explains is someone who would eat usury. Another is gathering a stack of wood adding to it though he cannot carry it. He is someone who insists on carrying peoples’ trusts even though he is unable to fulfill them. Then they see a people whose tongues and lips are sliced with knives. They are the public speakers of Muhammad’s community who say what they do not themselves do. They pass a people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. When the prophet asks the angel who they are, he replies: ‘These are the ones who ate the flesh of people and tarnished their reputation.’95

Then they enter a valley wherein they can scent a sweet cool breeze laden with musk, which is the voice of paradise. Then they enter another valley wherein they smell a terribly foul stench and hear a detestable sound, the voice of Hellfire. Further he meets the antichrist, Dajjal, emissaries from Jews, the Christians, Satan and the world, all which he rejects. He meets the prophet Musa who is praying in his grave, the prophet Ibrahim, both who salute and greet him. It is after this that they reach Jerusalem and the Hallowed house which he enters from its southern gate. In the mosque, all of the previous prophets gather and Muhammad leads them all, as imam, through two cycles of prayer. According to some narratives the congregation was made up out of all prophets and not just the twenty five known by name in Muslim tradition. After some further eschatological passages, signs of judgement day’s immanence and events which will come to pass in the end of time, the prophet is presented with three vessels of drink, one which is wine, one containing milk and one water of which he choses the milk.96

94 There is a very obvious parallel in this part of the narration to that of Dante’s Purgatorio and Inferno. Such a study, as to whether Dante was perhaps inspired by Muslim eschatology, or perhaps if Muslim recounts have taken inspiration from late medieval Christian depiction of the afterlife is a very interesting study in itself yet it is outside the scope of this paper. Therefore this research will reluctantly leave the entire collated narration without comment as far as content and interpretation is considered. The point of the abstract being to familiarise the reader with the topic to which the Egyptian fatwa is a response.

95 This is likely a reference to the Qur’an 49:12: “O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Ye abhor that (so abhor the other)! And keep your duty (to Allah). Lo! Allah is Relenting, Merciful” (Pickthall)

The ascension

*Ibn ‘Alawi* writes that the ascension to heaven was made by a ladder, a most beautiful object incrusted with pearls and surrounded by angels to the left and right. Aided by *Gibril*, the prophet enters the first heaven where he is greeted by the prophet Adam. In the second heaven he is greeted by the sons of two sisters, the prophets *‘Isa ibn Maryam* and *Yahya ibn Zakariyya*. The prophet is greeted by them and they invoke goodness on his behalf. Then the prophet proceeds with the company of *Gibril* to the third heaven where they are greeted by the prophet *Yusuf*. In the forth heaven they are met by and greeted by the prophet *Idris*. In the fifth heaven they meet the prophet *Harun*, surrounded by a company of the children of Israel listening to him retelling a story. They meet and greet and then proceed to the sixth heaven where they see many prophets, some with larger followings and some with as little as ten followers. In the sixth heaven the prophet also meets the prophet *Musa* again and is shown how much larger the community of Muslims is (or will become) to the Community of the Israelites. In the seventh heaven they meet the prophet *Ibrahim* with a company of his people. In the seventh heaven, *Ibrahim* teaches Muhammad to convey to his community some litanies which will work as seeds for the soil of paradise and that there is a house in the seventh heaven, exactly superposed to the *Ka’ba* in Mecca such that would a stone fall from the house in heaven it would fall directly on top of the *Ka’ba*. Some narrations, adds *ibn ‘Alawi*, puts the incident with the three drinking vessels to taking place at this station.

Then the prophet is raised up to the Lote-tree of the farthest limit:

“It is a tree from the base which issue rivers whose water is never brackish, and rivers of milk whose taste does not change after it is drunk, and rivers of wine which brings only pleasure to those who drink it, and rivers of purified honey. Someone on his mount could travel under its shade for seventy years and still not come out of it. The lotus fruit that grows on it resembles the jars of Hijar (near Madina). Its leaves are shaped like the ears of the she-elephant, and each leaf could wrap up this Community entirely.”

From the base of the tree stems rivers, two whom are the Nile and the Eufrates and another two whom are the hidden rivers of paradise. Another narration adds that one river is the *Kawthar* whose source is called *Salsabil*. Where the river flows it is flanked by pavilions of pearl, sapphire and chrysolite on top of which are nested marvelous green birds. After being shown more of paradise, *Gibril* in his true angelic form with six hundred wings, every single wing covering the entire

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97 Ibn ‘Alawi al-Maliki, Muhammad,*The hadith of Isra’ and Miraj*. Michigan: As-Sunna foundation of America 1999: p.84
firmament, and the gates of the fire of Hell, he is taken to a point beyond the Lote-tree of the farthest limit, cloaked in a cloud, to a place where he can hear the writing of the pens. At this place, Muhammad sees his Lord and he falls down in prostration before Allah and the prophet’s status and message is confirmed. Here, Allah also orders the prophet to establish fifty daily prayers. Ascending from heaven, the prophet converses with Musa who tells him to return to their Lord and ask Him to lighten the burden of fifty prayers, which Musa deems to be far too difficult for Muhammad’s followers to uphold. Muhammad returns beyond the Lote-tree and asks Allah to lessen the burden which is granted by removing five. This event repeats over and over, every time the prophet returns to Musa, he asks him to return and ask Allah to lighten the burden until only five daily prayers remain. Even then, when Muhammad returns from Allah with five prescribed prayers, Musa asks him to return and to petition for a lesser number. The prophet answers Musa that he now feels shame in returning again after having pleaded so many times already. After this he descends to Jerusalem and mounts the Buraq on which he traverses the Arabian peninsula back to Mecca which he reaches before daybreak. When he related his story for the Meccans, many would respond with scepticism. The story tells that the prophet proved his claim by relating some details about a caravan that he had seen on his way which were then confirmed by the caravan as they later arrived in Mecca.98

The Contrast: Miracles and metaphysics according to Haykal.

The story of the prophet’s journey to Jerusalem and ascension to the heavenly realm is indeed mythical in the Greek sense of the word. According to Muslim tradition, it wasn’t even universally accepted at the time of it taking place and only the prophet’s closest companion Abu Bakr accepted it at face value, which is why, according to tradition, he was given the epithet ‘the trusting’ al-siddiq.99

Muhammad Hussein Haykal (1888-1956) was an Egyptian writer who also authored a book in the 1930s about the life of the prophet Muhammad. Haykal who was not part of the religious scholars was still inspired by the teachings and ideas of Muhammad Abduh, especially perhaps the idea that Islam as a religion must be in complete harmony with modern science.

In Haykal’s passage of the nightly journey he places to different narrations next to one another, the Western Orientalist Émile Dermenghem (1892-1971) versus Ibn Hishām (d. 833). Haykal is bluntly critical of Ibn Hishām’s recount, or any other which likens it:

“It is certainly the historian’s right to question how closely these reports have been scrutinized and investigated by their collectors, with the view to finding out how much of them may be truly ascribed to the Prophet and how much was the invention and fancy of the Sūfīs and others.”

Dermenghem’s account on the other hand, Haykal finds eloquent and duly researched and not filled with “the reporter’s imagination” as Ibn Hishām’s.

Haykal appears bent on explaining the nightly journey and the ascension as a phenomenon on a psychological level, a spiritual insight he calls “the unity of being” where Muhammad’s experience aided him in transcending time and space, reaching a state of consciousness which entitled him to full spiritual insight, because, as he puts it, “in our modern age, science confirms the possibility of a spiritual Isrā’ and Mi’rāj.”

Haykal’s account of the night journey is very much a comment on it. He does acknowledge that there are two different opinions about whether it took place in spirit or in body, but concludes that the spiritual explanation is the more credible one, since it does not contradict modern science.

“[T]here is still no doubt that every one of these views has reasons which their advocates claim to be legitimate. There is no a priori reason why one may not adhere to one of these views rather than another.”

Haykal’s biography does not question the prophet’s experience of the night journey, it questions the reality of it. Willingly or unwillingly this puts Haykal in the position of an advocate for a secularised interpretation of the night journey by means of shifting the focus away from the miraculous for a rational-causal explanation, much in the manner that Shiner outlined.

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104 Above: chapter on Theories of Religion and Secularisation
As mentioned in the introduction, Armstrong sees religion and magic belonging to a separate sphere which went together with awe and respect and was clearly distinguished from the profane, an idea which is supported by some anthropologists, like Malinowski.\(^{105}\)

Haykal’s feat is an attempt to merge the mythos and the logos, or rather to bring the mythos into the world of logos, where it may be analysed and explained in a manner which makes sense in the material world. If the night journey was indeed an experience in the psychological realm, it makes perfect sense in the positivistic and scientific world view. On the other hand, if the miraculous aspects of religion are taken out of it, it begs the question what remains of it?

In the field of psychology it is widely recognised that human beings can not hold two mutually contrasting beliefs (cognitions) simultaneously but will try and alter one, rationalise, or incorporate other explanations in order to reach a cognitive equilibrium. The pioneering work in this field was made by Leon Festinger (1919-1989) who studied an American cult’s reactions to the failed arrival of Jesus on a spaceship and the end of the world in the 1950s.\(^{106}\) Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance provides a plausible theory on Haykal’s recount of the miraculous journey of the prophet. In stead of rendering Islam obsolete, Haykal tries to solve the seemingly two contrasting points by letting the one clarify the other i.e. religion is explained and rectified by science.

**The Fatwa**

The fatwa, which in its own words is actually a review, is called for by the question of whether the noble prophet ascended to the highest heavens in body and soul or whether it was a dream:

ا العليان على الطلب المقيد برقم 2158 في 2003/12/2 والذي يسأل فيه عن المعراج، وهل صعد الرسول الكريم فيه إلى السماوات العليا بالجسد والروح، أم كان رويا منامية؟

“We have reviewed the demand registered with the number 2158 in 2003/12/02/ which asks about the ascension, whether the noble prophet ascended to the highest heavens in body and soul, or if it was a dream during sleep?”\(^{107}\)

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106 Festinger Riecken & Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, Pinter & Martin Ltd. 2008
In comparison to the *fatwa* on the punishment and the bliss of the grave it is relatively short, citing only two passages of the Qur’an and no other sources, neither *hadith* nor scholarly opinion directly. The mufti states that the Qur’an mentions the night journey explicitly:

> The night journey and the ascension are miracles by which Allah singled out the noble prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, honouring him and confirming his honour, peace and blessings be upon him, and revealed to him some of His major signs. Allah exalted says:
>
> ‘Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Place of Worship to the Far distant place of worship the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, that We might show him of Our tokens! Lo! He, only He, is the Hearer, the Seer.’

In Arabic, *al-masjid al-aqṣā*, does not bear the literal meaning of ‘Jerusalem’ but rather translates into ‘the farthest place of prostration’, or as Pickthall translates it ‘the far distant place of worship.’ The direct reference to Jerusalem comes not from the Qur’an but rather from the hadith-literature where the Prophet is urged to describe the ‘Hallowed House’ by doubtful bystanders who have been given news of his night journey.\(^{109}\)

The second passage from the Qur’an which the mufti claims pertains to the ascension is:

> (٤٠) ﴿وَأَنْبِجُ إِذَّ هُؤَٞ (١) مَا ضَلّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَيْ (٢) وَمَا يَنْطَلِقُ عَنْ أُهْلِهِ (٣) إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحَىٔ (٤)﴾
>
> > عَلَمَهُ ﺖَمْدُودُ أُلْقِىٔ (٥) ﴿وَمَرَأَ فَاسَتَوْىٔ (٦) وَهُوَ ﻟِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوأ (٧) ﴿ثُمَّ دَا ﻟَدَأَنَُّ (٨) فَكَانَ قَابِ ﺕُوْسُوْىٔ أَوْ إِذْ (٩) فَإِذْ حَئ إِلَىٔ عِبَادِهِ ﻟَوْ مَا أُوْحِئ (١٠) ﴿مَا كَذَبَ أُلْفُوْىٔ مَا ﺮَآِىٔ (١١) ﴿اِنْتَصَرَوْأ ﻋَلَىٔ مَا ﻣَرَىٔ (١٢) ﴿وَ لَقَدْ رَأَىٔ نَزْلَةٔ أُخْرَىٔ (١٣) ﴿عَنْدَ ﺖَمْدُودٔ أُلْقِىٔ (١٤) ﴿بِنَاهَا جَنَّةٔ إِلَىٔ (١٥) ﴿ذِيِّبَعَىٔ أُنْسَدَةٔ ﻣَا ﻋَيْشُىٔ (١٦) ﴿مَا زَاغَ أَلْبَىٔ مَا طَعَىٔ (١٧) ﴿لَقَدْ رَآِىٔ مَنِ اِنْتَصَرَ رَبِّهِ أَلْكَبِرُىٔ (١٨)﴾


“By the star when it seteth (1) Your comrade erreth not, nor is deceived (2) Nor doth he speak of (his own) desire (3) It is naught save an inspiration that is inspired, (4) Which one of mighty powers hath taught him, (5) One vigorous; and he grew clear to view (6) When he was on the uppermost horizon. (7) The he drew nigh and came down (8) Till he was (distant) two bows’ length or even nearer, (9) And He revealed unto His slave that which He revealed. (10) The heart lied not (in seeing) what it saw. (11) Will ye then dispute with him concerning what he seeth? (12) And verily he saw him yet another time (13) By the lote-tree of the utmost boundary, (14) Nigh unto which is the Garden of Abode. (15) When that which shroudeth did enshroud the lote-tree, (16) The eye turned not aside nor yet was overbold. (17) Verily he saw one of the greater revelations of his Lord. (18)”

The mufti comments this passage by referring to a mass of scholars in agreement with the opinion that the Qur’anic word ‘His slave’ entails both body and soul. The proof of the claim that the ascension took place in body is thus a linguistic and a semantic one:

night, and the minority of the scholars hold the opinion that the ascension was by spirit alone or a dream during sleep. This is an opinion that cannot be accepted because Allah, mighty and sublime, is able to raise the prophet, - peace and blessings be upon him- in body and soul [to the heavens] just like he travelled by night [to the farthest mosque] in body and soul.

So, when the Qur’ān may have been clear about the night journey and implicit about the ascension, the Sunna mentioned both matters, the night journey and the ascension, explicitly.”

Finally, before conducting his ruling on the issue, the mufti recognises that there is a scholarly debate on the issue, whether it was a physical journey or whether it was a dream, but reassures that the majority of learned men uphold that the night journey was a phenomenon that took place consciously and those who hold a different opinion to this have erred. In the mufti’s words, the Qur’ān discusses the night journey explicitly and the ascension implicitly yet the Sunna discusses both explicitly.

After the relatively short section of proofs for his ruling, citing two Qur’anic passages and referring to hadith without specifying any particular ones, the mufti presents the ruling:

“We determine that the noble prophet travelled in the night from al-masjid al-ḥarām to al-masjid al-‘aqṣā and then he ascended from al-masjid al-‘aqṣā to the highest heavens in both spirit and body. We do advice the petitioner that investigation in matters such as this diverts the Muslim from what is more appropriate to give attention to in these our times and it turns him away from addressing the duty of present time.

And Allah glorious and exalted knows best.”

111 There is a slight discrepancy here where the mufti’s comment reads reads bi-‘abdīhī and the Qur’ānic text reads: ‘abdīhī, without the preposition bi-. http://www.dar-alifta.org/viewfatwa.aspx?id=264&km&Home=t&LangID=2 2012-03-19 English translation by the author.

The wording of: *al-‘istiğāl bi-wājib al-‘aṣr*, the occupation in the duty of the (present) time, has been used by the mufti on other occasions where the mufti seemingly places an obligation on Muslims not to be ignorant on current affairs.\(^{113}\)

Implicitly and not directly, Goma does comment Haykal’s scientific suggestion by stating that Allah, omnipotent and mighty, by no means is restricted from allowing the prophet to travel up to the heavens just as he was able to allow him to travel miraculously to Jerusalem and back in a single night. This is not to say that the *fatwa* is a direct response to Haykal. In Goma’s view, miracles are indeed part of the religious tradition and he seems to find no reasonable argument as to why one should reinterpret or reassess that particular narrative. The final words of the mufti can be interpreted as quite harsh, it is difficult not to read in to them an admonishment of the questioner, losing valuable time in asking of a thing which, by looking at how relatively thin the *fatwa* is regarding proof-texts, should be a non-matter, as far as the mufti is concerned. Again, the *fatwa* contains very little of the mufti’s own reasoning and the truth claim is that of a miracle. By referring to the word of God and to hadith (that are not quoted) and scholarly consensus, the mufti is again reaffirming his own tradition by using the proof text as *a priori* knowledge. Comparing the *fatwa* to Haykal’s account, which is almost a typology of Berger’s reductive option, we may discern that they are indeed binary opposites as far as supernatural phenomena are concerned.

\(^{113}\) See for instance the talk “Respecting Heritage” (with English subtitles) on the Mufti’s youtube channel: “I see it is most important to respect our heritage and not to give it up otherwise we become the joke of the world. But in parallel, we should maintain the *duty of our time*, and realise this duty. To know more about our contemporary life to figure out how to handle it.” [http://youtu.be/OiGkHmi6LqU](http://youtu.be/OiGkHmi6LqU) 2012-03-20
We have seen how, in two instances the Grand mufti reaffirms a religious tradition established quite early in Muslim theological history, but what does it all mean?

What I would suggest is that Berger’s model may enable us in assessing the current Grand Mufti in time and place. The study also indicates that Berger’s thesis is possible to utilise in studying Muslim theology, how it develops and how it is formulated.

This study tends to agree with G. Willow Wilson’s description of Ali Goma as a ‘traditionalist’. To describe Ali Goma as a traditionalist or orthodox is not a grave mistake since, at least in the two cases presented, he does adhere to an interpretative tradition and does not seem to be willing to deviate from it, even to the point where he mildly chides the questioner for wasting valuable time in asking about matters already established. Another interpretation of the mufti’s words is that he means that the legal ruling about the nature of the night journey is relatively unimportant in the bigger scope of things, where the singular Muslim is to foremost be observant of al-‘istiğal bi-wâjib al-‘asr Regardless of what that duty is, it is plausible that the mufti means that they can be performed without a unified opinion about the night journey, even though the mufti himself promotes the miraculous explanation of tradition.

Although we cannot discern the motifs of the petitioner, it is assumably so that they stem from uncertainty caused by secularisation processes in the society of the one who is asking even if that person would be the mufti himself. If we use Shiner’s criteria, the key points would be a desacralisation of the world and maybe the abandonment of commitments to traditional value and practices for the benefit of rational and utilitarian foundations.

We must not be confused though. That this paper claims that Ali Goma is indeed a traditionalist does not in any way mean that he represents an absolute truth about Islam. It just shows that he does adhere to the Ash‘ari theological tradition in two particular instances, no more no less. Whether that tradition represents the absolute truth about God and Islam is impossible to assess in the secular academic field of study, and must be left for Muslim theologians, institutions and lay to debate.

Some things are noteworthy though. First of all, Ali Goma is a representative of a religious institution and of the Egyptian state. Although this paper does not address that in depth, we are to be aware that his position does matter. He is not just any preacher in a mosque but very much a spokesperson for an ideological position. The fact that the two fatwas treated in this paper are published online, not only in Arabic but also in English, French, German, Russian, Indonesian, Turkish and Urdu indicates that the mufti’s mission is international. The dār al-iftā is formulating...
Islam not only for Egyptians but for all Muslims. The dār al-iftā is by this virtue alone situated very much so in modernity. For unknown reasons, dār al-iftā deems it necessary that the ruling of a prophetic miracle and life in the grave is known to Urdu-, French- and English speaking Muslims too. An educated guess leads us to thinking that it is related to the globalisation of Islam and dār al-iftā, with its long tradition of making ethics a public affair, probably sees itself as an important institution in the pluralism of voices all claiming to profess ‘true Islam’.

Looking at the title of the book Responding from tradition allows us to understand that Ali Goma, or the people around him, wants to position him in juxtaposition with modernity. Whatever the reason is, there seems to exist a narrative wherein Goma’s muftiship is seen as a counter to something which is less beneficiary than tradition.

Berger argues that the inductive, experience based option is the only viable for religious thought in the pluralistic modern realm. Yet Islamic tradition seems stubbornly resistant to this notion. The theological history of Islam reveals that not only has there been an ongoing debate about the revelatory sources of Islam since the time of the prophet, but the middle position between scripturalism and rationalism proves quite sturdy up until present day. It’s suggestive to play with the idea that Ash’arism is the equivalent of Berger’s inductive option and that is why it is still a viable option in the Muslim world. It is possible that the paper misinterprets the fatwas by analysing them as deductive when they are actually relating to a position already inductive. Be that as it may, it does not alter the validity of the study, where the paper finds that the Grand Mufti of Egypt is a traditionalist when the theological tradition of matters of the unseen is considered.

In conclusion this paper finds that the Grand Mufti ascribes himself to a traditionalist theological position where miracles are seen as acceptable explanations of reality by acknowledging so in the two fatwas published by the dār al-iftā. Further the study shows that this traditionalist position is equivalent of the theological school of Ash‘ariyya, even though it is not pronounced in the fatwas themselves but understood from secondary sources and the theological history of Islam and the university of al-Azhar. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the study suggests that there is an ongoing debate inside Islam where struggles are made to maintain a coherent narrative of reality and human endeavour. It is observable that the Muslim world has not remained unshaken by the arrival of modernity and subsequent secularisation of society yet in the field of academics the effects of that are still being unravelled and this study may be utilised as a piece in that puzzle of a larger study area, the effects and workings of the collision of tradition and modernity.

Ali Goma’s lost Islamic paradigm may prove not to be an uncompromising resistance of modernity but a revival of an ancient idea about a dual reality, the realms of logos and mythos. In
honesty, modern science does not disprove the idea of a miracle or life after physical death but is really the fundament for it, a miracle is not a miracle lest it defies the laws of physics. In the end, we need not perhaps sacrifice tradition on the altar of modernity because modernity does not necessarily demand blood rite. It is too early to tell if Goma’s holistic vision will hold water, but the continued study in the field is imperative because it may lead to discovering that our ideas about religion and modernity were faulty from the get go.
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Appendix I (Fatwa on the chastisement of the grave)

اطعنا على الخلب المفيد برقم 963 لسنة 2005م المتضمن:
أرجو بيان الحكم الشرعي فيما يسمي بذبح القبر والتعيم.

روى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: (إنما القبر هو نزعة من ريبان البيئة أو حرقان من حرق النار). وروى الترمذي. فقيل على مذهب يحترم عليه رضي الله عنه أن قال: كأنك في ذا القبر حتى تزالت هذه السورة: (أن أبكل الأكثارات حتى زرع الأغفر كأجساف مثلى) (иков: 3) يعني في القبر.

أخرج الشيخان وأبي شيبة عن عائشة رضي الله عنها أن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: (أنا عرفتهم في يومهم عذابهم كنفشهم البالغة). مسنده أحمد.

وأخير الشيخان وأبي شيبة عن ابن أبي عباس أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم مر من على قبرين، فقال: (أثنا أبكل الأكثارات وما يذبحان في غيري. أما أحرسناها فقدن لا يذبح من الأجل، وأما الآخر كفرك يشمت بأيديه، ثم أحد جدريه وبسطه صفعه ثم غز في كل قبر واحد، فقالوا: يا رسول الله، لم صنعت هذا؟ فقال: وله أن يجحد عنيما ما لم يبيس). مسنده أحمد.

وأبو هريرة: (ضيّق على الكافر قره حتى تحتفظ بين أضلاعه، وهو المبعوث الضنك، روى أبو هريرة

روى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: (إذا ضيّق على الكافر قره حتى تحتفظ بين أضلاعه، وهو المبعوث الضنك، روى أبو هريرة

فطعن على الخلب المفيد برقم 963 لسنة 2005م المتضمن:
أرجو بيان الحكم الشرعي فيما يسمي بذبح القبر والتعيم.

روى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: (إنما القبر هو نزعة من ريبان البيئة أو حرقان من حرق النار). وروى الترمذي. فقيل على مذهب يحترم عليه رضي الله عنه أن قال: كأنك في ذا القبر حتى تزالت هذه السورة: (أن أبكل الأكثارات حتى زرع الأغفر كأجساف مثلى) (иков: 3) يعني في القبر.

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فطعن على الخلب المفيد برقم 963 لسنة 2005م المتضمن:
أرجو بيان الحكم الشرعي فيما يسمي بذبح القبر والتعيم.

روى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: (إنما القبر هو نزعة من ريبان البيئة أو حرقان من حرق النار). وروى الترمذي. فقيل على مذهب يحترم عليه رضي الله عنه أن قال: كأنك في ذا القبر حتى تزالت هذه السورة: (أن أبكل الأكثارات حتى زرع الأغفر كأجساف مثلى) (иков: 3) يعني في القبر.

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Appendix II (Fatwa on the nightly journey and the Ascension)

اطلعتنا على الطلب المقدّم برقمه 2158 في 2/12/2003 والذي يسأل فيه السائل عن المعراج، وهل صعد الرسول الكريم فيه إلى السماوات العلية بالجسم والروح، أم كان رؤيا متنامية؟

الجواب: فضيلة الأستاذ الدكتور علي جمعة محمد

الإسراء والمعراج معجزة اختصاص الله بها النبي الكريم - صلى الله عليه وسلم - تكريما له وبيانا لشرفة صلبيه، وسلام وسلام وسلام عليه وسلم، وفياً بالآيات الكريمة قام الله تعالى: (سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أُسْرِىُ بِعَيْنِهِ لِيَسْتَمِعَ مِنْ السَّمَٰجِدِ الْأَقْصَىِ‍ۚ الَّذِي بَارَكَاهُ بِخَيْرٍ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ النَّبِيُّ) [الإسراء: 1] وقال تعالى: (وَالْبَجَارُ إِذَا هَوَىٰ مَا شَيْلٌ صَانِعٌ وَمَا غَوَىٰ وَمَا يَنفَطِقُ عَنَّ الْهَوْىٰ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الَّذِي يَبْقُ وَيَبْقُ) [البقرة: 1]، وهو بالآيات الأعمى، ثم ذا فَقَّدَتْهُ * فَكَانَ قَابِلُ فَوْقَينِ أَوَّلَيْنِ * فَاوَجَّهَهُ إِلَى عَنْصِرَهُ مَا أَرَى مَا أَقْصَرَهُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْنِهِمَا بِأَنْفُسِهَا هَذِيْنَ * وَقَبَّضَهُ مِنْ نَفْسِهَا عِندَ رَبِّهِ لَعَلَّهُ يَسْتَمِعَ مِنْ آيَةٍ رَبِّهِ) [المزى: 1-18].

وقد اتفق جمهور العلماء على أن الإسراء حدث بالروح وليس بالجسد، لأن القرآن صرح به لقوله تعالى (يَعْبُدُ). والعبد لا يطلب إلا على الروح والجسد، فإن الإسراء تحدث عنه القرآن الكريم والسنة المطهرة. ويمكن للسائل أن يراجع الأحاديث التي وردت في مقالتيها، وأما المعراج فقد وقع خلفية فيه، كأنه بالجسد أم بالروح - أي رؤيا متينية. وجمعهم العلماء من الحقائق على أن المعراج وقع بالجسد والروح يقتحما في ليلة واحدة، وما يراه بعض العلماء من أن المعراج كان بالروح فقط أو رؤيا متينية فإن هذا يأتي لا يؤول عليه: لأن الله - عز وجل - قادر على أن يجرع بالنبي صلى الله عليه وسلم، وصدعه ورواه كما أسرى به يجعله وروجه.

وإذا كان القرآن الكريم قد تحدث عن الإسراء صراحة وعن المعراج ضمنا، فإن السنة جاءت مسروحة بالأمرين الإسراء والمعراج.

وفي واقعة السؤال:

نُفِدَ أن الرسول الكريم قد أسرى به من المسجد الحرام إلى المسجد الأقصى، ثم صعد به من المسجد الأقصى إلى السماوات العليا بروحه وجسمه جميعا، وأنا نتصبح السائل إلى أن البحث في مثل هنا قد بلغت للسلم عما هو أتجر بالاهتمام في عصرنا هذا وليفته في الإشغال بالواجب. والله سبحانه وتعالى أعلم.