The underlying esoteric Ismaili doctrine in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Quran

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Abstract
Some researchers have identified doctrinal errors in Yusuf Ali's translation of, and commentary on, the Holy Quran. Ali's unconventional views have been attributed mainly to secondary reasons that do not fully account for his consistent departure from mainstream Islamic views on several issues such as prophethood, revelation and eschatology. It was hypothesized that Ali's Bohra affiliation informed his choices in the work under scrutiny. The interpretative qualitative approach is used. Select Ismaili/Bohra doctrines are used as a frame of reference. Representative examples of these doctrines were purposively identified in several suras *(chapters) in Ali's work and examined for consistency. The extracted examples were analyzed in light of the selected Bohra doctrines. Results show that Ali's work is based on the esoteric Ismaili/Bohra doctrine and departs from mainstream Quranic exegesis he claimed to have relied on. The study further finds that Ali's work belongs to the* ta'wil *(interpretation) genre of Ismaili literature. At best, Ali's work needs to be thoroughly revised and expurgated of the esoteric content in future editions.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran is perhaps the most well-known and widespread translation of the Quran in the English language. More than 200 editions of this translation have appeared since it was first published in 1934-7 (Kidwai, 2007). Some subsequent translations also relied heavily on Ali's translation (Kidwai, 2011). Although some later revised editions and even new translations were meant to make up for the shortcomings of, and unconventional views in, Ali's translation, they inadvertently reproduced some of his latent doctrinal views, due to failure to grasp the underlying system of thought or intellectual background of the translator. Moreover, Ali's work is not restricted to the translation of the Quran, but also includes a commentary consisting of 6310 footnotes. The commentary is no less important than the translation, a fact captured in the subtitle of Ali's work "English Translation and Commentary". As the subtitle indicates, Ali emerges as both a translator of, and commentator on, the sacred text.

1.1. The Bohra connection

Yusuf Ali belonged to the Dawudi Bohra community (Tayob, 2004; Sherif, 1994; Iqbal, 1998). Although he received western-style education, he did not relinquish his faith and religious doctrine. His education and the then newly released modernist interpretations of the Quran by Syed Ahmad Khan, Maulvi Abdul Haqq and the Islamic Reformation exegetes in Egypt such as Mohammed Abdu and Rashid Rida had tremendous influence on him (Ali, 1937, p. xiii). Ali acknowledged his debt to these modernist exegetes of the Quran, and his preference of their work over those of the recognized earlier authorities in the field of Quranic exegesis. The influence of the exponents of the Islamic Reformation on Ali's approach is clearly evident in his relentless references to the Bible particularly the Old Testament and in his approach to interpretation.

The Bohra is an offshoot of Ismailism, an umberella esoteric creed that emerged in the third/ninth century. Towards the end of the Fatimid state, political disputes over the rightful heir to the throne gave way to a schism of Ismailism into two branches, the Nizari and the Musta'li (later Tayyibi) offshoots. With the fall of the Fatimid state in the sixth/twelfth century, the center of the latter moved to Yemen, whence the *da'wah* spread to India. The new Indian converts were dubbed the *bohra* (merchant). In the tenth/sixteenth century the center of Tayyibi Ismailism moved to India (S. Qutbuddin, 2011).

1.2. Old vs. new esoteric approaches

Numerous books, including Ghaleb (n.d.), M. Al-Khateeb (1984/1986), and A'id (1989), have been written on esoteric sects in Islamic history from different vantage points. However, most of available literature draws largely on antiquated sources, some of which date back to the fourth/tenth century. This fact contributes to the difficulties involved in studying these movements, especially in the contemporary setting. Researchers have hitherto missed the inner dynamics of these movements, especially as far as the secular-minded intellectuals of these movements are concerned. Swayed by the modern esoterict intellectuals' divergence from the age-old techniques and approaches of historical Ismailism, scholars have mischaracterized esoteric movements, taking them usually at their face value. While the age-old doctrines remain part of the doctrine of all offshoots of Ismailism, such doctrines are so astutely woven into esoteric arguments that they are not easily discernible.

In many respects, esoteric communities are not static. They are receptive of new philosophical ideas. These new developments come usually from outside the ranks of the religious leadership of these sects. Thus, they begin as a break of the monopoly of the traditional leadership of the esoteric *da'wah*. In this way, these movements are, in a sense, historical constructs subject to change over time, especially as far as the secular-minded intellectuals of these movements are concerned. Education and opening up to new, particularly modernist, ideas have contributed to the emergence of a rational esoteric intelligentsia that departs from the irrational idiosyncrasies of traditional esotericism and puts on an air of adhering to the letter of the sacred texts (Quran and Hadith) at the surface level, while working havoc at the deep level of subtle esoteric meaning. In other words, the esoteric intellectual elite who received modern secular education have adopted a form of secularized esotericism; i.e. they dispensed with some of the radical doctrines in favor of secular ones dressed in a fusion of modernist-mystic garb. In this way, they not only managed to retain their affiliations to the esoteric creed, but also improved and revitalized it. Bohra leadership has not been friendly to such innovations. Motivated mostly by

concerns about their privileged status, Bohra *da'is* have had a hard time struggling to keep their followers under the pledge of allegiance and devising new ways to keep the community under control (S. Qutbuddin, 2011).

The tendency to take a more balanced and rational stance is not a new one. In fact, some intellectuals of these movements have adopted such a stance early in the history of these movements. Outstanding examples include Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Naseeruddin Al-Tusi. In the works of these learned esoterists, no bizarre interpretations of Islamic practices are found. Ibn Taimiyyah (2005) refers to this fact in his remarks on Ibn Sina. Ibn Taimiyyah further observes that learned esoterists find it simplistic and illogical to assign symbolic meanings to the basic tenets and obligations of Islam such as prayer, *zakat* (alms-giving), fasting and pilgrimage. They limit this approach to *samiyyat* (*wahy*-based beliefs, mainly the unseen/eschatology such as the hereafter, paradise and hell, as opposed to *'aqliyyat* (reason-based beliefs) that can be expounded by rational argument. In the former, symbolism is usually applied to such notions as *'arsh* (the Throne), *qalam* (the Pen), *kursi* (the Seat) *al-lawh al-mahfooz* (the preserved tablet). Esoteric doctrines are usually clothed in philosophical and scholarly arguments entrenched in a rational approach. The mystic flights of fancy are characteristic of the less philosophically-oriented propagandists, such as ibn Arabi (d. 638/1240). The confused irrational arguments bordering on the non-sensical are upheld only by the low-educated propagandists, whose treatises are hardly read, if at all, even in their own lifetime. Nowhere in the writings of modern esoteric intellectuals are such boring arguments to be found. They even avoid explicit exposition of esoteric notions and doctrines, though such doctrines predominantly inform their writings. In other words, traditional esoteric doctrines are rehearsed in new pseudo-scholastic arguments that draw on rational, philosophical, pseudo-spiritual and modernist interpretations and theories.

Ali's translation of the Quran (1937) is generally viewed as representing a Muslim point of view. Few studies have identified certain doctrinal problems in the translation (Kidwai, 2011; Al-Khateeb, 2009; Majlisul ulama (n.d.)), but no study has attempted to explore the underlying belief system that gives rise to such divergent views. As Ali's work is widely read and is likely to appear in new editions, a study of his doctrinal views is crucial. The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the underlying belief system that explains Ali's unconventional views in his translation of, and commenetary on, the Quran.
2. To identify the esoteric Ismaili content in representative examples extracted from Ali's work.
3. To identify the various strategies adopted by Ali to fuse Ismaili doctrines into his translation and commnetary.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW
4.1.Studies of Ali's docrtinal views
Ali's translation of the Quran has been the subject of several studies, most of which focused on linguistic (syntactic and semantic) issues. These studies are beyond the scope of this paper since they are not concerned with the doctrinal aspect of the translation. Scholarly inquiry into this aspect of Ali's work under scrutiny is unfortunately limited in scope. In his biography of Ali, Sherif (1994) states that Ali came from a Bohra background, which Sherif considers a shia

sect. Similarly, Tayob (2004) argues that Ali was able to transcend his immediate affiliation with the Bohra sect, which he too designated a faction of Shiism. Although general studies of Ali's life and work acknowledge his Bohra connection, they not only fail to examine the potential doctrinal and propagandistic impact this might have had on the translation, but also argue that Ali transcended this affiliation. In so doing, they underrate, indeed rule out, this important aspect of his life and the way it might have informed his work.

A. Al-Khateeb (2009) also mistakenly views the Bohra as simply a Shia sect. Al-Khateeb's study does not focus on the translation. It is divided to three sections: the first section is biographical, the second deals with the translation from a linguistic vantage point, while the third deals with Ali's conceptualization of the believers' bliss in the Hereafter. In this section, Al-Khateeb points out some of Ali's doctrinal views; namely his denial of physical pleasures in Paradise. These "mistakes", as Al-Khateeb dubbed them, are attributed to two main reasons; namely, Ali's inadequate knowledge of religious subjects, especially in the fields of Islamic jurisprudence and *aqeedah* (creed) due to the fact that he did not receive formal training in these religious fields. The second reason, according to Al-Khateeb, is the Hellenistic, specifically Platonic, influence besides the influence of Avicenna. These reasons do not account for Ali's approach, especially in view of the Quranic commentaries at his disposal during the translation process. The argument that Ali's disputable views are due to his inadequate command of Arabic is facile. Linguistically speaking, the translation itself and the notes reflect good command of the language. Whatever linguistic mistakes there might be in the translation, they are excusable, given that Ali was not primarily a student of languages. As for the second point, while such influences are valid, they fall short of accounting for Ali's approach and doctrinal views. In fact, they are subsidiary supports rather than primary causes of his approach.

The inaccuracies which Al-Khateeb and other scholars (Rizvi, 1993; Arafat, 1991; Majlisul ulama of South Africa) called "mistakes"/"errors" in Ali's translation and commentary are far from accidental mistakes in the strict sense of the word. Rather, they are conscious choices, purposefully contrived as a medium of a coherent system of thought and the pronouncement of a consistent worldview, an unorthodox one for that. In fact, Ali adopts a selective approach towards the Quranic commentaries, and often dismisses those scholarly sources out of hand and opts for stating his own views, in a strikingly unscholarly manner (Majlisul ulama).

Kidwai's chapter on Ali's translation (2011) is by far the most comprehensive of the works on Ali's unconventional views. Kidwai points out Ali's unorthodox stance regarding Islamic eschatology, focusing primarily on Ali's views of Paradise, Hell-fire, and the Quranic account of the drastic upheavals on the Day of Reckoning. He also refers to Ali's accounts of the jinn and the angels Harut and Marut and explains his deviant interpretations of these Quranic themes. According to Kidwai, such failings, indeed outright deviations, in Ali's work are the outcome of his apologetic modernist orientation, a view also espoused by Majlisul Ulama of South Africa. No references in these two works are made to the doctrinal affiliation of Ali and the possible infusion of his sect's esoteric views into the translation and commentary of the Quran.

The confusion over the true nature of the Bohra doctrine has led to mischaracterization of the doctrinal views in Ali's translation and commentary as merely errors arising from Ali's

modernist interpretation of Islam (Mijlisul Ulama; Kidwai, 2011; A. Al-Khateeb, 2009). Establishing the sources of Ali's views is of paramount importance since it makes the average Muslim reader of Ali's work aware of the gross consequences of the deviant, indeed un-Islamic, views of Ali and to draw attention to the propagandistic and missionary drive behind his approach. Moreover, the edited versions of Ali's work have left many of his latent views, both in the translation and the commentary, untouched. Uncovering the underlying system of thought in Ali's work will contribute to further correction of the translation, and expurgating his work from manifest and latent esoteric views.

4.2. Statement of the problem and hypothesis

Clearly, only a few studies of Ali's translation of the Quran have dealt with the unconventional views expressed in the translation. Yet, the esoteric Ismaili Bohra doctrine on which the translation and commentary are based is still out of the scope of existing literature, even though some studies have referred in passing to Ali's Ismaili (Dawudi Bohra) affiliation. This paper seeks to fill this gap. It proposes to test the following hypothesis: Ali's translation and commentary are informed by his esoteric Ismaili Bohra creed, and are therefore an embodiment of the esoteric Ismaili Bohra doctrine. The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are Ali's views, as expressed in his translation of, and explanatory notes on, the Quran, informed by his affiliation to the Dawudi Bohra sect (an offshoot of the esoteric Ismaili tradition)?
2. How representative of the overall esoteric Bohra doctrine are Ali's views?
3. To what extent can the translation be viewed as an embodiment of this particular esoteric doctrine?

3. Coneptual Framework

3.1.Esoteric Ismaili doctrines

Ali's unconeventional views are examined and analyzed in light of the following Bohra doctrines and techniques: symbolism, the nature of *wahy* (revelation), prophethood, *al-Qaim* (contemporary imam or his deputy. The term is historically applied to the awaited *imam* who went into concealment, but in modern esoteric literature, especially in Babi and Bahai literature as well as in the writings of the proponents of the Islamic Reformation movement of Egypt, it is broadly applied to leaders of esoteric movements.), the infallible imam, *kufr* (disbelief) and universal religion, and eschatology. Both established Ismaili and sunni sources are used in identifying these doctrines, including Daftary (2004, 2011, 1990/2007), Ghaleb (n.d.), Baghdadi (1977), Ibn Taimiyyah (2005), M. Al-Khateeb (1984/1986), Lewis (1940) and (Andani, 2020).

3.2.Bohra education

Bohra education is stratified into two layers. The initiated receives lessons in the *zahir* (exoteric) sciences, such as jurisprudence, literature, history and ethics. In the second layer, the student is introduced to the *batin* (esoteric) learning, which in turn is divided into two layers: *ta'wil* (interpretation) and *haqiqa* (truth). The first is open to all members of the community, while the latter is restricted to the religious elite, and is transmitted only "from mouth to ear" (T. Qutbuddin, 2011, p. 344). The *ta'wil* deals with the esoteric allegorical meaning attributed to the Quranic and hadith texts (T. Qutbuddin, 2011), while *haqiqa* deals with the occult notions of genesis (creation), *ilahiyyat* (that part of theology that deals with the notion of God) and eschatological matters. According to Daftary (2004), the *ta'wil* genre is mainly concerned with establishing Quranic evidence of the doctrines of Ismailism. *Ta'wil* literature also reads

and interprets the Quran from an esoteric point of view. Ali's translation and commentary will be examined in light of the notion of *ta'wil*, which is the outer esoteric circle in Ismaili knowledge production.

4. Methodology
4.1.Research design

This study employs the interpretative method of qualitative research. This approach is appropriate for this study since it is used in studies that seek to understand the meanings people attach to various phenomena, including beliefs and values (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Moreover, the interpretative qualitative approach is appropriate in research that seeks to uncover underlying meanings contained in textual data (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). The complexity of the translation of the Quran which is further compounded by the intricate nature of Ali's work and the underlying system of thought it contains require the use of the interpretative qualitative approach.

4.2.Data of the study

Ali (1937) is used as a sample frame because this early edition contains Ali's original ideas, especially as later editions were subject to mostly arbitrary adaptations by publishers. Purposive sampling was employed, and data were collected thematically. Seven variables (Ismaili Bohra doctrines) were derived from Ismaili and non-Ismaili sources, including works by sunni, non-Muslim, and non-Ismaili esoterist authors. Units of these doctrines were identified in two ways: first, through computer search for key words and phrases, such as inspiration, revelation, unbelievers, disbelievers, reject faith, gardens, paradise, hell, soul, certainty, spiritual, symbolic, figurative, etc. in the sample frame. Second, occurrences of esoteric doctrines were also identified manually, based on the researcher's prior knowledge of esoteric doctrines and the politics governing esoteric discourse, especially in verses that refer to issues usually interpreted by esoterists in unconventional ways, such as references to resurrection, concrete details of physical bliss and torment in the hereafter, etc. Units were drawn from various suras, to ensure symbolic representation and diversity of the sample (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003), and to further ensure the consistent frequency of the esoteric approach in the sample frame. The various sections of the translation; i.e. the opening, middle and closing suras are represented in the extracted sample. The data extracted from the sample frame were huge, and had to be cut down. For example, computer search for the words "symbol" "symbolic," "symbolism," "figurative," "figuratively," "allegorical," and "metaphorical" returns 107, 32, 34, 19, 31, 30 and 19 results, respectively. Manual search yields even much more results of applying symbolism as a technique of deviant interpretation. There are also omissions, e.g. the word "Eden" which occurs 10 times in the Quran, is referred to in the commentary (not in the translation) only twice, and in both instances its eschatological associations are dismissed. Representative examples of the selected esoteric doctrines, ranging from 5 to 10 – except for the "degree of certainty" doctrine for which only two verses in the Quran are cited by esoterists as Quranic evidence of this doctrine – were extracted and analyzed. I particularly benefited from some illuminating quotations in Kidwai (2011), as those quotations categorically reflect Ali's esoteric doctrine. Hilali and Khan (2005) is consulted in the process of data analysis since it is perhaps the best translation of the Quran in English in terms of conforming to the conventional line of Quranic exegesis.

4.2.1. Selection criteria

The following criteria were used in purposive selection:

- Likelihood of occurrence, i.e. verses that deal with issues assigned unorthodox interpretations in esoteric doctrines.
- Diversity, to ensure that the sample is not restricted to any particular section(s) of the translation, and to reflect the validity of the tested assumption that Ismaili doctrines are consistent throughout.
- Overtly stated Ismaili Bohra doctrines.
- Ismaili doctrines screened behind personal opinion, clothed in mystic or rational argument, or contained in literary analysis.
- Implied esoteric content.

4.3. Data Analysis

The seven esoteric doctrines and techniques referred in 3.1. were used as points of reference in the analysis of data. The translation strategies employed by Ali were also analyzed. In-depth analysis is employed to highlight the politics governing the esoteric discourse and to uncover the underlying meanings or arguments at the deeper level of discourse. Thematic analysis was also adopted as analyzed units were clustered thematically. Representative examples of each of the selected esoteric Ismaili doctrines were discussed under separate headings. Such clustering fascilitates the task of analysis and provided the additional advantage of allowing a holistic analysis of each esoteric doctrine.

5. Results and Discussion

Ali's audience are the Muslims generally. Esoteric doctrines are carefully fused into an approach and a language that suit his audience. Esoteric views are either dressed in modernist garb, or insidiously woven into the fabric of discourse, without making any vociferous remarks on their esoteric nature, or any explicit references to the sources from which those views are derived. All that a reader can come up with is that Ali's views are an amalgam of modernist ideas blended into a mystical framework. The underlying esoteric doctrine is thus carefully screened behind a well-crafted mix of mystical spirituality and modernist mentality. This approach has hitherto proved tenacious, making Ali pass for a mainstream Muslim scholar, when in reality his work is a propagation of the esoteric creed with missionary zeal. Key esoteric doctrinal views in Ali's translation and commentary will be discussed in the following sections.

5.1. Symbolism

Ali draws heavily on symbolism, which is employed for several purposes, including:

1. to support his esoteric views of eschatological matters. This will be further expounded in (5.7.).
2. to esoterically interpret verses dealing with historical fact and allusions to previous prophets and peoples. For example, in his comment on (2: 60) "...وإذ استسقى موسى لقومه", he assigns a figurative meaning to the parable, emphasizing the "spiritual food and drink" provided by God, even from "unexpected places" (Ali, 1937, p. 32).
3. to esotericize references to some unseen creatures such as Satan (the devil) and the jinn. The words "الشيطان/الشياطين" (Satan/devils) are rendered in many instances as "the evil one(s)". Satan is reduced to a symbol of evil, which implies negating the physical existence of such a creature.
4. to propagate the esoteric Bohra hierarchical structure, institutions, ideals, etc. An indicative example of this tendency is his imposition of the Bohra hierarchy in his translation of (4:

69) and the explanatory footnote, which are worth quoting at length, the translation first: "All who obey God And the Apostle Are in the company Of those on whom Is the Grace of God,— Of the Prophets (who teach), The Sincere (lovers of Truth), The Witnesses (who testify), And the Righteous (who do good). Ah! what a beautiful Fellowship!" Ali adopts the strategies of addition, deletion, substitution and outright distortion in translating the verse to force in the Bohra hierarchy. Additions, all of which are unnecessary, are introduced in brackets. The fact that the company described in the verse will take place in the Hereafter, more specifically in Paradise — which shall be highlighted in the English translation, is deleted. The verse is decontextualized, pulled out from its future setting and transposed to a present earthly one; namely the Dawudi Bohra community. Ali consciously replaces the accurate "those" with "all" at the beginning of the verse to include the whole Bohra community in his depiction of Bohra fellowship. He also replaces "martyrs" with "witnesses" so that this forced category corresponds to the third rank of the Bohra hierarchy. All of these choices involve blatant and intentional distortions of the sacred text. No less significant is the stylistic and semantic distortion in the closing exclamatory sentence, which does not reflect the style of the original, and the conscious use of "fellowship" which best fits the Bohra community rather than the company referred to in the verse. Apparently, Ali's exclamation is a triumphant cheer of joy at his successful endeavor of esotericizing the verse. The comment further elucidates the Bohra hierarchy:

> A passage of the deepest spiritual [read esoteric] meaning. Even the humblest man who accepts Faith and does good becomes at once an accepted member of a great and beautiful spiritual Fellowship. It is a company [read a community] which lives perpetually in the sunshine of God's Grace. (This passage partly illustrates Q. i.5). It is a glorious hierarchy, of which four grades are specified: (1) The highest is that of the Prophets or Apostles who get plenary inspiration from God and who teach mankind by example and precept. That rank in Islam is held by Muhammad Mustafa [read *da'i mutlaq* (absolute *da'i*)]. (2) The next are those whose badge is sincerity and truth [read the inner elite circle of *haqiqa* (truth)], they love and support the truth [read the secret esoteric cult] with their person, their means, their influence, and all that is theirs. That rank was held by the special Companions of Muhammad [read *da'i mutlaq*], among whom the type was that of hadhrat Abu Bakr Siddiq [read *ma'thun* and *mukasir,* the immediate assistants of the *da'i mutlaq*]. (3) The next are the noble army of Witnesses [read those allowed into the first esoteric plane of *ta'wil*], who testify to the truth. The testimony may be by martyrdom as in the case of Imams Hasan and Husain. Or it may be by the tongue of the true Preacher, or the pen of the devoted scholar, or the life of the man devoted to service (4) Lastly, there is the large company of Righteous people [read members of the Bohra community who took the oath of allegiance], the ordinary folk who do their ordinary business, but always in a righteous way. They are the rank and file of the beautiful Fellowship, in which each has his place, and yet all feel that they derive glory from the common association. (p. 200)

5. to introduce some esoteric concepts, such as *al-marhalah al-yaqeeniyyah* "degree of certainty". The word "اليقين" is used twice in the Quran to signify death. The first occurs in (15: 99), where "اليقين" is rendered literally: "the hour that is certain". Yet, in the note, Ali hinted at the esoteric meaning, explaining *al-yaqeen* as "certainty" (p. 654). Since the prophet is addressed in this verse, Ali avoids explicitly establishing the esoteric meaning. The second occurs in (74: 47) "حتى أتانا اليقين", where it is rendered literally. Although Ali acknowledges the popular interpretation of the word- i.e., death, he adds that there is also a spiritual sense, which refers to "a state of mind in spiritual progress" (p. 1646, fn. 5804). This state of mind is exactly what esoterists and esoterist-philosophers called the "certainty degree" which, for them, signifies an advanced stage of spiritual ascension during which an individual becomes exempt from all worship. However, as the verse in question is about disbelievers, Ali takes this point into account and adjusts the esoteric concept to suit the context. In other words, it would have sounded preposterous to claim in a translation of a

scripture that disbelievers attained the highest form of spiritual ascension, so he pointed out that they were shut out from the truth till they reached a crisis when the time of repentance was past.

6. to esoterically account for some Islamic practices and teachings.

The pervading presence of symbolism in Ali's work threatens to undermine the meaning of the whole Quran and the message of the prophet. It is applied indiscriminately to the religious teachings as a whole, as is evident in the following statement which comes at the end of the first part (*juza'*), when the story of the Israelites is rounded off, and Muslims are directly addressed: "This leads to the argument in the remainder of the Sura that with the renewal of the Message and the birth of a new People, a new symbolism and new ordinances become appropriate, and they are now expounded." (p. 56, fn. 139)

5.2. The Nature of *wahy* (revelation)

Ali consistently espouses the esoteric view of the *wahy* as inspiration. In fact, "revelation" and "inspiration" are two distinct concepts. While the established view is that *wahy* is revealed to prophet Mohammed, the esoteric inspiration theory holds that *wahy* springs from the inner soul of the prophet without the mediation of any outside agency. In this way, inspiration is the result of contemplation which leads to a sudden outburst of novel ideas expressed in a sublime style, unattainable in ordinary circumstances. Inspiration entails that the Quran is not the literal word of God, a sense conveyed only by "revelation".

The numerous occurrences of the Arabic root *w h y* and its derivatives (*wahy, awha, nuhi, yuhi, awhaina, yuha*) are rendered variously, and the phrase "by inspiration" or the noun "inspiration" is added to explain the nature of revelation, whereas the accurate equivalent is "reveal". Hence, "(by) inspiration" becomes the keyword/key phrase, even when the verb "reveal" is used. Ali uses various translation strategies, including addition, substitution, deletion, and explanation to replace the orthodox view of revelation with the esoteric one. In instances where "reveal" is used, the phrase "by inspiration" is consistently added.

1. (3: 44) "نوحيه إليك" (which We reveal to you) is rendered: "Which We reveal unto thee (Oh Apostle) by inspiration."
2. "وأوحي إلي هذا القرآن" (6: 19) (This Quran is being revealed to me) is rendered: "This Quran hath been Revealed to me by inspiration."
3. (12: 102) "ذلك من أنباء الغيب نوحيه إليك" is rendered "Such is one of the stories of what happened unseen, which We reveal by inspiration unto thee."

The addition of "by inspiration" in the above examples qualifies the verb "revealed". It shows the way revelation takes place; namely that the *wahy* is inspiration.

In other instances, other verbs replace "reveal" and the explanatory phrase "by inspiration" is added:

1. "اتبع ما أوحي إليك من ربك"(6:106): (follow (the Quran) which is revealed to you by your Lord), is rendered: "Follow what thou art taught by inspiration from thy Lord."
2. "قل لا أجد فيما أوحي إلي" (6:145): (Say: I do not find in (the Quran) revealed to me) is rendered: "I find not in the Message received by me by inspiration".
3. In (10:109) "واتبع ما يوحى إليك" we read "Follow thou the inspiration Sent unto thee".
4. (33:2) "واتبع ما يوحى إليك" is rendered "follow that which comes to thee by inspiration".
5. (13:30) "لتتلو عليهم الذي أوحينا إليك" is rendered "Rehearse unto them what We Send down unto thee by inspiration."

In (1), the verb "revealed" is substituted by "taught". The connotations of "revelation" in connection with the Quran are suppressed. The verb "teach" is used in the Quran in addressing the prophet in the context of referring to the Quran and *hikmah* together. The *hikmah,* literally wisdom, is commonly understood to mean the *sunnah* (prophetic traditions) which is also recognized as *wahy*. There is, however, a difference between these two forms of revelation. While the Quran is the literal word of God, revealed to Gabriel, who in turn conveyed it verbatim to the prophet as he received it from God, and is preserved in this way to the end of human existence on earth, the *sunnah* is taught to the prophet without the mediation of Gabriel, hence the wording is the prophet's. Yet, even in this case, the word "inspire" is not used in reference to the nature of revelation of the *sunnah*. "Taught" is used also in reference to earlier prophets, even when what was taught is mundane, as in the reference to David in (21:80) "وعلمناه صنعة لبوس لكم" (We taught him the armor's craft for your benefit). Other examples are to be found in (2: 31) and (12:68) in reference to Adam and Jacob, respectively.

In (2), the verb "revealed" is substituted by "received," which again suppresses the notion of revelation. Another distortion is the choice of the word "message" whereas a closer candidate would have been "the Quran" or "the Book," as suggested by the context. The choice of the rather unsuitable "message" reinforces the idea of distancing the reader from the conventional meaning of revelation while fitting in well with the esoteric conceptualization of *wahy*.

In (3) and (4), although the same Arabic clause occurs in both instances, it is rendered differently. In both cases, the sense of revelation by inspiration is conveyed. In all the examples discussed so far, the notion of the medium of revelation (Gabriel) is completely obliterated, the more so by establishing that the manner of revelation is "by inspiration". In (5), although "send down" seems to reflect the idea of a medium, this suggestion is again ruled out by the modifying phrase "by inspiration".

In sum, a reader who focuses only on the translation comes out with the view that the Quran is not the literal word of God, and that it was rather authored by the Prophet who was only divinely inspired. In this way, the reader ends up with the view that the prophet is not much different from Plato's divinely possessed poets.

In the Commentary, this view of revelation is further reinforced. Ali has to grapple with the medium of revelation (Gabriel), and necessarily falls into contradiction. In some instances, he dismisses the idea of a medium out of hand and suggests that the Quran is authored by the prophet. At others, he is content to point out its insignificance, while at yet other occasions, the idea is cast into an esoteric mold.

In expressing his apparently admiring attitude of the Quran, Ali writes, "No human composition could contain the beauty, power and spiritual insight of the Quran. Without inspiration, it is impossible to suppose that a man, with or without literary and philosophic training, could produce such a book as the Quran" (p. 401). Two levels of meaning are at work here: the seemingly applausive surface level and the subversive deep level. In a language clothed in false admiration, Ali expressly drives home the point that the Quran is authored by the prophet. Ali's argument here is that all that the prophet needed to produce the Quran was inspiration.

This view of authorship of the Quran is insidiously hinted at in the commentary. In his note to "لكن الله يشهد بما أنزل إليك أنزله بعلمه" (4:166) nothing is said of the role of Gabriel in communicating the revelation. Ali states, "Inspiration, though it is clothed in human language, and shaped to the personality of the inspired one, proceeds from the knowledge of God, and therefore, often contains more meaning than the inspired one himself realizes." (p. 232) Ali monopolizes the idea of "the knowledge of God," using the preposition "from" instead of "with" to establish an esoteric view of revelation. He underscores the supposedly inspirational nature of the Quran, by referring to "human language," which suggests the prophet's authorship of the Quran. The utmost that can be gleaned from this argument is that the prophet's inspiration was so intense that the he himself could not fully grasp the meanings of the verses he was inspired to produce. The word "proceeds" categorically leaves little room to the idea that the inspiration when supposedly received by the inspired one was a finished product.

A further strategy of the negation of the medium of *wahy* is the negation of Gabriel himself by resorting to the esoteric technique of *ta'wil*, which constitutes the outer esoteric circle, and is commonly used in esoteric literature, particularly in relation to the Quran, *sunnah* and *sharia* (Islamic law). Gabriel is described in (26:193) as "الروح الأمين". Ali concocted an unjustifiable interpretation of the epithet "الأمين" (sincere), rendering the phrase as "the Spirit of Faith and Truth," which suppresses the Quranic emphasis of Gabriel's trustworthiness and sincere conveyance of the revelation. While Ali nominally acknowledges that the reference is to Gabriel, he immediately introduces a new agent which he calls the "spirit of inspiration" which he defines as "the very quintessence of Faith and Truth" (p. 969). The fact that the "spirit of faith and truth" is identical with the "spirit of inspiration" rules out the role of Gabriel. The "spirit of inspiration" has sense only when applied to the prophet himself rather than to Gabriel. As the word "truth" is used in esoteric literature to refer to the esoteric doctrine itself, Ali's definition of the "spirit of inspiration" becomes clear. To paraphrase his definition after de-esotericizing it, we get "inspiration is the essence of the esoteric doctrine." In short, Ali's note is an esoteric depiction of the Bohra/Ismaili view and conceptualization of *wahy,* which necessarily denies any outside agency, and this esoteric view of *wahy* as inspiration is presented as *the* truth.

Alternatively, Ali dismisses the agency of revelation as unimportant. According to him, in intensely spiritual experiences, or in "in mystic worlds," as Ali puts it, names of the agency matter very little (p. 1765). Reducing the revelation process to merely a mystical experience is indicative of his view of revelation, as it at once dismisses the external agency of revelation and establishes the context and rationale of a unique personal experience.

When Ali acknowledges Gabriel as the medium of "inspiration," he strives to negate his role of conveying the word of God to the prophet. Ambiguity is employed as a technique in such contexts. He writes, "Muhammad's inspiration was through visions of Gabriel. Muhammad had been helped to the highest spiritual light and the message which he delivered and his spotless integrity and exemplary life were manifest Signs which everyone could understand except those who were obstinate and perverse. Besides, the verses of the Quran were in themselves reasonable and clear." (p. 43) The word "visions" is ambiguous as it connotes unreality and imagination as well as real sighting. The esoteric view of Gabriel as "unreal" or "imaginary" creature is at work here (Zaheer, n.d., p. 326). This idea is also employed by the orientalists and modern esoterists in the so-called psychological inspiration theory. According

to this psychology-based polemic, the prophet was sincere in his claim that he received inspiration since it occurred to him that an angel was communicating a message to him, while in reality inspiration came from inward rather than through any outward agency. Ali also disregards the fact that most of the *wahy* was conveyed to the prophet with no visions at all.

Whichever connotation of the word "visions" the reader may opt for is insignificant in view of the explication put forth in the next sentence which explicitly restricts the role of those visions, real or imaginary, to helping the prophet attain the highest spiritual state. Gabriel's role of communicating the revelation is thus excluded and the esoteric view of revelation is judiciously contrived into the commentary. Moreover, the notion that the prophet was helped in the process of those inspirations further affirms the view that the *wahy* originated in the prophet's self. This entails that he instigated the inspiration by exerting some effort; namely, having visions, and was helped to the highest visionary experience in the process. This view again contradicts the established fact that the prophet had no power at all over revelation, a fact evidenced by the Quran (18: 23) and in several prophetic traditions. It is antithetical to the nature of *wahy* as understood by the orthodox scholars and most importantly as established in the Quran, and conforms to the esoteric interpretation of *wahy*.

Implied in the above quoted statements, when taken to their length, is the view that the Quran was authored by the prophet. In fact, in his introductory stanzas to sura (1), Ali states the idea of the prophet's authorship of the Quran quite clearly, pointing out that the prophet had no miracles and no "mystery, save those mysteries/Which unfold themselves in the growing *Inner experience* of man and *his* vision of God" (p. 4; emphasis added). Ali categorically makes it plain that what was inspired to the prophet was the "message". Nowhere in his translation or commentary is it stated that the text of the Quran was conveyed to the prophet. At a more basic level, this esoteric view of revelation casts doubts on the origins of Islam, indeed of all religions, and suggests that they were merely human constructs. The gist of this theory is that prophets are merely ambitious individuals who aspired for leadership and power and found in prophethood an effective stratagem to control the public (Baghdadi, 1977, p 279). Knowledge of these secrets is restricted to *haqiqa* (truth) elite circle. It is unlikely that Ali was introduced into those inner circles of the esoteric elite Bohra club. However, such esoteric views are no more a secret, as they have been circulated and laid bare in sunni and shii literature for more than a thousand years. Ali did not have even to read those sources. The idea was easily accessible in his immediate sources to which he admiringly refereed in his preface; namely in Syed Ahmad Khan's exegesis and in Abdu's and Ridha's *tafseer al-manar*.

In sum, Ali reduces revelation to a personal experience of inspiration attained in moments of spiritual excellence. It springs from the lofty imagination of the inspired, in this case the prophet. External mediation, such as the role of Gabriel, becomes irrelevant. It follows that the Quran is not the word of God, but that of the prophet. The sublimity of the Quran is guaranteed by the inspiration. Consequently, the accepted view of *wahy* is effaced and the esoteric view is introduced in its place.

5.3. Final Message or Endless Prophethood?

The esoteric view of *wahy* as inspiration preludes the more radical tenet of ever-recurring prophethood, which involves the abrogation of the *sharia* laws and introducing new ones, a

task reserved for the *natiq* (law-providing prophet). Ali refers to this doctrine of ever-recurrent inspirations, though sagaciously:

> There is always in human affairs, the conflict between the old and the new – the worn-out system of our ancestors and the *fresh living spring of Allah's inspiration fitting in with new times and new surroundings*. The advocates of the former look upon this latter not only with intellectual doubt but with moral suspicions, as did the People of the Book upon Islam, with its fresh outlook and vigorous, realistic way of looking at things. (p. 544; emphasis added)

In this note, Ali's tropes and the context of the explained verse (11: 111) reveal his esoteric belief of continuing revelation. The note comes in the context of the doubts of the pagan Arabs and the Jews about the authenticity of Prophet Mohammed's divine message. Ali utilizes the idea of conflict between the old and the new to insidiously introduce the esoteric doctrine. The image of inspiration as "fresh living spring" suggests that revelation continues indefinitely. The esoteric belief is conveyed through figurative language. Ali's foregrounding of inspiration, with its esoteric associations, definitively sets his implicit hint at the esoteric notion of ever-recurring prophethood apart from the Islamic notion of *tajdeed* (renewal). This distinction is further evidenced by the rejectionist attitude towards the "worn-out system of our ancestors," which is intrinsic to the former, but is unacceptable in the latter.

The esoteric notion of the *wahy* as inspiration serves two complementary purposes. First, it strips the messengers of God of their special status as exclusive recipients of divine revelation conveyed to them by the angel Gabriel, hence the laborious pains taken to suppress Gabriel's role as *ameenul wahy* (the one trusted, hence entrusted, with the *wahy*). Second, it makes the notion of open prophethood feasible, not only in the case of the *natiq,* but also down the religious hierarchy to the extent that the *da'is* and indeed anyone can claim to be divinely inspired. Hence, it was quite normal that such mundane impoverished figures as Ali Mohammed Al-Shirazi, Subh Azal and his brother Hussain, as well as Ghulam Ahmed claimed prophethood and even Godhead in the case of Hussein Ali Nuri.

5.4.The "Man of God" and the "Living Teacher"

Following the esoteric practice of *ta'wil*, Ali assigns meanings he himself contrived to Quranic terms. A case relevant to the notion of inspiration discussed here is his *ta'wil* of "*khaza'inu Allah*" (the treasures of God). He restricts the meaning to "truth," an occult elite level of knowledge, sometimes loosely applied to the esoteric *da'wah* itself. Ali's note on this term is replete with strong esoteric undertones. Although the term occurs in the context of directly addressing the prophet, he broadens the applicability of the Quranic reference to the "men of God". This vague phrase leaves the reader puzzling over who those "men of God" are, especially as this phrase is not used in Quranic, or more broadly in Islamic, literature. However, Ali provides clues to help the reader figure out who they are. Firstly, he differentiates them from soothsayers. Unlike these, they do not "pretend to reveal hidden treasures or peer into the future or claim to be something of a different nature from men." Secondly, Ali is concerned with the present context rather than with the past, as suggested by the hint that "they are of the same flesh and blood *with* us" (p. 301; emphasis added). The reference is most probably to the esoteric elite who are the sole proprietors of "truth". This assumption is supported by Ali's assertion of their "greater insight into the higher things" (p. 301).

The contemporary identity of the "men of God" is established in an imaginary dialogue between "a man of God" and an atheist (p. 292). Interestingly, this man of God is heavenly inspired. His

arguments in favor of faith are justified on three grounds: "God's voice" that is within him; i.e. divine inspiration; secondly, his "living Teacher awakens that voice," and finally, there is the "Book of Inspiration" (p. 294). Again, the reader is deterred by vague terms: the "Book of Inspiration" and the "Living Teacher". While the former might refer to the Quran, the latter needs to be examined further. The term has an esoteric history. It is a translation of the Arabic *al-qaim,* the *imam* or his representative. The term is very popular in esoteric literature. Ali uses the term in reference to prophet Mohammed twice (p. 136, fn. 392; p. 1550, fn. 5466). In both cases, reference is to events during the prophet's lifetime; namely, rejection of his message by the Jews of Yathrib and the blessings enjoyed by the *Ansar* due to the prophet's migration to Medina, respectively. However, in the context of the imaginary dialogue referred to above, the "Living Teacher" cannot be the prophet, but a contemporary of "the man of God," hence the contemporary *qaim*. It is important to note that in the esoteric Ismaili cult the office of *qaim* is permanent, and must always be filled either by the *imam* of the time *(imamu-zzaman)* himself or by his deputy, the *da'i.*

5.5. Jihad and the "righteous imam"

Ismailis believe that an *imam ma'sum* (infallible imam) of the progeny of Mohammed ibn Ismail shall always be there (Ghaleb, p. 98). When the imam of the time is not known; i.e. he goes into concealment, the *da'i mutlaq* (absolute *da'i*) acts as his deputy. It is noteworthy that in Ismailism, obedience and allegiance to the *imam* or *da'i* replaces the *shahada* (testimony of faith) as the first pillar of Islam in the Ismaili cult. Regarding jihad, it is usually construed figuratively since it is antithetical to the notion of universal brotherhood espoused by Ismailism.

Historically, esoteric movements and communities have supported invaders of Islamic lands and allied themselves with them. Ibn Taimiyyah referred to the alliance of the Nusairiyyah, an esoteric community in Syria, with the crusaders and later with the Moghuls during their invasions, and occupation in the case of the crusaders, of the Levant and Iraq (As-Saqqaf, 1998). Modern colonial powers also heavily relied on these communities as did the British in Egypt, India and Iran, and the French in Syria. The Bohra's alliance with the British is acknowledged by Bohra intellectuals (S. Qutbuddin, 2011). Ali himself rendered great services to the British crown during the WWI. He was commissioned to travel across Europe in a lecture tour, a task he carried out enthusiastically, urging fellow Muslims to join the ranks of the British against their Ottoman co-religionists (Hasan, 2019).

Ali refers to the "righteous imam" when discussing the verses dealing with jihad. The phrase is a euphemism for the *imam ma'sum* (infallible imam). He imposes strict conditions on jihad which make it almost impossible. According to Ali, jihad cannot be waged by any mundane leader. Rather, it shall be declared only by a "righteous imam" who "can see the whole field of spiritual and physical warfare." (p. 61) This condition applies only to the *imam ma'sum/da'i mutlaq* who acts as both the ecclesiastical and mundane leader of the Bohras. Obviously, this condition is antithetical to orthodox Muslim unanimous opinion that obliges Muslims to respond positively to their head of state's call to jihad, even if he does not observe Islamic teachings. Instructively, Ali states quite bluntly that devoted allegiance to the "righteous imam" amounts to jihad in the cause of God: "God's cause must not be narrowly interpreted. All sincere and real service to humanity comes within the definition, as well as *actual devotion to religion or to the righteous Imam*" (p. 110). This leaves little room for doubt that the righteous

imam is the *da'i mutlaq* of the Bohra community. Confining jihad to the righteous imam (read Ismaili *da'i*) is so overemphasized in all references to jihad that declaring jihad becomes the imam's exclusive right. Ali explains that

> it is not for private persons to take vengeance even for the cause of right and justice… Nor is it permissible even to a group of persons to arrogate to themselves the championship of the right… here are always apt to be private motives of hatred or enmity or mixed motives of that kind. These are and must necessarily be, absent in the case of a Jihad under a *righteous Imam*, for, by the very definition of the term, a righteous Imam is swayed by no feelings of a private nature and is guided by nothing but divine Light. (p. 1358)

Moreover, following the esoteric line of argument, Ali limits the rewards of jihad to the esoteric realm of spiritual purification of the soul, completely disregarding the otherworldly rewards and the high rank assigned to martyrs in the hereafter, as detailed in the Quran and conventional Islamic literature.

5.6. Disbelief and the universal religion

Esoteric definitions of *kufr* (disbelief) are too loose to precisely set the boundaries between belief and disbelief. Esoterists usually adopt an all-embracing attitude towards all religions, including pagan creeds. This view is widely expressed by the famous medieval esotericists-mystics, such as ibn Arabi in the famous quatrain on universal religion attributed to him (Zaheer, 2005). More recently, Ridha (1898) calls for abrogating the conventional definition of *kufr*, arguing that it was unnecessary in the modern context, and suggesting that the term should be abandoned when referring to non-Muslims who believe in God, regardless of their faith.

Ali adopts a similarly loose view of the "religion of love". Followers of other faiths are included among the community of believers. Ali's typically esoteric view of *kufr* is also evidenced by his view of the message of Prophet Mohammed as one that celebrates the "brotherhood of man" and calls for "universal brotherhood" regardless of faith. This idea of brotherhood is framed in the overarching category of "unity," which comprises a set of sub-unities, reminiscent of the esoteric unities, including the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) also referred to as "unity of creation," and unity of race (*wahdat aljins al-bashari*). Obviously influenced by Abduh and Ridha, Ali refers to the Prophet's message as a unifying thread that reunites the human race after "Man fell from Unity when his Will was warped" and the "Brotherhood of Man was… doubly forgotten." The Prophet, according to Ali, proclaimed "with unfaltering voice/The Unity of God, the Brotherhood of Man" (p. 4).

Ali underscores this notion of unity of the human race, making it *the* ultimate end of Islam as a religion, and transferring to it the phrase "in God's way" (*fi sabeeli-Allah*) which, in the Quran and in Islamic literature, exclusively modifies jihad. Thus, according to Ali, it is the task of Muslims to "bear witness to God's Law,/To proclaim the truth, maintain/[God's] Symbols and strive and fight/For Unity in God's Way." (p. 57) The notion of "love of others" is also an esoteric one, and when applied loosely, threatens to undermine the Islamic principle of *wala'* (allegiance). This notion serves as a threshold to the more radical unity of religion, which is also implied in Ali's commentary. In his introduction to sura (2), he states that Abraham established a "common religion, of which Islam is the universal exponent." (p. 16)

Ali sets the stage for his rendering of the recurrent term *kufr* and its variant forms by stating that the word *kufr* (disbelief) and its derivatives "imply a deliberate rejection of Faith as opposed to a mistaken idea of God or faith which is not inconsistent with an earnest desire to see the truth" (p. 18, fn. 30). His rendering of the word is consistent with this definition, as shown in the following examples:

1. In (2: 6), "إن الذين كفروا" is rendered: "those who reject faith". The phrase "reject faith" is consistently used in verses 26, 34, and 39 of the same sura.
2. In (2: 89), "فلعنة الله على الكافرين" is rendered "But the curse of God is on those without Faith."
3. In (2: 105), "ما يود الذين كفروا من أهل الكتاب" is rendered "It is never the wish of those without faith of the People of the Book".
4. In (3: 10), (4: 167) and (4: 168), "إن الذين كفروا" is rendered "Those who reject faith".
5. In (6: 1), "ثم الذين كفروا بربهم يعدلون" is rendered "Yet those who reject faith hold (others) as equal with their Guardian-Lord."

Ali tends to be consistent in using the phrase "reject faith" in the first six long suras. Yet, in (8: 12 and 15), "الذين كفروا" is rendered "unbelievers," which is also inaccurate and seems to fit in the loose esoteric definition of *kufr* since it signifies rejection of all religions, as opposed to "disbelievers" which suggests rejecting a particular faith as false (Abdelaal, 2019). The word "الكافرين" in verse 14 of the same sura is rendered "those who resist God," which is vague and inaccurate since it limits the definition of *kufr* to disbelief in God. This latter conforms to his definition of *kufr*, and its juxtaposition to the preceding and following instances of "unbelievers" seems to qualify the nature of unbelief. In the rest of the translation, he is inconsistent, using equivalents such as "unbelievers," "reject faith," "misbelievers," and even "reject truth," which hints implicitly at the esoteric doctrine itself. However, the notion of "rejection" is not dropped, but is used to the very last suras, as in suras 98 and 109 in which "reject truth" and "reject faith" are used, respectively. Generally, Ali renders the word "كفر" and its cognates in a way that conforms to the esoteric view of *kufr*, and in some instances uses it as a synonym of rejecting the esoteric doctrine.

5.7. Ali's Eschatology
5.7.1. Esoteric reincarnation

Esoteric eschatology departs from the orthodox Islamic view of the hereafter. Since belief in resurrection on the Day of Judgment and in subsequent reward/punishment is the impetus for following the injunctions of religious law, and as esoteric creeds are anti-Islamic and anti-religious in nature, eschatology acquires a central position in their teachings. This essential prerequisite of faith and living according to the teachings of sacred scriptures is, therefore, a primary target of esoteric polemic. Esoteric doctrines reject the established Islamic view of physical resurrection, opting instead for a denial of resurrection and the belief in a spiritual life after death, derived mainly from reincarnation, which is borrowed from pagan eschatology. The gist of this theory is that the human body comes to an eternal end by death. The soul, however, embarks on a new journey, which vaguely involves moral reward or punishment, according to the aptitude and attitude of the person during their lifetime towards esoteric teachings and purification. The soul's journey of reincarnation is eternal. It becomes entangled in a perpetual cycle of reincarnation, moving from one host to another. The reward or punishment involved in this perpetual cycle is only spiritual.

5.7.2. Denial of physical resurrection

Ali's denial of physical resurrection has been pointed out by Majlisul Ulama of South Africa. The esoteric denial of the resurrection of humans on the Day of Judgment is clearly and laboriously argued by Ali in his translation of, and comment on, (2: 260). Ali laboriously fabricates evidence to support his pre-conceived esoteric denial of physical resurrection. Although Abraham's question in this verse is about resurrecting *the dead*, Ali insists in the face of all textual and contextual evidence that Abraham was instructed to train the birds to fly to him, rather than slaughter the birds, cut them to pieces, and then call them. He introduced a new meaning to the word "صرهن" that supports his position, arguing that it means "tame", while dismissing the established meaning of the word; i.e. "embrace," "hold closer to you" and "cut to pieces". Based on this fabricated evidence, he completely obliterates the concept of physical resurrection.

Throughout his work, Ali construes the concept of resurrection in line with his preconceived esoteric thought. Resurrection and recompense are presented from an esoteric perspective; the afterlife in its entirety is depicted as merely spiritual, an idea which conforms to the concept of reincarnation. Physical torment and physical bliss are dismissed altogether. The "garden" is simply a state of ecstasy and bliss, whereas hell is merely a symbol of spiritual agony. The concrete details of physical bliss and physical torment which amount to one-third of the Quran, usually designated as *wa'd wa-wa'eed* (promise and warning) are simply dismissed by Ali as symbolic. Relevant eschatological issues are also assigned symbolic meanings to fit into the esoteric schema, including:

1. Al-A'araf (heights; the divide between the dwellers of paradise and those of hell) in the sura of the same name are dismissed as symbolic.
2. References to "نفس/أنفس" are rendered "soul(s)" to rule out the physical component.
   a. "وهم فيما اشتهت أنفسهم خالدون" (21:102) is rendered "What their souls desired, in that will they dwell." Apart from the clumsy structure, "أنفسهم" here does not refer merely to the soul, but also connotes physical pleasures. This shade of meaning is brilliantly conveyed by Hilali and Khan (2005): "which their ownselves desire." However, too literal a translation in such a context shall be abandoned altogether. The verse could have been simply rendered "which they desire" since it sounds more idiomatic in English, while conveying the original sense.
   b. "واتقوا يومًا لا تجزي نفس عن نفس شيئًا" (2: 48) is rendered "Then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another". The translation is in line with the esoteric belief of soul-only afterlife. Hilali and Khan translated "نفس" as person, but then used the pronoun "him," whereas accurate translation must include both men and women. A candidate such as "anyone" successfully resolves the gender difficulty here.
   c. "ولكن كانوا أنفسهم يظلمون" (2: 57) is rendered "But they harmed their own souls." The word "souls" here is inaccurate and conforms to the esoteric belief, whereas "themselves" is the accurate candidate. It shall be noted that the verse is spoken from an otherworldly perspective, and hence the functional "كانوا" is important as it signifies persistent action in the past, in case those wrongdoers failed to repent. This functional word proves a pitfall for translators (Khawalda, 2004). In Ali's rendering above, it is completely dropped. In Hilali and Khan, it is rendered "but they wronged themselves". A more accurate rendering would have been "but they used to…".
3. "الجنة/جنات" (Paradise) is consistently and unnecessarily rendered "gardens," whereas the more accurate and more familiar religious term "paradise" lends itself readily to a translator who had also studied the Bible as Ali did.

4. The sensuous details of the rivers of water, milk, wine and honey, the maidens (*hoor*), the fruits, etc. are dismissed by Ali as symbolic. He even tries to establish a rationale for such details in the Quran, suggesting that such details were mainly inspired by the barren desert and harsh climate of Arabia, and the Arabs' dreams of gardens (p. 4).

5. Similarly, torture in hell is dismissed as figurative. Emphasis is placed on the agony of the soul. He establishes this esoteric doctrine at an early stage of his book: "Fire is the symbol of punishment" and "gardens are the symbol of felicity" (p. 22). In a revealing passage, which I owe to Kidwai (2011), Ali provides clues to the docrtine on which his views are based:

> Our doctrine of the Hereafter is not strictly a doctrine of Rewards and Punishments… To be righteous merely for the hope of reward for one's self or for fear of punishment may be good at a certain elementary stage of spiritual progress when higher motives are yet unintelligible. But as the light of Islam illumines the soul more and more, it is seen that virtue is its own reward and evil its own punishment. (pp. 1464-5)

6. Quite often, Ali conveys the original meaning in the translation whenever it proved outrageous to suppress the evident exoteric meaning. In such cases, he relies on the footnotes to dismiss the exoteric meaning and establish an esoteric one in its place. For example, in (74: 26-31), the translation conveys the original sense, but the notes introduce esoteric interpretations and beliefs. In his notes to these verses, he negates physical torment in hellfire, the nineteen angels guarding hell, and hell itself as a physical entity.

7. The Scales of the Day of Recompense are also assigned symbolic meanings. For example, in (101: 6), he points out that the balance is figurative.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper argues that Ali's translation of, and commentary on, the Holy Quran are deeply anchored in the esoteric Ismaili Bohra doctrine. Ali consistently adopts an esoteric stance throughout, injecting esoteric doctrines into his work. Hence, Ali's views as expounded in his work are not merely accidental mistakes emanating from his modernist views or lack of proficiency in Arabic. Rather, they are conscious representations of the Ismaili doctrine. It was found that Ali uses the translation and the *ta'wil* to establish Quranic origins of Ismaili doctrines and also to fuse those doctrines in the Quran with missionary zeal. Ali's work, therefore, is a conscious misrepresentation of the Glorious Quran in favor of asserting a parochial, deviant interpretation of Islam, and hence has to be viewed as a deviant work rather than a classic of orthodox Islamic literature. Yet, Ali's translation still enjoys a respectable place in the Quran translation literature due to its wide circulation, and cannot be simply dismissed as worthless. However, examining the translation carefully reveals that it is corrupted beyond repair and is unfit in its present form, or even in the revised versions, for republication. In the process of conducting this research, the Manar International revised edition of Ali's translation (1998) was consulted and found flawed as many esoteric doctrines and views were left intact. Unless a painstaking effort of a throrough revision of the translation and commentary is carried out to expurgate the work of latent and manifest esoteric Ismaili doctrines, Ali's work has better be abandoned.

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