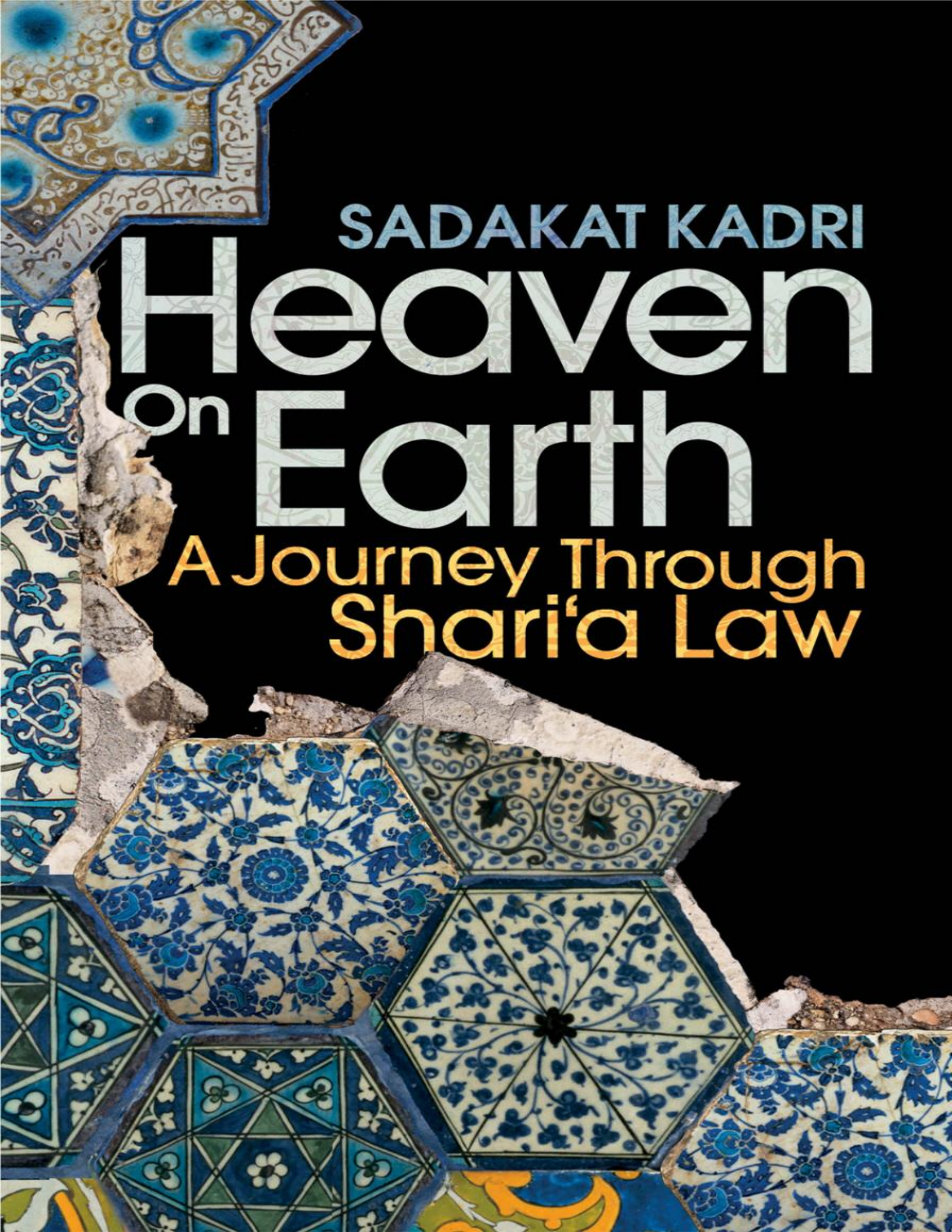
SADAKAT KADRI
Heaven on Earth
A Journey Through Shari'a Law

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About the Book

This book is important because it is:

Unique. *Heaven on Earth* offers a critique of extremism that is human rights-based and entertaining – combining the comparative approach of **Karen Armstrong** and the immediacy of **Ed Husain** (*The Islamist*) with storytelling.

Timely. At a time of veil bans, Qur'an burnings and English Defence League protests, Kadri voices a liberal view of Islamic history and shows Muslims working against repression. This book explains up-to-the-minute brutalities.

Epic. Interviews, anecdotes, personal reflection and analysis are set against a narrative that sweeps from seventh-century Mecca to the war in Afghanistan. Civilisations are evoked via the vivid lives of caliphs, mystics, and travellers. Legal changes are described through the feuds, courtroom dramas, conquests and cataclysms that have left their mark on modern Islamic law.

First-hand. On the road for five months, Kadri travelled through Iran just before the June 2009 election protests, and took part in a human rights conference there with ayatollahs and academics.

Eye-opening. This book goes beyond the explosive headline issues (criminal justice, women, jihad, religious freedom) to reveal the stranger ones: genie exorcisms; the legal consequences of premature ejaculation; online fatwa

advice; the sharia approach to Facebook and Qur’anic mobile phone ringtones, etc.

Bold. *Heaven on Earth* primarily targets religious extremism, but also cuts anti-Muslim panic down to size.

About the Author

Half-Finnish and half-Pakistani, Sadakat Kadri was born in London in 1964. He graduated with a first in history and law from Trinity College, Cambridge, and after taking a master's degree at Harvard Law School qualified as a barrister and New York attorney. He has been attached to London's Doughty Street Chambers since the mid-1990s, and has worked on human rights issues in several overseas jurisdictions, including Turkey and parts of the Middle East. His last book was *The Trial: A History from Socrates to O.J. Simpson*, he is a past winner of the *Spectator*/Shiva Naipaul travel writing prize, and before setting off to research the sharia, he wrote a regular column on legal questions for the *New Statesman*.

Also by Sadakat Kadri

The Trial: A History from Socrates to O.J. Simpson

For my mum and dad, with much love

SADAKAT KADRI

Heaven on Earth

A Journey Through Shari'a Law

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Prologue: Infinite Justice

The north Indian city of Badaun is barely known beyond the subcontinent, but among the Muslims of India it has a great reputation. Seven ancient Islamic shrines encircle the town, collectively drawing visitors from miles around, and one spiritual speciality has always brought them immense local renown. They are said to facilitate the exorcism of jinns. That is a weighty claim among the poor, the credulous and the desperate. Genies of the region are not popularly imagined to be the bountiful servants of lamp-rubbing legend. They are mercurial creatures, capable of wreaking havoc, who routinely seize control of people's lives. Victims are suddenly plunged into depression or discontent, possessed of unusual ideas, and urged to speak, to lash out, even sometimes to kill. Entire families suffer as a consequence, and dozens are therefore to be found at the largest of the shrines, where they camp out in a shanty-filled cemetery pending miraculous interventions on behalf of their afflicted relatives. The scene is permanently alive, serviced by a nearby market, and it swells into something of a carnival as day-trippers arrive by the hundreds on the eve of Friday prayers. The spectacle had horrified and fascinated me in roughly equal measure ever since I first visited Badaun – my father's birthplace – in 1979, at the age of fifteen. Elderly relations had warned me then to steer well clear of the place after dark on a Thursday night.

In the spring of 2009, I finally got round to disobeying them.

I reached the shrine long after dusk, and its neem tree glades were pulsating to the drums and accordions of an ululating troupe of musicians. Picking my way through knots of pilgrims, past shadowy figures who babbled in the darkness or lunged from wooden posts to which they had been chained, I eventually reached the marble courtyard at the mausoleum's centre. The everyday bedlam of India looked to have merged with a scene from *The Crucible*. In a moonlight that was fluorescent, bright-eyed girls were whipping their hair into propellers, while older folk, senile or despondent, chattered to tomb-stones. As I fidgeted with my camera settings, a teenage girl next to me stepped forward, assisted by anxious relatives, to quiver and collapse into the waiting arms of two shrine employees. Others strode forward to swoon in their turn, and were expertly scooped aside to make way for fresh fainters. Whooping children, barely able to believe their luck, cartwheeled all the while around the hysterics and their helpers. It was hours before the chaos gave way to chirrups, and a semblance of peace returned to the sepulchres.

Walking back to my relatives' home across a meadow filled with tottering fourteenth-century funeral vaults, I wondered how to make sense of what had just occurred. I had come to India in search of colour after a year immersed in libraries, but it seemed almost as though I had found too much. A survey of Islamic legal history demands flexibility if it is to entertain rather than anaesthetise, but fitting tales of jinn-exorcism into an account of the shari'a called for the literary equivalent of a crowbar – until a few hours later. By then, I had found another shrine: a postage stamp of a necropolis, comprising a dusty courtyard, an ancient banyan tree and a chiffon-draped tomb-stone. In the afternoon heat, the otherworldly excitements it might

ordinarily have inspired had slowed to a crawl. Two women were gazing at the central slab, motionless beneath their burkas, as though it might shuffle away at any moment. A man stood before the headstone, his palms cupped in prayer, while his young son raced around and kissed other graves at random. The only sign of any transcendental goings-on at all came from a woman who was chanting breathlessly as she strode to and fro beneath the lush branches of the banyan tree, watched by a squatting husband and mournful children. But when I lined up the scene for a photograph, it turned out to contain far more than met the eye. A moustachioed man who was tending a smouldering sheaf of incense sticks at the gnarled roots of the tree raised his hand forbiddingly. ‘No photographs,’ he ordered. ‘She is making her plea to the king of the jinns.’

Throughout the previous night, I had wondered how, precisely, a person possessed by a jinn could expect to obtain relief, and I obediently lowered my camera. The man clearly possessed some kind of authority, for he was selling a selection of holy knick-knacks that were neatly laid out next to the green coverlet of the shrine’s main tomb, and I decided to strike up a conversation. Using a combination of quizzical gestures and atrocious Urdu, I asked if he had any charms worth taking on the three-month trek to Syria and Istanbul that I had lined up. His first suggestion was an amulet to ward off the evil eye. When I pondered it sceptically, he proffered a leather pouch containing a secret verse of the Qur’an. It apparently guaranteed good fortune, God willing, so long as the purchaser did not try to read the contents. That seemed a bargain, and as rupees changed hands, I seized the moment. Why no cameras? He nodded solemnly towards the thick cluster of banyan roots and explained that they enthroned the king of the jinns – whose court was now in session.

That explained the photography ban – in a sense – but what, I wondered, was the likely outcome of the woman’s

complaint? ‘The king will listen to both sides and make a ruling,’ replied the shrine’s custodian.

‘Will the jinn then leave?’ I enquired.

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ he replied with a wiggle of his head. ‘Or maybe a hanging.’ Startled, I asked how that would work. He laughed, slapped a hand around my shoulder, and pointed to a colourfully decorated bough of the banyan. ‘The jinn, not the woman.’

‘Physically hanged?’ I asked meaninglessly.

‘Yes … actual fact,’ he replied. ‘If that is required by the shari‘a.’[fn1]

The claim was as surprising to me as it ought to have been predictable. I already knew that the invisible world is considered no less subject to God’s law than the visible one, and that jurists have often had occasion to consider the rights and obligations of genies. A tenth-century writer named al-Shibli once wrote about the lawfulness of their marriages with human beings, for example: though aware of unions that had been fruitful, he warned of inevitable antagonisms and urged all readers to stick to their own kind.[1] At many Sunni madrasas, jinns are thought to be so committed to observance of the shari‘a that chairs are left empty for them during jurisprudence classes. And as I found out later in the spring of 2009, their activities are still liable to be considered at the very highest level. The realisation came in Damascus, at a question-and-answer session chaired by Ayatollah Mohammad Fadlallah. The Lebanese cleric (who has since died) used to be routinely characterised in the Western media as the ‘spiritual leader of Hezbollah’ but opposition to Israel never made him controversial in Syria and Lebanon. There was one aspect of his teachings which did give rise to dispute, however – his relative liberalism when it came to addressing sexual taboos – and at the meeting, the sniggering students of a rival cleric demanded to know whether he thought it lawful to have sex with a jinn outside marriage. ‘Why are you

wasting my time?' he snapped. 'It's fine so long as you use a condom. Next question, please.'

Some people might find it odd or even offensive that a book about the shari'a should open with a discussion of jinns, let alone a reference to sexual congress with them. Westerners have been exoticising Islam for centuries, and a work that sets out to scrutinise Islamic jurisprudence by reference to the supernatural can only invite suspicion. But though intercourse with genies is the kind of subject that would certainly have intrigued many an orientalist scholar in years gone by, the fact that its lawfulness came up for discussion in a twenty-first-century Shi'a seminary is ample proof that it retains legal significance. Ayatollah Fadlallah's response, for all its contempt, also has contemporary relevance – because he was either right or wrong to imply that thousand-year-old legal traditions might have become redundant. And though any respectable Islamic jurist would ridicule the suggestion that jinns should be hanged from a sturdy branch, it is perfectly sensible to wonder what makes an execution so absurd – and what safeguards exist to prevent other people from making similar mistakes about God's law. The question is important. More than a dozen of the world's fifty or so Muslim states possess constitutions which acknowledge Islam to be a source of national law[2] – and several invoke the shari'a to punish defendants who are considerably more tangible than a jinn.

I found myself before the king of the jinns in the first place because the tomb at the shrine's centre belonged to one of my direct ancestors. Abdullah was an Arab born in Mecca in the twelfth century, and his journey to India had been an eventful one. He left home in around 1192, the same year that Delhi fell to Muslims for the first time, and reached Lahore at the height of a ferocious regional conflict. After marrying off his son and travelling companion and apparently settling down, he then upped sticks all over

again almost two decades later. He got to Delhi just before the sultan accidentally and fatally impaled himself on his pommel during a polo game in 1210.[3] A succession crisis ensued, and when a battle-hardened slave-general was elevated to replace the sultan the following year, Abdullah set off for the recently conquered outpost in which the new ruler had earned his reputation. It was there, in Badaun, that his wanderings finally came to an end.

Abdullah's journey through war zones to the jungled fringes of the Islamic world was as arduous as it sounds. Although Badaun gave him a wife and at least one more son, it was a very uncongenial place. Two battles, separated by seven years, had left its fields pockmarked by hundreds of graves. Its Muslim conquerors were confined to a garrison, commanders of a militarised cemetery that was surrounded by a seething Hindu sea. But Abdullah was undaunted, because he had come on a mission. He was a Sufi, in an era when Islamic mystics were as fervent as they were introspective – far more like the warrior monks of Christendom than the flying carpeteers of later legend. But though Abdullah almost certainly wielded a sword earlier on his journey, his outlook was not a military one. He had come to Badaun to battle for souls.

As far as Abdullah would have been concerned, the task on which he was engaged was a sacred struggle – a jihad – but the way that he and thousands of other Sufis chose to pursue it was distinctive.[4] In their missionary work, they accentuated similarities rather than differences. Instead of condemning Hindus as irredeemable polytheists, they recognised their pantheon to be different expressions of the one God. They fused Islamic prayer with Hindu mantras to create the ecstatic devotional music known as qawwali. And in a country that was littered with pocket temples and accustomed to worship through the senses, they transformed the graves of fallen warriors into the nuclei of magical shrines: incense-wreathed and saffron-threaded

portals into an unseen world, where it was said that jinns could be tamed, the dead might speak, and supplicants' wishes become saints' commands. The package sold. Bolstered by practical incentives – the enhanced status that Islamic egalitarianism promised low-caste Hindus, for example – Islam won hearts and minds by the thousand. Within a decade of Abdullah's arrival, Badaun itself was on track to become one of the most important centres of Islamic culture in northern India. Abdullah's own legacy was so enduring that, eight centuries later, he was still being venerated by descendants of the men and women he had helped to convert.

I had been very pleased to learn about Abdullah from my father, who recited his adventures from an old genealogy shortly before I set off for India. His existence had furnished me with a useful lineage, and though academic texts often insist that Sufism has no connection with the colourful fantasies of orientalist legend, his reputation turned out to be gratifyingly magical. Abdullah is known in Badaun simply as Pir Makki, or the Holy Man of Mecca, and devout believers assured me that he was a saint of the highest order. His influence over the unseen world was all but unquestionable – why else would the king of the jinns frequent his shrine? – and hundreds of scribbled prayers around his grave testified to intercessory powers that could tackle problems from matrimonial strife to exam nerves. According to the shrine's amulet vendor, his uncanny abilities had been evident even during his lifetime. Anxious not to abandon followers in Mecca, he had taken the trouble to teleport himself back once a week to lead their Friday prayers.

Over the course of my travels, however, it became apparent that Abdullah's standing with the home crowd was no guarantee of admiration further afield. The saint- and shrine-dominated rituals of Badaun are associated with one particular set of Indian believers – known as Barelvis –

and though there are millions of them, they have long been in conflict with another sect named after a famous madrasa town called Deoband. And many Deobandis take the view that pioneers such as Abdullah were actually responsible for vast amounts of damage. Instead of promoting Islam by cleaving to the path laid down in the seventh century by the Prophet Muhammad,[fn2] they had borrowed from the smells, bells and menagerie temples of Hinduism. The consequence had been terrible spiritual corruption, and the incorporation of innovations ranging from musical prayers to incense sticks. According to the Deobandis, asking saints to intercede with God was not Islamic at all; it was an act of idolatry akin to worshipping a monkey or an elephant. Claims to exorcise people according to the shari'a were equally preposterous: jinns inhabited a parallel universe and insofar as they might sometimes possess human beings, that was the unchallengeable will of God.

Similar complaints about Sufi heterodoxy date back centuries, and they have some history on their side. Among Abdullah's near contemporaries in late-thirteenth-century Cairo and Damascus were mystical sects of a notoriously inventive sort, known for practices that ranged from cannabis consumption to penis-piercing, and the willingness of early Indian missionaries to accommodate local customs does not lack for circumstantial evidence. One of the men who led Badaun's conquest is buried in a mosque alongside his horse – as well as a lion, a snake and, most mysteriously, a parrot. Another mystic of the era, known as Mangho, is honoured in northern Karachi with a shrine that accommodates two hundred sacred crocodiles, all of them supposedly descended from his head lice, and worshippers often wrap up their prayers at the nearby mosque by sacrificing bags of offal to the reptiles. And though signs of sacred penis-piercing are nowadays scant, cannabis retains a degree of popularity: in the anarchic shrine of Sehwan Sharif, narcotic potions are liberally

shared as religious ecstasy kicks in, and hopes of spiritual communion in the Sufi mausoleums of Lahore inspire would-be mystics to smoke *charas* by the fistful.

The eclecticism does not prove that cross-fertilisation is inherently irreligious, however. The point is made most vividly with architectural examples. The magnificent turquoise-tiled mosques of cities such as Esfahan and Shiraz owe their existence to the encounter of Muslims with an alien people – the Mongols. Istanbul's skyline, a bubble bath of stone that is about as emblematically Islamic as any sight on earth, visibly mirrors the domed basilicas of Christian Byzantium and the Ottomans who produced it were steeped in Sufism. Indeed, Islam would have been *incapable* of developing such traditions without a capacity to learn and borrow. That struck me forcefully when I visited the ghostly ruins of a city called Anjar, built from scratch less than a century after the Prophet's death, which now nestles among garlic fields in a quiet corner of Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Its lizard-infested villas, palaces and frescoed bathhouses are perfectly Graeco-Roman – not only in terms of inspiration, but also, in the case of dozens of Corinthian pillars lining its grassy *cardo maximus*, in terms of materials.

Such ruminations would belong to a travel diary rather than a book about the shari'a, were it not for one fact. Conservatives have imagined Islamic law to be as eternal as any other aspect of the faith, and arguments about authenticity have therefore had tremendous legal consequences. That is, to a certain extent, consequent on the very notion of Islam – with its commitment to a revealed text and an inspired Prophet – but it has affected approaches to historical scholarship as well. The idea has become widespread that God's revelations were built into practical rules by people untainted by impurities – companions of Muhammad, heroic early generations and

omniscient jurists – whose probity transcends the vagaries of place and the passage of time.

That claim raised issues I had encountered before. As a law student at Harvard in the late 1980s, I had learned that many American conservatives consider the Founding Fathers of the United States to be possessed of incontestable wisdom. Some went further, arguing that God had manifested His will through their deeds. According to certain lawyers, that could oblige judges to interpret the federal Constitution according to its eighteenth-century meaning, or even require that they consider the Founders' views when resolving contemporary legal controversies: limits to the death penalty, for example, or governmental restrictions on free speech. Back then, I had felt that the deference to ancient vocabularies and dead people's thoughts had the whiff of a seance about it. Pinning down a person's meaning and motives is hard enough when he or she is alive. The collective intention of a large and diverse group of the deceased is difficult to conceptualise, let alone know. The traditionalist approach towards interpreting the shari'a did not, on its face, look very different. It seemed more akin to ancestor worship than any grave-venerating ritual could be – simply because, notwithstanding my personal debt to Abdullah of Mecca, holy wisdom does not automatically pass down the generations.

This book was more than three years in gestation but my decision to write it sprang out of an earlier and very inauspicious event: the bombings of London's Tube and bus network on 7 July 2005. Those murders were notoriously committed by men who cited Islam as their inspiration, and in their aftermath claims and counterclaims about Islamic law began to reverberate around the media. Having recently published a history of criminal justice in the West,[fn3] I was feeling rather redundant – until I realised that no one was actually throwing much light on the issues

under discussion. Fiery preachers and random Muslim youths were making all sorts of bellicose assertions about ‘the shari‘a’. People who wanted to be angry with them were assuming that the shari‘a meant what they said. Noise, rather than information, was rushing to fill a void, while critical questions were going not only unanswered, but unasked. Where was the shari‘a written down? To what extent was it accepted that its rules had been crafted by human beings? And what gave the men who were so loudly invoking God’s law the right to speak in its name?

It took a surprisingly long time to establish even basic answers, and it is worth recalling a few of them here. When the Qur’an was first enunciated by the Prophet Muhammad during the 620s, the word ‘shari‘a’ conveyed the idea of a direct path to water – a route of considerable importance to a desert people – and at a time when no one systematically differentiated between the world that was and the world that ought to be, Islam’s straight and narrow described as much as it prescribed. Scholars would not write anything about it for at least another century, and half a millennium would elapse before their legal ideas finally settled into definitive form, but devout Muslims have always thought of the shari‘a in grand terms. The fourteenth-century Syrian jurist Ibn Qayyim (1292–1350) set out the vision well:

> [It] is the absolute cure for all ills … It is life and nutrition, the medicine, the light, the cure and the safeguard. Every good in this life is derived from it and achieved through it, and every deficiency in existence results from its dissipation. If it had not been for the fact that some of its rules remain [in this world] this world would [have] become corrupted and the universe would [have been] dissipated … If God wish[ed] to destroy the world and dissolve existence, He would void whatever remains of its injunctions. For the shari‘a which was sent to His Prophet … is

> the pillar of existence and the key to success in this world and the Hereafter.[5]

As befits so awesome a phenomenon, the science of studying the law – jurisprudence, or *fiqh* – came to be considered a duty akin to prayer. There was no aspect of creation that fell outside its scope, and jurists would over time pronounce on questions from the lawfulness of logic to the legal meaning of the moon. They hypothesised dilemmas of fantastically unfortunate proportions: what Muslims should do on a desert island, for example, if they ever found themselves pining away alongside a dead shipmate, a pig and a flask of wine (clue: avoid the pork and alcohol until desperate).[6] Certain scholars took an interest in issues such as criminal justice and jihad, but others explored far more specialised aspects of the cosmic order – the calculation of inheritance shares, say, or the jurisprudence of ablutions – and no problem was ever too personal to escape the scholarly gaze. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), arguably the greatest of all Sunni theologians, once subjected the intimacies of marriage to rigorous juristic scrutiny and attributed to the Prophet himself a commandment on the importance of foreplay. Sex was unholy unless preceded by 'kiss[es] and [sweet] words', Muhammad had reportedly warned. 'Let none of you come upon his wife like an animal.'[7]

By the time I took the plunge and signed up in late 2007 to write an account of Islamic ideas of justice, it was clear therefore that challenges lay ahead. Herding the research presented inherent problems, and the distinction between shari'a and *fiqh*, all too often overlooked in the West, called for careful negotiation. The divine law is considered so sacred among devout Muslims that attempts to critique 'the shari'a' are liable to be perceived as a denunciation of God rather than an argument. The rules of *fiqh*, on the other hand, can never be more than a human approximation of

the divine will. Individual jurists have often tried to blur the difference, but Islamic tradition in general has never immunised lawyerly ideas from scrutiny. It was through that gap – the crack between heaven and earth – that they would have to be explored.

The difficulties moved from the theoretical to the real when, between late 2008 and the spring of 2011, I travelled around South Asia, Iran and the Middle East and met jurists in person. Suspicion of the Western world in the region has rarely been higher, and my background as a human rights barrister was more often a hindrance than a help: an indictment of the West's hypocrisy rather than an expression of its values. And although I traded ruthlessly on my un-English name and paternal roots, suspicions were often intense. The chief law lecturer of a Lucknow madrasa began by warning me that any attempt to understand the shari'a required a fluency in classical Arabic and proficiency in Qur'anic exegesis, and any questions I had in mind were therefore at least a decade premature. The president of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami Party complained that my inquiries about Taliban interpretations of Islamic law sounded like those of a NATO stooge, and that I would be better off abandoning my 'agenda' and asking him instead about 'American napalm, daisy cutters and helicopter gunships'. A particularly memorable put-down came from Muhammad Afshani, the director of fatwas at a militant Karachi madrasa called the Jamia Farooqia. As we sat cross-legged on a threadbare mosque carpet, I outlined the nature of my project and told him that, *insh'allah*, I would fill the gaps in my own knowledge by learning from scholars with different opinions – even conflicting ones. He smiled sagely, and murmured that I had taken on a difficult project. I nodded, with what I hoped was humility. 'And no one', he continued evenly, 'should ever embark on such a journey until they know their destination.'[8]

The view that questions were inappropriate until the answers were known was one I felt bound to ignore, and as a consequence I did indeed end up with several unforeseen ideas. Mufti Afshani was wrong to the extent that my travels were productive on their own terms, however, and that is reflected in the relatively straightforward structure of this book. The first part sets out the historical events that informed the creation of Islamic jurisprudence, while the second considers its status today, with a particular focus on four themes: attitudes towards war, modernity, criminal justice and religious tolerance. It seeks unashamedly to entertain as well as inform, but lest it be necessary to say so – and it probably is – it does not intend at any point to challenge the sacred stature of the Prophet Muhammad, the self-evident appeal of Islam, or the almightiness of God. It seeks instead to recall the history that attended the elucidation of Islamic law, and to demonstrate that over the years, legal rules have often been rewritten or ignored in the name of the shari‘a. It also aims to show that many of the people who nowadays claim the clearest perspectives on seventh-century wisdom form part of a revivalist trend that is in important respects just a few decades old. Even people who disagree will, I hope, recognise at least that issues so important are worthy of debate.

It is tempting in conclusion to plagiarise al-Jahiz, the wittiest writer of ninth-century Baghdad, who once demanded full credit for a work’s strengths while insisting that any inadequacies were the fault of his audience’s unrealistic expectations.[9] I grudgingly accept, however, that my own shortcomings cannot be so easily palmed off. All I ask is that readers bear in mind the words of another great Arab: the tenth-century historian and traveller, al-Mas‘udi. ‘If no one could write books but he who possessed perfect knowledge, no books would be written.’[10]

fn1 In the interests of readability, only two transliteration symbols are used in this book: the opening inverted comma ‘ signifies the slightly strangulated vowel *ain* and its closing counterpart ’ indicates the glottal stop *hamza*. They are included only when they fall in the middle of a word.

fn2 It should be noted that Muslims conventionally add ‘May God bless him and grant him peace’ (*sallalahu alayhi wa sallam*) when referring to the Prophet. Punctuating the text in that way would be more likely to alienate Western readers than inspire them, however, and this book does not use the phrase, or the variants that are often attached to the names of lesser prophets, archangels and God.

fn3 *The Trial: A History from Socrates to O.J. Simpson*.

PART ONE

THE PAST

1

Laying Down the Law

‘RECITE!’ THE DISEMBODIED voice echoed around the cavern. ‘In the name of thy God who created man from a clot of blood!’ With those words, according to the Qur’an, all of humanity was instructed to submit to Islam – but the only person present was a forty-year-old Arab merchant named Muhammad, who reacted by looking around with astonishment. Although it was the holy month of Ramadan and he had come to the cave to meditate, he had never before experienced so uncanny an event. The order was then repeated – ‘Recite!’ – as incomprehensible symbols floated on a piece of cloth before his eyes. Muhammad protested that he could not even read, only to find himself lifted off the ground and crushed until words that he barely understood filled his mouth.[1]

Muhammad was terrified. He came from Mecca, a trading centre on the western edge of the Arabian peninsula which doubled as a place of pilgrimage, and the pagan cults with which he was familiar had no shortage of malevolent deities. Their nymphs, satyrs and storm gods were constantly up to no good, fighting dusty battles on the desert horizon or shifting villages across its shimmering sands, and Muhammad feared that he was falling victim to one of the most destructive creatures of them all – the jinn, a spirit capable of controlling a person’s mind. He scrambled out of the cave, besieged by visions, but as he

swayed suicidally on a rocky precipice he was at last made to realise that he was dealing with no mere demon. A colossal figure now filled the starry sky, and its voice addressed him wherever he turned. ‘O Muhammad!’ it boomed. ‘You are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.’[2]

Events on the hillside detained Muhammad for so long that his wife, Khadija, sent out a search party. She was an independently wealthy businesswoman, older than her husband, and when he was found, traumatised and shivering, she swiftly took charge. The region in which Mecca was situated, the Hijaz, was home to a number of faiths and one of her cousins was an expert in matters spiritual, having studied the Torah and converted to Christianity. A visit was arranged, and Waraqa bin Nawfal’s response was both encouraging and ominous. The good news was that Muhammad had encountered the one true God and that the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) had been associated with some very auspicious events. The bad news was that Meccans would vilify Muhammad, ridicule his story and do their utmost to kill him.[3]

Islam so despises the culture it replaced that its hostile claims about Arab paganism always merit a pinch of salt, but there would have been good reasons for Waraqa to be concerned. Although the Meccans considered one of their gods to be paramount, and even called him *the* god – *al-lah*, in Arabic – monotheism ran directly contrary to their traditions. As far as they were concerned, *al-lah* governed the universe in alliance with three daughters and several hundred subordinates, and that belief was fortified by some sound economic calculations. Across the city stood dozens of domed red leather tents, each of them housing holy statuettes and images, and an idol-strewn palace known as the Ka‘ba drew thousands of pilgrims annually. The shrine was jointly managed by two branches of the dominant Quraish clan – the Umayyads and the Hashemites – and their partnership was as delicate as it was lucrative.

Muhammad was a respected Hashemite, but any attempt to revise the rules would not go down well.

The year was 610 and the channel of communication that had opened between Muhammad and God would transform the world. Thousands of lines of divine wisdom would reach him from the heavens over the next two decades, transmitted by a disembodied voice or heralded by a bell, and as he fell entranced and moved his lips to memorise God's words, he would see far beyond the visible world, far into heaven and deep into hell. Even the jinns that he had initially feared were said to have converted en masse, after several overheard a nocturnal recitation and were struck by its beauty.[4] Among Muslims, Muhammad has become a correspondingly epic figure, and every child is brought up on stories about his valour, wisdom and kindness. But though evidence of the admiration is ancient, the process that saw it recorded was far from straightforward. The revelations he received were collected together as a written Qur'an ('recitation') soon after his death, but it took another century for the first written accounts of his life to appear, and only in the late ninth century did scholars compile collections of reports (*hadiths*)[5] which the majority accepted as authentic. Older books were subsequently relegated to irrelevance whenever they differed. As a consequence, the orthodox version of Islam's origins became definitive only about three centuries after the events it described. Yet for many Muslims, history has turned into an aspect of faith rather than a subject for debate – assumed insofar as it supports the conventional view, and sacrilegious if it seems somehow to undermine it.

Any account of this period therefore faces some serious problems. Not only is there little way to test the received version of events; the hadiths themselves are contradictory. There is plenty on which the biographers agree, to be sure. No one has ever denied that Muhammad was tall, dark-

eyed, handsome, fragrant, lustrous, well-mannered, softly spoken, modest, firm of handshake and purposeful of stride. But the uncertainties quickly multiply. Some hadiths state that he was prone to tears, while others insist that he had an easy smile. There are claims that he once envisioned hell to be full of females, and many others that depict him not just comfortable but delighted by the company of intelligent and opinionated women. He was a man of unyielding rigour, say some, but he is also supposed to have laughed when told that an arrested drunk had staggered free from a flogging, and to have counselled followers against further action.[6] The truth must lie somewhere – but all that can be said for sure is that the descriptions frequently say more about the describers than they could possibly reveal about Muhammad himself.

A coherent picture does emerge out of the early biographies, however, and it portrays someone who was both resourceful and remarkable. Born after the death of his father, Muhammad lost both his mother and his grandfather during childhood,[7] and grew up in the household of an uncle named Abu Talib. Though orphaned and illiterate, he married well and built up a successful trading partnership with Khadija, and his acumen was impressive enough for his fellow Quraish to ask him at one point to arbitrate a dispute over management of the Ka‘ba. And even during the first quiet years of his mission, he won supporters. Khadija quickly accepted that her husband was a messenger of God,[8] and though Abu Talib would never acknowledge Muhammad’s prophethood, his ten-year-old son Ali pledged his allegiance. Slaves and social outcasts also trickled to his cause, along with a prosperous merchant named Abu Bakr. Precisely what Muhammad was divulging at this early stage is not known – but he was clearly already inspirational.

Three years after first making contact, God at last told Muhammad that the time had come to spread the word

more generally. With some trepidation, he duly informed his fellow Meccans that he was a prophet – the last in a line that ran via Jesus and Moses all the way back to Adam. Then, more boldly, he revealed that *al-lah* had neither companions nor daughters. The Quraish were blindly following their ancestors, he declared, 'even though their fathers were void of wisdom and guidance',[9] and their activities at the Ka'ba were fundamentally misdirected. They should pray twice daily towards Jerusalem instead,[10] and seek peace through submission to the divine – a state encapsulated by the Arabic word 'Islam'. Only then would they begin to appreciate God's true nature: a spiritual presence 'nearer to [man] than his jugular vein'.[11]

Although no one would ever doubt Muhammad's eloquence, early reactions were unpromising. Rumours rapidly spread that he had fallen under the spell of a jinn or poetic inspiration (maladies then considered more or less interchangeable), and the first response of Mecca's pagans was to offer Muhammad the best medical treatment that money could buy.[12] But he had found his voice – and it was assuming ever greater urgency. Whereas Meccans seem to have believed that life after death differed little from life before it, Muhammad began to warn that a great reckoning awaited everyone, and that earthly deeds carried eternal consequences. In his telling, God was about to snuff out His stars and set seas boiling, and as creation shuddered to a close, trumpet blasts were going to wake all the dead there had ever been.[13] There would then be a final Hour at which commendable deeds would be weighed against sins – and all the signs suggested that Meccans were in line for scorching winds, molten brass and unquenchable hellfire.

The apocalyptic vision was informed by solid moral arguments. The world into which Muhammad had been born was so stratified that clans did not even intermarry, while women were chattels[14] and slaves bore a shameful status that lasted through generations.[15] Vengeance was as