

## Chapter 1. Blurring the Boundaries

‘...the creaturely significance of man must today be assessed against the contemporary background of a new seriousness about the human ethos’ (Akhtar 1990, p.139).

The future of the human must be, for humans anyway, the most important philosophical and religious issue. Perhaps it always has been, yet much recent scholarship on what is referred to as ‘transhumanism’ lays claim to the question of the future human as a new issue and seeks to define it within a narrow secular arena that shuts all doors to the religious. Like all ‘-isms’, there are many variants of ‘transhumanism’ and what we are witnessing is a new transhumanism with its own rules, which, in this book, shall be referred to as ‘*secular transhumanism*’. This secular transhumanism displays many of the same tendencies as new, or ‘militant’, atheism, most especially in its antipathy towards religious belief, while being more open to other scholarly disciplines. *Why* religion is so excluded will be examined later on, and particular emphasis will be on the religion of Islam, especially as - if not explicitly stated - Islam often seems to represent all that is ‘bad’ about religious belief so far as the militant atheist (and, by implication, the secular transhumanist) is concerned.

The transhumanist debate is both fascinating and extremely important and, in the future, it is destined to increase in importance with technological change. Islam, for its part, should be a part of this debate, and so here I want to *reclaim* the debate, to show that others can play the transhumanist game, that the doors to the arena should be open and should welcome contributions from the non-secular. Note I use the term ‘reclaim’, not ‘introduce’, for, as shall be shown, in many ways Islam has, through most of its history, been involved in one way or another in the transhumanist debate, whilst it may not specifically use the term ‘transhumanism’ or understand it in the stricter sense that secular transhumanists are seeking to define it. The postmodern world in which we find ourselves is confronted by a myriad of emotional and intellectual responses to the rapid developments in technology. Some of these responses are fearful and perplexing, others are more embracing and exciting. What unites them all is a questioning of what it means to be human. This questioning, this *re-questioning*, is nothing new in terms of concerns for the future of humankind, and the transhumanist movement readily acknowledges its debt to the intellectual past, at least as far back as the European Enlightenment.

Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska define transhumanism as ‘our seemingly endless capacity for self-transcendence, our “god-like” character, if you will (Fuller and Lipinska 2014, p.1) and this is a definition I wholly subscribe to, for it succinctly presents two key characteristics of the transhumanist movement: firstly, the ‘endless capacity for self-transcendence’, with the emphasis, for me, on ‘endless’. Secondly, our ‘god-like’ character. Where transhumanism appears more radical is that technology in the future, in perhaps the near future, will result in greater ‘displacement’ of the human condition. We are talking here of a much more radical stage in evolution, from one species of the genus *homo* to a whole new species. This more radical form of transhumanism breaks away from the four-billion-year-old process of natural selection (assuming one accepts natural selection as a scientific fact and, as we see later, not everyone does) and now puts evolution in the hands of scientists. We are talking about animals becoming gods as a result of their own intelligent design, and leaves seemingly no room for the divine, for *homo sapiens* is divine.

But if humans are indeed to *become* gods, then it is vital to understand what it means to *be* a god. After all, such an exploration may also raise the question of whether such an evolution is desirable. Religion is often considered to be distinct from science and technology - in itself a debatable point as I shall argue - but, even if it were so distinct, that does not mean that it should remain silent on issues that arise from science and technology, especially when it relates so directly to the transformation of the human being. So 'becoming divine' is not synonymous with leaving the divine behind, rather it brings the divine front of stage. By evolving what are we leaving behind? To answer that question, we need to understand what being human actually involves. Whilst religion does not have exclusive rights to the question of the nature of existence and humankind's place within it, it has, nonetheless, been central to religion for, quite possibly, as long as religions have existed. The quest for what it means to be human consists of a vast battlefield with various forces, sometimes allied, sometimes opposed. Philosophy, going back at least as far as the pre-Socratics, has also reflected upon the natural world and the human within, while 'natural philosophy' has often worked alongside philosophy, to the extent that they are not always that distinguishable. Stemming from this is the empirical modern sciences. These varying traditions are not easily pigeonholed, at times working together with the same goals and methods, while at other times in serious conflict. In fact, when we look to ancient Greek thought it is not always too romantic a view to see human flourishing and spiritual nourishment as the overriding aim, making full use of philosophical, empirical and religious insights to achieve that aim (see, for example, Hadot 1995). A spectator from a distance may understandably be puzzled as to who is fighting who in this battle of ideas.

There is an undeniable tension that exists between many transhumanists and religious believers. On the one hand, the transhumanist emphasis on enlightenment origins, on science and technology, and on 'reason' are seen by transhumanists as antithetical to religious tenets. On the other hand, those with strong religious views themselves see transhumanism as opposed to religion. Here I want to unpack these assumptions some more and see if some middle ground can be found.

### **Transhumanism as interdisciplinary**

Nick Bostrom, a philosopher at the forefront of transhumanist scholarship, gives us perhaps the best attempt to present the core and corollary values of transhumanism:

**'Core Value:** Having the opportunity to explore the transhuman and posthuman realms

#### **Basic Conditions**

- Global security
- Technological progress - Wide access

#### **Derivative Values**

- Nothing wrong about "tampering with nature"; the idea of hubris rejected
- Individual choice in use of enhancement technologies; morphological freedom
- Peace, international cooperation, anti-proliferation of WMDs
- Improving understanding (encouraging research and public debate; critical thinking; open-mindedness, scientific inquiry; open discussion of the future)
- Getting smarter (individually; collectively; and develop machine intelligence)
- Philosophical fallibilism; willingness to re-examine assumptions as we go along - Pragmatism; engineering- and entrepreneur-spirit; science

- Diversity (species, races, religious creeds, sexual orientations, life styles, etc.)
- Caring about the well-being of all sentience
- Saving lives (life-extension, anti-aging research, and cryonics)' (Bostrum 2002)

In the above it is significant that religious belief is not precluded, and a recognition of diversity, including religious, is stated. The primary concern of this work is with the *transhuman*, as opposed to the 'posthuman', yet these two terms seems to be frequently interchangeable in the literature available, so it is important to be clear in our terms. Perhaps the best way to distinguish transhumanism from posthumanism is to see the former as 'clinging' to the human, whereas the latter is entirely set free from any such ties. Transhumanism adopts an interdisciplinary approach to enhancing the human condition (primarily through technological advances), not escaping from it. Humanism, as a school of thought, looks to societal change and educational improvement in order to make us better humans based on the assumption that this life is the only one we have (see the 2002 Amsterdam Declaration for the widely accepted definition of humanism). Therefore, humanists are not religious believers, but see the world through an empirical lens. Transhumanists, to a large extent, are equally empirical and non-religious (although, as we shall see, this is not always so clear-cut), but want to go beyond the limitations of human biology and genetic inheritance. In other words, humans are not an end in themselves, but something that can be overcome through further evolutionary change. In this respect, the 'human condition' is not a fixed entity. The reason, therefore, that posthumanism is often equated with transhumanism, is that the boundary between what is human and when humans cease to be 'human' is not so clearly delineated. Given that transhumanism is regarded as a continual process, and perfection is not a defined, set goal, then there are, by definition, no limits. In this existential, epistemological and technological sense, the human is always in a process of change (although, inspired by the writings of Ayn Rand, some transhumanists subscribe to a foundationalist epistemology. See Murnane, 2018), and so you have self-declared transhumanists talking of, for example, 'uploading' minds to non-biological substrates, which does seem to leave behind pretty much all that would be regarded as 'human'. As we shall explore, this rests with the philosophical notion of personal identity, of what makes us distinctively human. If we are to argue that all that is necessary and sufficient to be human is our psychological existence, then 'posthuman' seems something of a redundant term. Rather, 'we' are always in a process of transcending, for to be 'post' human is equivalent to ceasing to exist, which seems synonymous with death. From this, therefore, I do not make use of the term 'posthuman' at all in this work. My view is that posthumanism is not at all desirable, for to be 'free' from the human is synonymous with no identity, with *death*. For the posthuman, the human is something as an obstruction, something that is an enemy of the planet and, consequently, such hubris needs to be reined in at the very least. This notion of the posthuman perhaps fits better with certain Eastern religious traditions such as Buddhism whereby, for example, the concept of *anatta*, of 'non-self', is a goal, but what of 'me' will remain here? For me there is nothing consoling in lacking an 'I', whatever form that may take, for what am I if I do not retain my memories, personality, hopes, desires and so on? What makes us human is wanting to cling on to these things, even if in reality they are 'bundles' of self, rather than a self as such.

Another helpful definition of transhumanism comes from Max More:

'Transhumanism is a class of philosophies that seeks the continued evolution of human life beyond its current form as a result of science and technology guided by life-promoting principles and values.

Transhumanism promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology' (More and Vita-More 2013, p.1).

There are a couple of points in the above quote that are worth highlighting in terms of the debate in this book. First of all, the view that transhumanism 'seeks the continued evolution of human life'. The assumption is obviously made that human life has already been through a process of evolution and what needs to be addressed to begin with is the extent to which Islam, or rather certain strands of Islam, may well be resistant to this idea. Secondly, the quote moves on to state that this evolution goes 'beyond its current form as a result of science and technology'. The Islamic belief that humankind was created by God in His/Her image may well conflict with what can be perceived as hubristic to go *beyond* its current form. Further, it begs the question *why* humans should go beyond their current form as a result of science and technology. What, therefore, is the role of science and technology, particularly in relation to faith? In addition, the quote goes on to say that this evolution is to be 'guided by life-promoting principles and values'. This requires considerable unpacking from an ethical standpoint, for how are we to determine which principles and values are 'life-promoting'? What can Islamic ethics contribute here? The final sentence states that transhumanism 'promotes an interdisciplinary approach', and therefore it will be, hopefully, enlightening to examine what the discipline of Islamic thought has to offer to this understanding.

The need for an interdisciplinary approach to transhumanism is the recognition that, as stated at the very beginning of this chapter, this is an '-ism' and, what is typical of '-isms', this is a catch-all. Having said that, all '-isms' have certain central characteristics that distinguishes them (Islam should be no exception here, as explored below). The quote by More above helps to illustrate what the term refers to, and More elaborates on his own definition by aligning this worldview with that of secular humanism and Confucianism in the sense that these do not rely or require a belief in the supernatural in order to have practical implications. In fact, it seems that one essential feature of transhumanism is its rejection of the supernatural, of the divine. Given this, what possible contribution can any religion make to a worldview that rejects religion? As we see below, there is a danger of a 'clash of civilisations', with Islam rejecting entirely transhumanism, and transhumanism rejecting Islam, but it is sincerely hoped that this work will help to bridge a perceived chasm here. More has associated transhumanism with ephrassophy, a term introduced by Paul Kurtz (1925-2012) in 1988 which literally means 'good practice and wisdom' - from the Greek roots *eu* (good, well); *praxis* (practice, conduct); and *sophia* (wisdom) - and is a philosophy that seems to widen the gap between religion and science even more by offering a secular vision that is an ethical *alternative* to religion. Ephrassophy draws from philosophy, science and ethics for this vision, but does not acknowledge any contribution from religious traditions, although an exception is made for Confucianism which Kurtz, in line with the viewpoint of More, did not consider a religion as it does not, in Kurtz' view, rely on the transcendent or supernatural (Kurtz 2012). However, this view, somewhat typical of new atheist thinking generally, tends to adopt a rather simplistic notion of religious belief, so that painting a black and white, dualistic vision of philosophy as something *separate* from religion ignores the complexities and the historical interactions *between* religion and philosophy. If we were to adopt the stance of transhumanism as a ephrassophy, then the debate ends at this point, for Islam has nothing to offer.

Some transhumanists are considerably more 'militant' in their beliefs. The cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky (1927-2016) was the author of a number of works on AI and philosophy and,

in a contribution to an anthology of articles on transhumanism (More & Vita-More 2013), he said the following:

‘And so Pascal’s Wager: either you believe in God or you don’t; if there is no God it can’t do any harm to believe in him because he’s not going to punish you because he doesn’t exist; on the other hand if you don’t believe in him and there is one then he’ll be mad at you and you won’t get eternal life. The argument convinced a lot of people that it didn’t do any harm to believe in religion. But in fact it did them harm and it’s what killed them all because if they had believed in science instead of religion 2,000 year ago we would all be immortal now’ (Minsky 2013, p.169)

It is simply wrong to assert that Pascal’s Wager ‘convinced a lot of people that it didn’t do any harm to believe in religion’ and betrays a simplistic and naive understanding of the complexity of religious belief. Similarly, the assertion that it is an ‘either/or’; either you believe in science or you believe in religion, does not hold up to historical scrutiny, as we shall see when looking at science in Islam. Whist, admittedly, the Minsky contribution comes across as considerably less scholarly and more careless compared with many other contributions in the anthology, his views represent this strand of secular transhumanism. By way of another example, we have Zoltan Istvan, who was also the first Presidential candidate for the Transhumanist Party during the 2016 United States Presidential Election. He wrote a novel, *The Transhumanist Wager* (Istvan 2013), which tells the story of the transhumanist Jethro Knights who establishes a floating city, Transhumania, populated by like-minded individuals. These are primarily scientists, and the enemy, not surprisingly, are fanatical religious groups, including the mystic Zoe Bach. The book proudly proclaims on the back cover that it was, ‘Scorned by over 500 publishers and literary agents around the world’, which it seems to see to its credit because of the view its rejection by so many publishers was due to its controversial content, whereas I suspect it was more likely due to the poor quality of writing. This, it must be said, is no *Atlas Shrugged*. However, it is indicative of the concern amongst many transhumanists that the enemy of its goals is religion. Religion, it is argued by many transhumanists, is *the* major stumbling block towards scientific progress. As the theologian Ted Peters states, ‘Through the eyes of today’s transhumanists, religion looks like a roadblock, an obstruction. What the transhumanists think they see in religion is an atavistic commitment to the past, to the status quo, to resistance against anything new’ (Peters 2011, p.159). One other example of this perception of religion as ‘atavistic’ is Simon Young who states that, ‘The greatest threat to humanity’s continuing evolution is theistic opposition to Superbiology in the name of a belief system based on blind faith in the absence of evidence’ (Young 2005, p.324). The assumption made here are that faith is ‘blind’, whatever that may mean (blind to what exactly?), and that this is the antonym to ‘evidence’, whatever is meant by that!

In terms of the intellectual origins of the use of the terms ‘transhumanism’ in some form or other, we can go back to the fourteenth century, to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in 1312 to be exact, who used the term *transumanare* to refer to passing beyond the human in a religious or spiritual manner, and T.S. Eliot used the term ‘transhumanized’ in *The Cocktail Party* (1935) in the sense of a mystical ‘illumination’. For modern transhumanists, neither of these fit, given that Dante and Eliot do not relate the ‘going beyond’ to any technological transformation. The ‘secular transhumanists’ look to Julian Huxley as the starting point, as he had a brief chapter entitled ‘Transhumanism’ in his work *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957), although this was not a well-developed philosophical position: for that we need to look more recently with Max More’s 1990 essay ‘Transhumanism: Toward a Futurist Philosophy’. However, strands of transhumanist thought in the technological sense are numerous and varied, and just a few are mentioned here. For example, we have the ‘proto-transhumanists’ -

the alchemists of Europe from around the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries - which inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and a concern that Mankind was 'playing God'. Another precursor was Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1829-1903) who argued for the use of technology to achieve life extension and, indeed, immortality. Fedorov went further in advocating resurrection of the dead. Importantly in the context of this work, Fedorov was a Russian Orthodox Christian and part of the Russian cosmism movement which combined elements of religion with Eastern and Western philosophy. Fedorov was a deeply-religious man who believed that God had created humankind for a purpose and that our mortality is a result of ignorance and discord which is antithetical to God's purpose. Science and reason, for Fedorov, are not opposed to faith, but all part of what makes us human, yet it is curious that the secular transhumanists disregard the religious aspect. It is worth pointing out that Fedorov's transhumanist ideas also influenced the esotericist Peter Ouspensky (1878-1947) who, though he did not subscribe to one particular religion, was certainly a believer in the metaphysical and mystical. Interestingly, his novel *Strange Life of Ivan Osokin* (2012, originally published 1915) is a narrative for explaining his philosophy through Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence which, from a psychological perspective, emphasises the importance of personal responsibility and transformation. The secular transhumanists tend to consider such existential angst as alien to religion, but this need not - and often is not - the case.

Twentieth-century transhumanists (or proto-transhumanists) include Robert Ettinger (1918-2011) who founded the Cryonics Institute. His work *Man into Superman* (1972) used the term 'transhuman', though perhaps the most idiosyncratic transhumanist was Fereidoun M. Esfandiary (1930-2000) who changed his name to FM-2030, partly in the hope that he would like to live to be 100 (i.e. in 2030) but also in a rejection of traditional naming conventions. Many of these figures were, therefore, from a number of disciplines, not just the sciences. One current notable transhumanist writer is Natasha Vita-More, the author of the *Transhuman Manifesto* (1983), followed by the *Transhuman Arts Statement* (1992, revised 2002) is a designer and artist. As we have seen, some were writers of fiction, perhaps, inevitably, science fiction in many cases and, as will be constantly reinstated, one other discipline that has contributed is the *religious* tradition, and so it seems curious that this is now frequently considered to be *outside* of the transhumanist debate. Vita-More states that 'Transhumanism's proposed elevation of the human condition involves technology *and* [her own emphasis] the arts' (Vita-More 2013. p.18). If the arts can enter the arena - and not just science or 'reason' - then why should religion be excluded? As Vita-More goes on to say,

'New media's interpretation of the human form, visual landscapes, literary narratives, and musical scores move us from one mental state to another - offering experiences that shift perceptions of ourselves and the world around us' (Vita-More 2013. p.18).

Does not religious narrative, experience and other expression of religious thought 'move us from one mental state to another - offering experiences that shift perceptions of ourselves and the world around us'? Vita-More is opening the door to other, more 'creative' or 'humanistic' disciplines, if you will, yet there seems to be a degree of 'religion-blindness' going on here, and to some extent this is certainly understandable, for religion, as presented to the public, tends not to do itself any favours, and Islam especially takes centre-stage when people who wanted to criticise religious belief for its dogmatism and resistance to scientific advances are looking for an easy target. However, as religious scholars, we need to try harder than this, and to look beyond the superficial public image, in the same way transhumanists need to break away from new atheist militancy.

The first fully explicit transhumanist organisation is the Extropy Institute (Ex1) which began in the late 1980s. It has its own periodical, *The Journal of Transhumanist Thought*, and has run conferences since 1994. At its very first conference, Extro 1, a precursor of transhumanism that was praised was the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). As Max More states in his reference to Mirandola:

‘In his 1486 piece, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, he portrays God as the Craftsman explaining to humanity its nature in a way that sounds much closer to transhumanism than to the religious worldview it emerged from’ (More 2013, p.9).

Again, the ‘religious worldview’ is seen as separate from ‘transhumanism’; as two opposing forces, rather than noting that one ‘emerged from’ the other. Mirandola himself, one suspects, would not have been too impressed in this hijacking of his name for the cause of secular transhumanism, whilst putting his religious sensibility in the shadows. Despite Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* being considered a manifesto of the Renaissance, he sought to downplay the more radical ‘pure’ humanism and, in fact, considered himself indebted to the writings of such Islamic thinkers as Ibn Rushd (1126-1198, Latinized as ‘Averroes’) and Ibn Sina (c.980-1037, Latinized as ‘Avicenna’). As we shall see later on in this work, it is these Islamic thinkers, and others besides, who represent an important strand of Islamic thought that has much to offer the transhumanist manifesto. Giulio Prisco provides us with some insightful writings on what he calls a ‘transhumanist religion’ and the quote below sums up what the intentions of this book signifies:

‘Many transhumanists with an ultra-rationalist approach have a very hard time considering parallels between transhumanism, spirituality, and/or religion. Good interpretations of religion have done great good to many people, and following William James (1896) I think a modern transhumanist religion, with religion’s contemplation of transcendence and hope in personal resurrection, but without its bigotry and intolerance, can be a powerfully positive force in the life of a person, which is what really matters’ (Prisco 2013, p.238)

We must not be too rash in painting all transhumanists with the same brush, in the same way we must not do likewise for all Muslims. As noted by Mark Walker and Heidi Campbell: ‘At the heart of the transhumanist project is an interpretation (or re-interpretation) of what it means to be human. This leads to questions about humanity’s relationship to other entities, including the transcendent or divine’ (Walker & Campbell 2005, p.i). As we have seen, many transhumanists recognise the importance of this relationship, although there are others who are hostile towards religion, and dismissive of any claims it may make in the transhumanists debate.

### **Transhumanist Dialogue with Religion**

The middle way approach between transhumanism and religion more generally is something that is already being engaged in and has been for some years now. Going back to 2003, an informal meeting took place between the World Transhumanist Association (WTA, now known as Humanity+) president, Nick Bostrom, and the Templeton Oxford Summer Seminars in Christianity and the Sciences. This discussion led to an informal working paper entitled, ‘A Platform for Conversation: Transhumanism and the Christian Worldview.’ This is a start, with a recognition that transhumanism and religion - or Christianity at least - have shared values such as a desire for eternal life, the elimination of pain and suffering, and the

creation of better human beings, although it did also highlight some of the dissonance between them, particularly, from the religious scholars, that of hubris and of ‘tampering with nature’. Following on from this, which had resulted in considerable traffic on the WTA list, a more public one-day conference was held in 2004, the Transvision Conference in Toronto entitled ‘Transhumanism, Faith and Hope’. There was also a ‘pre-pre-conference event’ at Green College in Oxford in July 2004 to allow those unable to get to Toronto to engage in dialogue. Various papers were delivered both for and against the ideals of transhumanism, and participants came from WTA members, as well philosophers and theologians. Debates up until this point seem to be largely monopolised, however, by Christianity in terms of a religious response. As for the Toronto conference, this has been considered to be somewhat ‘uneven’ (Walker & Campbell 2005, p.iv), especially during an open discussion which revealed a number of transhumanists’ distaste for religion and a view that it is the religious believers who need ‘converting’ to secular transhumanism. This attitude to religious believers as essentially ‘weak-minded’ is also a recurring theme on transhumanists’ email lists.

Therefore, there is still quite some way to go in finding common ground, and this is perhaps more difficult with the Abrahamic religions, with the accompanying view of human beings as being created by God as originally perfect, and, *even more so* with Islam than with Judaism and Christianity, for a number of reasons that will be explored in this work. As noted, transhumanists have certainly been willing to embrace the ‘eastern’ religions, especially Confucianism and Buddhism, which may allow for the perception - all depending of course on how interpreted - of the human being as at one stage in an evolutionary process. Interestingly, the Mormons have been reasonably positive about transhumanism, as the idea of immortal bodies and becoming gods is right in line with Mormon theology. In 2004 and 2005, the WTA issued a survey (Hughes 2007, p.5) amongst its members. The survey received 1100 responses and it reflected its global membership of 45% US residents, and 55% from elsewhere around the world. In response to the question ‘Which best describes your religious or spiritual views?’, a quarter declared themselves to be ‘religious or spiritual’. The breakdown is in the table below:

Which of these best describes your religious or spiritual views?

**62% Secular, atheist**

30% Atheist

16% Agnostic

9% Secular humanist

7% Other non- theistic philosophy

**24% Religious or spiritual**

6% Spiritual

4% Protestant



2% Buddhist  
2% Religious humanist

2% Pagan or animist

2% Catholic

2% Unitarian-Universalist

2% Other religion

1% Hindu

1% Jewish

1% Muslim

**14% Other/DK**

11% None of the above

4% Don't know

To some extent this is encouraging, although given the often-declared remark that “I am spiritual but not religious”, it is not always the case that respondents see them as synonymous. Equally, this may well be the case for Buddhism, Universalists, animists, and so on. Also, only one percent (eleven people!) call themselves Muslim here, and we do not know what *kind* of Muslims these are; i.e. Ethnic, or ‘normative’ Muslims, or orthodox? Nonetheless, the important thing is that there is *dialogue* and it is promising that the annual American Academy of Religion conference has held a ‘Transhumanism and Religion Group’ since 2006. Books that make the connection between transhumanism and religion are on the increase, and in August 2005 the *Journal of Evolution and Technology* devoted a special issue to ‘Religion and Transhumanism’. There is still very little specifically when we look to Islam, hence the need of this work and, it is hoped, more to come from other Islamic scholars.

I ask you to imagine a large, circular table, seated at which are the current major thinkers on transhumanism. They are brought together to discuss, not so much the technological possibilities of transhumanism, for many of the participants at the table will not have much expertise in that arena, but rather to consider the implications of technological transhumanism: what does this reveal about our human nature? What are the moral and ethical considerations? Would the transhuman still be ‘human’ and, if not, why not? Here we have Nick Bostrom, Aubrey de Grey, Ray Kurzweil, Max More, Natasha Vita-More, Giulio Prisco, Ben Goertzel and many more of what are largely secular transhumanists. Representing Christianity would be Ted Peters, for Buddhism we have Derek F. Maher, and others representing Judaism, Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Mormonism, and many other

religions. Imagine, also, a spokesperson for Islam. *The prime intention of this book, then, is to see what Islam can bring to this 'Transhumanist Table'.*

As I have already pointed out, the dialogue with religion has been going on for some years in the transhumanist scholarly world, and so we should begin by seeing what Islam has contributed so far. Frankly, it has been very little, and what there is would likely as not leave others at the table feeling that the chair could be better utilised. The problem is that when Muslims address issues that arise in transhumanism they do have a tendency to look to Qur'an, hadith, shari'a for answers and, therefore, see Islam as essentially *prescriptive*. If you cannot find guidance in the authoritative texts, then there can be no answer. Further, if you can find guidance in the authoritative texts, then *that* is the answer. For example, the Islamic contribution by Aisha Musa to an anthology entitled *Religion and the Implications of Radical Life Extension* (Maher & Mercer 2009) looks to the Qur'an because 'it is the most authoritative source of knowledge about divine commands relating to life, death, the here, and the hereafter...' (Musa 2009, p.123). Musa, therefore, goes on to say that 'A basic understanding of life and death is clearly articulated in the Qur'an. God predetermines an individual's life span prior to his or her birth' (ibid. p.124), and then looks to characters such as Noah for 'hints' as to how long that predetermined life span may be.

I want to look at this methodology some more, for it raises important issues as to how we approach the Qur'an; for the Qur'an, as an authority, can be used either to condone or condemn transhumanism depending upon one's understanding of the tradition, and this applies as much to any religious tradition as much as it does to Islam. Let us then consider the quote that refers to Noah: 'We sent Noah out to his people. He lived among them for fifty years short of a thousand but when the Flood overwhelmed them they were still doing evil' (29:14). Therefore, one human being at least, the Prophet Noah (Nuh) lived for at least 950 years. How long Noah lived in total differs from one scholar to the next. The Andalusian Qur'anic commentator al-Qurtubi (c. 13th century) notes that these views go from 'only' those 950 years, to a total of 1650 years (Al-Qurtubi, 2003). Regardless, we are talking here of a long lifespan indeed, even if it is something of an exception. In terms of how this is interpreted, we can, for example, look to the Islamic scholar Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149-1209). Al-Razi continues to be esteemed highly in the Islamic world, especially his great works *Mabahith al-mashriqiyya fi 'ilm al-ilahiyyat wa-l-tabi'iyyat* (*Eastern Studies in Metaphysics and Physics*) and *al-Matalib al-'Alya* (*The Higher Issues*). Equally important is his commentary on the Qur'an, *Mafatih Al-Ghayb* (*Keys to the Unseen*). Al-Razi is a philosopher who adopted Mu'tazila<sup>1</sup> methodology to some extent, especially with his commentary on the Qur'an where he believed that the interpreter needs to exercise independent reasoning in the struggle to understand its meaning. In relation to the Qur'anic verse concerning Noah's longevity, his following comment is interesting:

'Some physicians say that human life span does not exceed one hundred and twenty years, but the verse indicates the opposite of their statement, and reason agrees. Indeed, survival of the human body is possible; otherwise, he [Noah] would not have survived...Their words go against reason and tradition. We say: "There is no dispute between us and them because they say that the natural life span is not greater than one hundred and twenty years, and we say this life span is not natural, rather it is a divine gift."' (Ibid. pp.124-5)

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<sup>1</sup> Briefly and, inevitably, somewhat simplistically, Mu'tazila (or Mu'tazalite) is a theological school of thought dating back to the eighth century. Its methodology referred to here involves the use of analogy and human reason in an effort to determine the meaning of the Qur'an, rather than a strict literalist interpretation.

What we can take from al-Razi's commentary on Noah is that he is prepared to accept the possibility of an extended life and, indeed, it is a 'divine gift' rather than seen as an act against God. Other accounts of extended life can also be found in the Qur'an, for example sura 8 which recounts a tale of a group of believers who were seeking refuge from religious persecution. God 'sealed their ears [with sleep] in the cave for years' (8:11) before awakening them. How many years this was is not given, but it can conjure an image of some kind of 'divine cryogenic suspension'. However, in a sense, that is the central point here in that life extension ultimately depends on *divine grace*: the physical aspect of human nature is entirely contingent, and it is the spiritual aspect that is ultimately controlled by God. There are, of course, many references in the Qur'an to God's power to resurrect the dead and, whilst our physical bodies are contingent, for Muslims we are also ensouled, and so we are able to experience spiritual life for an eternity. For the secular transhumanist, of course, there is no 'spiritual' element to concern us, hence no 'mystical' attachment to ageing, but for the Muslim our physical nature is not all that there is and so, it may be suggested, by extending life we are encroaching upon God's power. That may be one way of reading God's power in the Qur'an, whilst another reading may see this as allowing for us to conceive of the possibility of life extension; of, to some extent, 'endorsing' it as a concept. However, I will argue later (see Chapter Four) how problematic it can be in this approach of looking to the Qur'an to 'endorse' scientific exploration.

We might look to the Qur'an for guidance as to whether or not humans *should* go beyond the laws of nature and defeat death: In the Qur'an it states 'Every soul will taste death' (3:185; 29:57) and 'Death will overtake you no matter where you may be, even inside high towers' (4:78). Eventually, then, we must all face death, but how soon? Are we talking in hundreds of years, or thousands, or millions? The Qur'an as a source is, like all religious texts, subject to ambiguity and various interpretation, so that even references to death may be seen as metaphorical, referring to - not a literal, physical death of the body - but a death of the self and a subsequent spiritual, more knowing and enlightened, renewal, and so we cannot take the Qur'anic references to death at face value, for to do so is to fall into the fundamentalist trap. Similar, anti-realist, interpretations of the Qur'an can be found with reference to life after death and an eternity in heaven or hell. Ahmad Parvez considered the Qur'anic reference to Heaven and Hell as psychological, not literal, and states: 'Heaven (*Jannah*) stands for fruition coupled with glowing home for the future. Hell (*Jahannam*) is the experience of frustration tinged with remorse and regret' (Parvez 2008). Aisha Musa quotes the Dutch Muslim thinker Arnold Yasin Mol who certainly adopts an anti-realist position towards the Qur'an, seeing *Jannah* as a metaphor for the state of evolution of the human and society, rather than any metaphysical phenomenon. Similarly, *Jahannam* is when the individual and society fail to evolve and develop. Mol sees the concept of *Akhira* (the afterlife) in the more concrete way of the next stage in the evolution of the physical universe. Such interpretations of scripture are extremely common in Christianity, and currently less so in Islam, but what I find curious is Musa's conclusion from this: 'Such a radical redefinition of Heaven, Hell, and the Hereafter, if it gained acceptance, could make the sort of practical immortality that might result from RLE acceptable as well...' (Musa 2009, p.128). The idea that RLE (Radical Life Extension) may only be 'acceptable' to Muslims when a sufficient number of them accept a 'radical redefinition' of central concepts of *Jannah*, *Jahannam* and *Akhira* strikes me as an erroneous conclusion to make. To say that the technology associated with transhumanism is 'acceptable' in this sense is to say that it is okay because the Qur'an - interpreted in some ways anyway - *says* it is okay. This is problematic for a number of reasons, for example there are many Muslims who interpret the Qur'an in a way that would regard transhumanism as unacceptable for Muslims, and so the question then arises as to who

has the ‘right’ interpretation. Musa considers the possibility that a ‘wider acceptance’ of a particular interpretation along the lines of Parvez and Mol could make RLE acceptable, but by this criterion the majority wins, regardless of whether or not the majority have understood the Qur’an ‘correctly’. Such a populist approach to Qur’anic exegesis is dangerous territory, especially today when many people’s understanding of the Qur’an derives from tweeted hadiths and other forms of social media. It may be that the ‘wider acceptance’ applies only to those in the field of Islamic scholarship, but that still leaves the question open as to whether those scholars in the minority are, by definition, failures in their field because of their minority view. As Willem B. Drees says,

“Islam and science” cannot but be a part of the wider struggle as to which Islamic voices will have the upper hand, schematically a traditional and mainly antimodern version or a more liberal one. Who speaks for the Church? Who speaks for the Muslims, for the Hindus, for the Jews, or for the Buddhists? The definite article in such singulars hides a plurality of voices and opinions. Having science on one’s side can be valuable. That is not just the case for liberals and modernizers; quite a few of the orthodox or fundamentalists seek to have science on their side as well. In the controversies over evolution advocates of a creationist understanding of their tradition do not just give up on science; they rather argue that science is misunderstood and dominated by a particular ideology, and that they represent the more genuine scientific spirit, which thus in the long run will be on their side’ (Drees 2013, p.736).

We can ‘use’ the Qur’an to be on ‘our side’, whatever that side may be. This is certainly one approach Islam can adopt in its contribution to issues in transhumanism, but seems to me rather misguided and somewhat pointless. The question of whether we should break the laws of nature as they are understood cannot be deemed as answerable by looking to the Qur’an as being a source for what is ‘acceptable’ or not. However, this is not the same as saying the Qur’an should be *ignored*. I cannot stress enough how important it is that we question this approach because, surely, we want Islam to be taken *seriously*. As shown, transhumanists are, for the large part, not Muslim and not monotheists; in fact, mostly not religious at all. The concerns that transhumanists raise are important, they raise what it means to be human and the very future of *homo sapiens*. Also, transhumanists are, with some exceptions, open to debate with non-scientists on these issues. The sad fact is that if all that Islam can bring to the table is to open up the Qur’an because it is, in the words of Musa, ‘clearly articulated’ in there what we can and cannot do and, further, we have the story of Noah to help us, it is no wonder that transhumanists remain at best sceptical and, at worst, antagonistic towards Islam.

As a *literary device*, therefore, what can the Qur’an tell us about what it means to be human and, by implication, to go beyond the human? The key thesis throughout this work is that Islam provides us with a series of heroic acts and events if you will, that act as paradigms for what it means to be human. Even if one is not a Muslim and does not believe in the Qur’an as divine revelation, the possibility remains that the Qur’an nonetheless has something important to contribute to the transhumanist debate. The Muslim believer may well take the accounts of lengthy lifespans of characters such as Noah in the Qur’an in a literal sense, or see this as endorsing RLE, but perhaps these are ‘myths’ in the sense, not as falsehoods, but as stories that help us to understand our human nature and what we can aspire to be. For example, the account of the lengthy lifespan of Noah is, rather, a literary device to make him seem larger than life. The heroes of not only the Qur’an, but the Bible, the Greek and Norse myths, and so on, are seen as strong, healthy, living often incredibly long lives or even immortal, and possessing various super-powers.

There is another anthology, a ‘sequel’ if you will, by the same editors, called *Transhumanism and the Body* (Mercer & Maher 2014). Again, there is a chapter contribution on the Islamic view, entitled ‘God’s Deputy: Islam and Transhumanism’, in this instance by Hamid Mavani. He begins by citing Abd al-Hakim Murad (aka Timothy Winter) who has argued that the most important issue is not the clash of civilisations or religious fundamentalism, but the scientific excesses that may lead to the end of the human species as we know it and a new, to use his preferred term, ‘posthuman’. On this, I could not agree more, yet Mavani’s opening ‘argument’ consists of one quote after another from the Qur’an in the literal sense, without pause for hermeneutic reflection, hence ‘Each person has been commissioned to actualise the divine purpose: to obey God and to have an intense and profound sense of his cognisance (*ma‘rifah*), love Him, and establish an egalitarian and moral-ethical public order without transgressing the boundaries set out by Him’ (Mavani 2014, p.68). Already, in this early paragraph, we have ‘boundaries’ and the dangers of ‘transgression’. Whilst both Mavani and Musa can be seen as bastions against the conservative elements that are fundamentally against transhumanism in *any* form - and for this we should be thankful for their contribution – they, neither of them, go anywhere near far enough, other than to declare, in a reflexive manner, that the Revealed Sources can be read as sanctioning various transhumanist aims, whilst stressing the importance of remaining within certain ethical boundaries. Frankly, you do not need a Muslim to tell you that. Yet another anthology, *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement* (Mercer & Trothen 2014), was published a few months later and which has one of the editors, Calvin Mercer, who edited the previous two works. Yet, it should not be too surprising that in this anthology Islam, in any explicit way, has been left out altogether. In the Introduction to this more recent work, the editors state that ‘unfortunately’ most of the contributions come from Christianity, but ‘We sought out scholars from traditions other than Christianity and are fortunate to offer three chapters from experts in Judaism, East Asian traditions, and Chinese religions’ (Mercer 2015, p.x). Have we exhausted all that Islam can offer on the subject after just two chapters in two anthologies? Can Islam give anything *more*?

### Islamic Authority as Explorative

Obviously, given I have written this book, the answer to the question of what more Islam can offer is that yes, indeed, it can offer much more. However, for it to do so requires us to understand Islam in a different way from the prescriptive manner that is more commonly adopted. Rather, I subscribe to the Islamic scholar Shahab Ahmed’s (1966-2015) approach that, in his own words,

‘...has presented a historical scenario of significant societies of Muslims who *thought* and *lived* in a manner that destabilises any reflexive conceptualisation we might have of Islam having been constituted by the overweening supremacy of those sources of Revealed Truth that we moderns are intellectually conditioned to regard as primary: the Qur’an, Hadith or Islamic law...We have seen, rather, that Islamic philosophy *subordinates the Qur’an* to the supremacy of reason - which is to say not merely that the *text* of the Qur’an is read rationally; rather the *concept* of the Qur’an as the text of divine revelation is contracted and read subject to the demands of a total Truth-matrix elaborated by reason in which reason/philosophy is the higher truth and the text of revelation the lower’ (Ahmed 2016, p.97)

To look at what Islam can contribute we need not restrict ourselves to the Qur’an, but can look to creative and explorative explication for which all too often is ignored, yet they

provide so much meaning and value. What, for example did the Muslim writer and philosopher Ibn Tufayl (1105-1185), through the medium of his novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (which I will explore in much more detail in Chapter Five) has to say about the human condition and what humans can overcome has as much value as the Qur'an or hadith. Similarly, Rumi's (1207-1273) poetry, for which his *Masnawi* is 'a Qur'anic exegesis by other means' (Ahmed 2016, p.307), deserves its place at the table in the discourse with transhumanists, as does other works of poetry, by the likes of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938, see Chapter Six). Musa adopts the safe, literal approach of addressing a modern issue by reflexively going straight to the Qur'an for answers. My concern with this approach is not, of course, to deny the importance of the 'sources of Revealed Truth', but that the approach to these sources is where many modern Muslims have gone astray. As Amir Latif states, 'Tafsir should be seen both as genre and as process and, regarded in this fashion, studies of Qur'anic interpretation done outside the tafsir genre...the study of poetic and creative writings, therefore, deserves a prominent place in the field of Qur'anic interpretations' (Latif 2009, pp.106-107). By seeing Islam as prescriptive, as governed primarily by the law, we are seeing Islam as nothing more than law, denying the importance of the discursive tradition of theology, philosophy, poetry, and so on, as important sources of authority:

'But can we not conceive of other forms of authority that not only are not prescriptive, but that are actually at odds with prescriptive authority? I suggest that, to understand the discursive tradition of Islam, we must conceive not only of prescriptive authority, but of what I should like to call explorative authority - the authority to explore' (Ahmed 2016, p.282)

Ahmed is not plucking this idea of explorative authority out of thin air, but is based on Islam as an historical phenomena in, roughly, the period 1350-1850, in what Ahmed calls the 'Balkans-to-Bengal complex', by which time one could see in the Islamic world a structured community with established constitutions, which included as part of its canon the concepts and vocabularies of philosophers, poets, Sufis, and musicians. Importantly, these are not marginal to the Islamic paradigm, but central. During this period the translation, circulation and transposition of philosophical concepts had been integrated into larger modes of thinking, as well as the hermeneutics of Islam. It is only after 1850 we see Islamic reification (see Chapter Three) and a salafi inclination to look for a mythical notion of an Islam that was believed to have existed before the fourteenth century. In terms of philosophy, of falsafah, it was not long before this discipline was integrated into the Qur'anic-Arabic notion of hikmah (in Persian, Ottoman, and Urdu: hikmat), which the major Islamic thinker Ibn Sina refers to as 'a real-true philosophy (falsafah bi-al-haqiqah): a first philosophy which imparts validation to the principles of the rest of the sciences and that is Wisdom in Real-Truth (al-hikmah bi-al-haqiqah)' (Avicenna 2005, p.3). Therefore, 'Revealed Truth' is seen through the lens of the 'Real-Truth'. Hikmah has the same semantic roots (h-k-m) as hukm, or 'rule', and so philosophy, in a Platonic sense, reveals the rules of the universe, as well as determining the ethical rules to live by. Let us not forget that Ibn Sina, like many Islamic thinkers of his time, was a polymath and, in his case, as much a physician as a philosopher, and so the physical sciences work hand-in-hand with philosophy in revealing universal truths. This, then, is how the Muslim must approach issues of transhumanism: not as Qur'anic scholars, with the Book before us looking for answers, but as philosopher-scientists, as hukama (sing. hakim).

## The Essence of Islam?

An awareness of the complexity and diversity of Islamic belief is key to understanding the relationship between Islam and transhumanism. There are ‘many Islams’, and no one book can possibly hope to represent all Muslims or all aspects of Islamic teaching. The concern over religion for many transhumanists is based upon a particular understanding of religion that hopes and prays for a better life in the *next life*, or relies upon supernatural forces for a better life in *this life*. Of course, there is no denying that many Muslims, as with other religions, do ‘use’ religion in this manner, but this is one of many kinds of Muslim. Whilst, as will be considered later, it would be stretching it too far to argue that secularism is central to Islam - despite the existence of ‘cultural Muslims’ in, as an example, the quote concerning Bosnian Muslims below - this does not mean going to the other extreme of rejecting human autonomy and placing all responsibility on God. There can be something of a ‘middle way’ which sees religion in a Nietzschean sense; a more ‘existential’ approach to religion and Islam in particular that does allow for engagement with the transhumanism debate. A commonality between transhumanism and the transcendental is the Latin prefix ‘*trans*’; a recognition at the very least by both that human beings can go ‘beyond’. What that ‘beyond’ might be is where things become more convoluted, of course.

Given this picture, it is important to tread gently and carefully before making assertions as to what one belief system, philosophical system, or scientific system, ‘believes’ to be the case, especially in this postmodern world of competing and overlapping beliefs, or, to use a metaphor of sociologists, this age of ‘liquid modernity’, where everything is in a state of continuous change (Bauman 2000). Likewise, to look back in history it is also important to avoid stark contrasts, for things are always more nuanced. Whilst opposing views have often raised themselves above the parapet, what lies beneath may well be subtler. Whilst being so wary, one need only scan the literature to be aware that apparent conflicts are brought to our attention and, further, when looking to the western world, the conflict of ideas, or the ‘clash of civilisations’, is frequently presented as a sharp contrast between western modernism, globalization and postmodernism with that of the Islamic reluctance or downright stubbornness to embrace the modern world. The extent to which this conflict is ‘real’ or not largely depends on your perspective. There are ‘hardliners’ on all sides of these perceived clashes who draw strict boundaries as to what the ‘west’ is, what ‘Islam’ is, and so forth. At the centre of these perceptions is the role and status of the human being, with subsequent ethical and political concerns regarding the ‘essence’ of the human, if indeed there is such a thing, and the best political system in which human beings can flourish. It raises very broad questions revolving around authority in terms of that of the divine and the human. In the case of Islam, divine authority through the medium of scripture may or may not take precedence depending upon the views of Islamic scholarship. Amongst some Islamic scholars, Islam in essence is universal and therefore beyond the realm of reform. For example, the scholar Hamid Enayat (1932-82), to name but one of many, argues that the ‘Islamic essence’ relies upon idioms which are unchangeable, eternal and beyond the realm of reform. What takes precedence is the Qur’an as something that is inviolate and perfect; no mere ‘whims’ of mankind can be so accommodated within the will of God. This, as will be explored, is by no means an exclusive view. Shireen Hunter is one critic of an essentialist, ahistorical culturalism, pointing out that, ‘Understanding Islam and analysing its relationships to other ideas and civilisations can be accomplished correctly only within *specific frames of time and space* [my italics]. Any other approach leads to incomplete and hence inaccurate generalities that would represent only one aspect of Islam, not its totality.’ (Hunter 1998, p.17). Hunter, looking at Islam from a political perspective, sees the religion encompassing a full range of symbols that can just as much point to absolutism and hierarchy, as towards democracy and

egalitarianism. In terms of its attitude towards science, then, one can equally identify ‘many Islams’ containing a full spectrum of views.

The criticism by transhumanists of religion generally and Islam specifically is based on a particular ‘kind’ of Islam. Now, this inevitably leads to the question, what, then *is* Islam? Once more, we can look to Shahab Ahmed’s excellent work, *What is Islam?*, for an exploration of this contentious issue, but, to summarise here, he successfully picks holes in a number of attempts to define Islam. It has already been noted that to see Islam as prescriptive is to omit so much of what is valuable in terms of what makes us *human*, let alone a Muslim. This prescriptive view of Islam is summed up by Jacques Waardenburgh:

“Normative Islam” is that form of Islam through which Muslims have access to the ultimate norms that are valid for life, actions and thought...In classical terms, normative Islam is the *Shari’a* (Waardenburgh 2002, p.97).

This understanding of Islam is echoed in the writings of various Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, including such luminaries as Wael Hallaq, Joseph Schacht, H.A.R Gibb, G.E. Von Grunebaum, and Ernest Gellner. However, Shahab Ahmed has, in my view, clearly demonstrated that this was not ‘normative’ at all through most of Islamic history, up until the mid-nineteenth century anyway and, as he states,

‘This totalizing “legal-supremacist” conceptualisation of Islam as *law*, whereby the “essence” of Islam is a phenomenon of prescription and proscription, induces, indeed *constrains* us to think of Muslims as subjects who are defined and constituted by and in a cult of regulation, restriction and control’ (Ahmed 2016, pp. 119-120).

In line with a number of my scholarly colleagues, I consider Ahmed’s work ground-breaking, and which is astounding in its synthesis of Islamic philosophy, history, law, politics, poetry, fiction, and so on. This certainly helps me in paving the way for adopting this approach to how Islam should be perceived. His book on the Satanic Verses affair (Ahmed 2017) reveals a side of Islam that is frequently ignored or denied, an Islam that for centuries considered the Satanic Verses incident - in which the Prophet Muhammad was supposedly deceived by Satan into believing it was God who told Muhammad to praise the three goddesses Lat, Uzza and Manat - was true and open to debate, not the defensive and fearful closing of shutters and a refusal to engage in such possibilities which seems more indicative of the modern response that Islam adopts. For Ahmed, Islam is much more than a religion, and so to define what we mean by Islam we have to look at what Muslims *do* and this must include its creative forms, from poetry and music, to art and philosophy.

The *fear* that many Muslims have of breaking away from the shackles of prescribed law, given its authority from the Qur’an and - almost on an equal level - the hadith, prevents Islam from contributing anything dynamic and creative to the transhumanist table. It is perhaps not surprising that modern Islamic discourse is dominated by what the law has to say, for modern humans more generally seem to be increasingly defined as legal entities, as *homo juridicus*, rather than determined by other authoritative sources. By seeing ourselves this way it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; we are unable to see the human in any other way. If, however, what is Islam is not - or *should* not - be defined by *shari’a*, then what? The *shahada* (the declaration of belief in one God and Muhammad as the seal of the prophets) may provide a basic framework, but when you attempt to unpack it, we are left with a series of complex, philosophical and theological concepts that only result in obscuring what we mean by Islam: what do we understand by God? In what way is the Prophet the ‘seal’? Without elaborating



here, Andrew Rippin (1950-2016), for example, has demonstrated that each of the Five Pillars of Islamic faith raises problems in terms of their origins and how they are to be understood (see Rippin 2011, chap.7).

The *Cambridge History of Islam* states that, 'Islam is a religion. It is also, almost inseparably from this, a community, a civilisation and a culture' (Gardet 1970, p.569). However, these seemingly innocent opening lines are deeply problematic conceptually. To what extent is the religion separable from community, civilisation and culture, given Gardet says it is 'almost inseparable', and what would remain if it is separated? What do we mean by culture and how is this different from the religion? What do we mean by 'civilisation' and how is this different from culture, or religion? Ditto the concept of 'community'! The historian of Islam Marshall Hodgson (1922-1968) gives us his renowned distinction between 'Islamic' as referring to faith or religion, contrasted with 'Islamdom' or 'Islamicate' which he regarded as its historic culture and society. Shahab Ahmed spills considerable ink on Hodgson, rightly so, but the central point is that, 'In order to function, Hodgson's schema, like any sliding scale, requires an independent unit of measure: to distinguish Islamic from Islamicate, we have to know what religion=Islam is and how to gauge its presence' (Ahmed 2016, p.160). Needless to say, we do not seem to have an 'independent unit of measure'. Indeed, this attempt to separate a kind of 'pure' Islam from its historical, social and culture accretions falls into the very hands of the fundamentalists as well as those proponents of a clash of civilisations thesis. It ignores the important contribution that other cultures, religions and philosophies have made to what we now call 'Islam', which is why this book makes no excuses for tapping into those 'other' cultures, for they not as 'other' as might be supposed. As Shahab Ahmed parenthetically says (and I agree entirely): 'human and historical Islam is arguably almost as Neo-Platonic as it is Muhammadan' (Ahmed 2016, p.173). Hodgson's distinction between Islamic and Islamicate certainly has some value; for example in describing Moses Maimonides (c.1135-1204) as 'Islamicate' rather than 'Islamic' I get what he means, for I also make reference to Maimonides in this work as an important contributor to Islamic thought. Maimonides was brought up and educated in an Islamic environment and his philosophy is imbued with Islamic concepts, but he is not an 'Islamic' thinker in the sense that he was Jewish, although, in fact, he combined his Jewish philosophy with that of Islam. As Sarah Stroumsa said when writing on Jewish theology, 'The development of Jewish systematic theology takes places under Islam and mostly in Arabic...As Arabic came to replace Hebrew and Aramaic as the main cultural language of the Jews, the intellectual activity of eastern Jews became an integral part of the intellectual Islamic scene' (Stroumsa 2003, pp.73), and, as Sarah Pessin points out in relation to Maimonides' work *Guide for the Perplexed*, 'As is clear from the representative quotes from Islamic sources cited throughout...understanding the Islamic philosophical context of the Guide is key for understanding the intricacies of Maimonides' thought' (Pessin 2014).

However, this does not resolve the problem of what exactly do we mean by 'Islamic' in any pure sense of the term. The history of the discipline of Religious Studies shows us that it is difficult enough to define what we mean by 'religion'! In the case of Islam, there is no one all-encompassing authority, such as the Pope in Catholicism<sup>2</sup>, that can lay down decrees as to what is 'Islamic' and what is not and so, inevitably, we have individuals and groups that look to a number of authoritative sources for guidance. Perhaps for this reason, it makes no sense to talk of a 'reformation' in Islam, because it is in its very nature to always be in a process of

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<sup>2</sup> This may apply less to Shi'a Islam than Sunni, which really just emphasises my point that there are 'many Islams'. I do, incidentally, tap into Shi'a Islam, Sunni Islam, and Sufism (and not may be Shi'a or Sunni) throughout this book.

reform as the various conflicting bodies struggle for their supremacy of ideas in values in a Nietzschean will to power kind of way. The trouble is, we seem no nearer to knowing what Islam is, and perhaps we are led to the conclusions of Hamid Dabashi:

‘We need to relieve a view of the vast and diversified Islamic heritage that is irreducible to Islamic *doctrinal* beliefs...Positing Islam as a cosmopolitan worldliness...will have a conclusively transformative impact on the way we ordinarily think of the terms “Islam” or “Islamic”’ (Dabashi 2013, pp.13-14)

Perhaps, but I am not convinced this really helps us to understand what Islam or a Muslim is, any more than I really know what someone who has an outlook of ‘cosmopolitan worldliness’ would actually *believe*. And, as I have already pointed out, even the basic doctrinal beliefs that are attributed to Islam are open to much dispute and interpretation. It is unavoidable that in using terms such as ‘religion’, ‘science’, ‘Islam’, ‘secular’, and so on, we are creating boundaries that are, in reality, blurred. As will become evident in this work, we are trapped by our vocabulary; striving to explain the paradox and complexity that is the human experience with words that fail us. I must, however reluctantly, be also compelled to use labels, but always with the proviso that these are labels of convenience rather than to be strictly defining. For example, I make no apologies for employing the insights of so-called ‘western’ philosophers to inform the debate on what ‘Islam’ can contribute to transhumanism. Note here the need to use the terms ‘western’ and ‘Islam’ which, in itself, suggests they are two separate and distinct systems of thought. They are not. Islam, for its part, would not be recognisable today if it were not for the influence of Greek philosophy, for example, and, likewise, ‘western’ thought owes much to Islam, ancient Greek thought to ‘eastern’ philosophy and religion, and so on. This is why I prefer to use the term ‘*hikmah*’ as a kind of Islamic *Weltanschauung*, for there is a saying attributed to the Prophet, ‘Hikmah is the believer’s straying camel; he takes it from wherever he may find it; and does not care from what vessel it has issued’ (Arberry 1956, p.34). This magpie-like accretion of knowledge from whatever source and making it your own is typical of Islam, as with many other belief-systems, and flies against this idea of a *salafi* ‘pure Islam’. There are always tensions, of course, yet, at the same time, in the *hikmah* tradition, it is Aristotle who is known as the ‘First Teacher’, and there is also the ‘Divine Plato’ (*Aflatun-i ilahi*). The non-Islamic philosophical tradition likewise ‘uses’ Muslim philosophers, preferring to Latinise their names; to refer to Ibn Sina as Avicenna, or Ibn Rushd as Averroes. Such an adoption perhaps makes these Islamic philosophers less ‘Islamic’ in the sense of being more ‘global’. Islam, for its part, does the same, hence Aristotle is Aristu, Plato is Aflatun, Galen is Jalinus, and so on. These philosophers, in being acquired in this way, become ‘Islamic’ in the sense that, for example, Musa is an Islamic prophet and, in some ways, different from Moses, or Isa differs from Jesus. The difference, however, is that the prophets would be considered as ‘Muslims’, whereas the philosophers are not Muslims, but they are Islamic. This cannot be stressed enough, for Islamic philosophers of the past have often been accused of merely ‘copying’, or even stealing, the philosophical views of the Greeks, but it is really the Islamization of knowledge, which is not the same thing at all. Ibn Rushd’s ‘Aristotelian’ philosophy, is not the philosophy of Aristotle, but the philosophy of Aristu.

Let us then see what Islam can contribute to the transhumanist table in its *explorative* sense. We may have a copy of the Qur’an on the table, but also Rumi’s *Masnavi*, Muhammad Iqbal’s poetry and philosophy, Ibn Tufayl’s philosophical fiction, Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, Ibn Rushd’s commentary on Aristotle/Aristu, the writing of Muslim scientists such as Mehdi Golshani, Mohammed Basil Altaie, Bruno Guiderdoni and Nidhal Guessoum,

and so on. Here we will see that Islam does not *prescribe*, it does not say what is forbidden and what is allowed, but it *reveals*, through its generations of creativity, what it means to be human and, as a consequence, what it means to be transhuman.