

The Hermeneutic, the Epistemic, and the Aesthetic in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Function and Form

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Abstract:

This article addresses contemporary practical and comparative theological forms of inter-religious dialogue, aiming to highlight the difficulties of maintaining distinctions in this way. It does this specifically in the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue where, although great strides have been made in the academic study, there are broader political and social considerations which often play a role in the formation of well-meaning, but shallow, forms of inter-religious consideration.

The difficulty of parsing aspects of practice or meta-physics from other considerations is considered here in the context of the use of the marker of 'beauty' by contemporary Islamic legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl which forms a significant part of his ethical and legal works. In doing so, the use of beauty as an ethical marker involves and includes significant hermeneutic, epistemic, and aesthetic considerations stemming from the specificity and particularity of the Islamic tradition. The article considers this through examining the role that uncertainty and non-finality play in the development of the method by which Abou El Fadl approaches matters of the law.

This article considers the inter-connections of hermeneutics, epistemology, and aesthetics in the work of Khaled Abou El Fadl in order to outline the extent to which each of these considerations and their inter-connection influence and structure aspects of both belief and practice. Without an awareness of both the content of these considerations and their function within the overall project of Khaled Abou El Fadl, our ability to coherently understand points of connection and comparison are compromised.

Biography:

Dr Angus M Slater is currently a Lecturer in Christian Theology and Interfaith Studies at the University of Wales Trinity St David in Lampeter, where he directs and manages the Professional Doctorate and Masters in Interfaith Studies Programmes.

His principal teaching responsibilities include contemporary Christian Theology, Interfaith Studies, and Christian-Muslim Relations, while areas of research interest are centred around theological considerations of authority and aesthetics within the Christian and Islamic traditions, including queer approaches to authority, the formation of identity, and the role that aesthetics plays in religious construction. These interests can be seen in the recent publication of 'Radical Orthodoxy in a Pluralistic World' with Routledge, as well as further work in the Journal of Law, Religion, and State, Theology & Sexuality, and Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology.

Recent activity includes speaking at the UK Department of Education on LGBT+ and Faith Issues, assisting a UNESCO Peace Conference on multifaith initiatives, and advising the Church in Wales Doctrinal Commission regarding religious same-sex marriage.

Keywords:

Christian-Muslim Dialogue; Hermeneutics; Epistemology; Dialogical method; Khaled Abou El Fadl; Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

Current forms of Christian-Muslim interaction have increasingly come to occupy a central place in the contemporary West - especially those interactions framed as deliberately 'dialogical' in nature. Each day, it seems, another formation or practice of inter-tradition dialogue is set up, with laudatory aims of social cohesion, integration, and the promotion of inter-religious understanding. It is impossible to have missed this flowering of attention to the area of Christian-Muslim dialogue in recent years, with prominent academic work being done, notable social programmes being established, and the furtherance of inter-community understanding being developed. This has occurred from the grass-roots level, at the level of religious institutions themselves, through representatives and leaders within each of these traditions, and between scholars working in and amongst this interaction.

We have also seen, perhaps over the last thirty or so years, a tremendous increase in the presence of aspects of Christian-Muslim dialogue within a broader trend of increased attention to religion being paid by the largely post-Christian western secularised state. This can be seen in political discussions around religious practice, identity, and integration in heterogenous societies, for example attempts in the UK to define 'British values', and in political concerns over religious violence and extremism, usually targeted towards the Muslim community. In these circumstances, explicitly religious dialogue seems to have somewhat fallen by the wayside, perhaps for all the reasons that the liberal state is generally uncomfortable with religious belief. However, the dynamics of dialogue remain at the forefront of the secular state's attempt to interrogate, understand, and construct the meaning of the Islamic tradition within a framework of liberal, secular, values.

These two areas of increased attention to the dynamic interaction of the Christian and Islamic traditions have led to the flourishing of many different forms of dialogical interaction, from practical and pragmatic dialogues over the sharing of physical space or social location, to generalised discourse over comparative theological aspects of difference and similarity. Examples of these abound, such as initiatives between Muslim and Christian groups over payday lending in the UK (O'Toole & Braginskai, 2016), or more theologically orientated discussions over the monotheism shared between both the Christian and Islamic traditions (Corrigan, et al., 2016). Yet, in an increased foregrounding of forms of Christian-Muslim interaction, we have also seen the emergence of forms of dialogue which prioritise the social outcomes motivating them; above the form and content of the dialogue itself (Garfinkel, 2008). This prioritisation of social outcome – integration, social harmony, peace, emotional understanding, an awareness of 'them' being just like 'us' – has come to be elevated as the distinct contribution of forms of religious dialogue to the liberal secular state and has often developed into the *raison d'être* for the interaction itself. We see this clearly in various critiques of the contemporary liberal and pluralistic forms of dialogue (Shatz, 2011), but we also see the formation of this approach in the selection of dialogue topics within instances of interaction.

This approach, while undoubtedly producing significant social value for the communities involved, runs the risk of a flattening of the distinctive qualities of the particular traditions and of the specific views and beliefs enunciated within them. This is done in the hope of delivering a sense of similarity and homogeneity within the wider community. We see, in more socially and outcome orientated dialogical interactions, a lack of emphasis on the necessary context and depth for a true and well-developed form of inter-religious understanding to emerge – where concepts and terms that may

appear similar across religious traditions are assumed to be compatible and transferrable. This exposes a significant difficulty even in those areas where the concept under discussion is peripheral to the religious tradition. Indeed, almost all religious traditions, in operating as universalising meta-narratives, are internally intricate and utilise the connected nature of the theological concepts which make them up in order to better serve that narrative purpose. This difficulty is fourfold – it encourages a sense of contextual unimportance on the part of those engaged in inter-religious encounter in this way and it precludes an appreciation of the significant depth which religious concepts necessarily have within their own traditions. In addition, this approach remains too focused on outcomes – either the conceptual outcomes of the religious traditions (which continue to change, morph, and renew their conceptual architecture in response to the myriad changes and variances of geographic, cultural, historical, and social difference) or the outcomes promised by the instance of dialogical interaction itself (whether this is communal peace, religious minority integration, or a furthering of religious understanding). We have therefore, in some cases, developed a functionalist form of Christian-Muslim interaction as our general form of social discourse – that bends the practice of interaction, the content of interaction, and the outcomes of interaction into feeding this very specific and peculiarly constructed functionality.

Beyond this general discourse, we have also seen a significant uptick in the academic consideration of more complex forms of Christian-Muslim interaction, particularly in areas of law and ethics (Renard, 2011), scriptural and hermeneutic work (Cohen & Berlin, 2016), and shared religious figures and practices (George-Tvrtkovic, 2018). It is not my intention in this article, for my position to be read as a critique of these dialogical forms, but rather as a plea for greater attention to the mechanics by which the forms of similarity identified in the more generalist discourse are produced – the epistemological, hermeneutical, ethical, and aesthetic functionings that allow religious traditions and their believers to fully grapple with the diversity and plurality of their social realities. Each of these aspects is part of the overall meta-narrative structure of the religious traditions themselves, with an attempt at comparison that does not take them into account offering a comparison only of outcomes, rather than the complex mechanics by which these outcomes are achieved. This methodological approach can be seen in some forms of comparative theology, such as the work of Clooney et al (Clooney, 2010), which seeks to better understand the theological commitments and mechanisms of the other religious tradition in order to enhance and influence the originator tradition, a process of exploration and return that seeks to mirror the broader cultural and social interaction of the traditions in a more specific and generally academically orientated manner (Hedges, 2017). This form of approach emphasises the points of similarity and difference in the content of the other religious tradition, but also seeks to understand the internal mechanisms by which that religious content is both made and made meaningful. In doing so, it seeks to uncover the myriad ways in which religion interacts with and influences our social and cultural habits across the lines between religious traditions, but also aims to more fully understand the ways in which the religious tradition seeks to formulate meaning about our realities.

This article sketches out this mechanical comparative approach through the lens of one particular Islamic legal scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl and his use of the notion of ‘beauty’ as a determinative marker in his legal and ethical work¹. In doing so, the immediate possibility of comparison relative to the occurrence of notions of divine beauty in both the Christian and Islamic religious traditions can be seen to be made more complicated by differing epistemological, hermeneutical, ethical, and aesthetic considerations that are a vital part of Khaled Abou El Fadl’s work (Ralston, 2014). Beyond this and in addition to it, these differing epistemological assumptions, hermeneutical approaches, ethical processes, and aesthetic qualities all inter-connect and interact within the religious tradition itself –

¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl is a prominent Muslim scholar who is currently a Professor in the UCLA School of Law. Further bibliographical detail can be found on his website: <https://www.searchforbeauty.org/khaled-abou-el-fadl/>

producing the intricate and universal forms of discourse that religious traditions epitomise. In examining this process within the very particular context of Abou El Fadl's deployment and integration of the aesthetic within his legal and ethical work, the intricacies of placement, function, and form can be more fully teased out.

2. A Methodology of Reform

The methodology that Abou El Fadl deploys in his work can be split into three broad and connected procedural steps that form the structural outline of his methodology. This can be seen throughout his published works, and occurs across a number of different contextual areas, such as in relation to gender in 'Speaking in God's Name' (2001a), to forms of social authority and authoritarianism in 'And God Knows the Soldiers' (2001), to politics and the law itself in 'Reasoning with God' (2014), and to reflections on his own practice in the semi-autobiographical 'The Search for Beauty in Islam' (2006). These steps – first a process of de-legitimisation, second a re-presentation of the plurality of the tradition, and third the use of 'beauty' as an ethically determinative marker between this plurality – form the core of Abou El Fadl's method (Slater, 2016, p. 40). While the methodology remains largely the same across this swathe of application, the structure is most clearly apparent in Abou El Fadl's shortest work, 'And God Knows the Soldiers', in which he responds forcefully to a specific fatwa issued in response to the Abdul Rauf affair by an Islamic group called the 'Society for the Adherence to the Sunnah' (SAS) (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 43-46). Although the book is framed as a response solely to this specific fatwa, which sought to investigate the Islamic legal and ethical ground of a Muslim basketball players refusal to stand for the American national anthem before games, Abou El Fadl engages in a sustained and detailed fashion not only with the text of the particular fatwa, but also what he sees as the structural underpinnings operating within the contemporary Islamic community that allow for its co-option of religious authority (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 31). In his words, the fatwa is chosen because it 'illustrates the tension between the authoritative and the authoritarian', the 'process by which the authoritative is used to produce the authoritarian', and because 'in style and method it is fairly representative of the endemic quality of contemporary Muslim discourses' (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 44). The specific fatwa addressed in this work is important because its handling of the sources of authority in the tradition and the various conceptual architectures which surround them, provides a strong and clear outline of Abou El Fadl's more general critique of contemporary forms of authoritarian discourse within the Islamic tradition. This extends beyond just the methodological usage of these sources, which Abou El Fadl in his exploration aims to showcase is weak and distinctly different to the established tradition (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 47-61), but also the methods by which the authority of the tradition as a whole is deployed by groupings to produce social and religious authority in contemporary Muslim communities (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 45), and how this process of authoritarianism produces increasingly conservative social norms within, and between, religious communities (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 87-97).

2.1 Delegitimisation

Abou El Fadl begins in 'And God Knows the Soldiers' by foregrounding the de-legitimisation of the presented discourse of the SAS's fatwa. This done in a two-fold way – first, by critiquing the narration of the SAS's approach to the specific matter under consideration, examining the particular way in which they choose certain sources to use, how these sources of authority are utilised within their discourse, and the various connections made in the attempt to apply sources to specific circumstances. This is then followed by a critique of the way in which this approach fits into the established patterns of authority within the Islamic tradition, highlighting its divergences from traditional norms, even as those traditional norms are invoked in order to accrue authority for the expressed position (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 45). This two-step process begins with the highlighting of the lack of depth apparent in the SAS's use of the legal tradition as a whole (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 47-61), as well as the specific traditional methods embedded within it, such as the role of *qiyas* or analogical reasoning, which is highlighted here by the provision of additional context to the legal

sources presented, drawing a distinction between basketball and funerals that is concealed in the SAS's usage (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 57-59). This aspect undercuts not only the specific nature of the SAS's claim in the context of the book context, but also their broader claim to accurately represent the meaning of the Shari'ah and the concomitant social and communal authority that goes with it. Abou El Fadl's approach deliberately targets both of these aspects through his de-legitimisation of the SAS's position – rather in examination the Shari'ah can no longer be unproblematically presented as having only one thing or way of saying, but rather must be presented as the full range of established judicial and historical opinion (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 81). This process also undercuts the appropriation of social and communal authority developed through the assumption of the authority of the religious sources themselves, by highlighting the extent to which that authority, resting on an accurate presentation of the legal and ethical sources, is misplaced – the SAS fatwa misunderstands, misrepresents, and fails to abide by the established norms of judicial practice within the Islamic tradition, as Abou El Fadl, in his response, illuminates. In doing so, there is a de-construction of the authority of the authoritarian discourse within the SAS fatwa, not through an appeal to an outside source or based on the nature of outcomes, but rather through a de-legitimisation of the authority claims of the fatwa itself, which rests on being an accurate and 'traditional' representation of the authority of the Islamic tradition and its sources (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 83-91).

2.2 Re-Presentation

This initial stage is followed by the second of Abou El Fadl's methodological steps, that of re-presenting the initial plurality and difference existent within the historical tradition (Slater, 2016). This functions, again, in two ways – by showcasing the variety and plurality of the existent tradition, Abou El Fadl draws a distinction between his own familiarity with the mechanics and content of the tradition and that of the SAS (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 46-47), but also the re-presentation of the extent of this plurality draws a contrast between the authoritarian presentation of a single opinion seen in the first stage and the willingness and openness to variety expressed in Abou El Fadl's response (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 83-91). This re-presentation is done by developing the initial de-legitimising critique into a wider account of the background of the sources drawn upon and the varied meanings that these sources have been seen to hold throughout their historical uses (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 47, 54, 62). In doing so, the plural nature of the Islamic tradition and of the potentially plural meanings of sources and texts within it, is opened up to further reflection, hermeneutical discussion, and ethical interpretation. This feature means that the process of interpretative choice is, in contrast to the authoritarian form, foregrounded and made the central question of Abou El Fadl's methodology. In this case, the question moves from being 'What does the Shari'ah say about this matter?' to one of 'How do we select and construct the most appropriate answer from among the various things that the Shari'ah says about this, and other relevant, matters?'. Crucially, while the authoritarian forms of discourse seek to occlude this interpretative choice, masking it behind descriptions of the Shari'ah which minimise the element of interpretation and present only unitary singular accounts of its meaning (Zakariyya, 2005, p. 5). Abou El Fadl at this stage foregrounds the element of interpretative choice – and by doing so, seeks to uncover and re-present the norms by which these choices have been made within the established Islamic legal tradition (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 96-98).

2.3 Ethical Determination

This process of delegitimisation and re-presentation naturally provides the ground on which the third step of Abou El Fadl's methodology lies – the deliberation of correct action between and through the plurality present within the tradition that has been previously identified. Abou El Fadl correctly identifies the act of interpretative choice as a critical part of the Islamic legal tradition's approach to matter of ethics and the law (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 84-85), and having done so, he requires a systematic and tradition grounded method of appropriately selecting between the interpretative possibilities he has identified in the previous stage. It is at this stage where we see the invocation of the notion of 'beauty' – as a way of determining the most appropriate interpretative frame and

outcome from amidst plurality. This selection has its roots firmly within the Islamic tradition as one of the many names of God, *al-Musawwir* the shaper of beauty, as well as a long Sufi tradition grounded in mystical practice (Baldwick, 2012, p. 68). This invocation serves as a marker of discernment for the legitimate application of one interpretation amidst the identified plurality, to a particular and specific contextual circumstance (Slater, 2016, p. 299). This is important, because not only does it allow the aesthetic quality by which interpretative judgements can be made amongst difference to come to the fore, but it allows for that aesthetic quality to play a role in the preservation of difference across differing ethical contexts. The account that Abou El Fadl draws upon in deploying this notion of beauty is one that incorporates within it a sense of non-finality and imputes on the application of beauty a sense of continuous and progressive beautification (Slater, 2016). This mirrors both classic forms of beauty within the Islamic tradition, stemming from its connection to the nature of the divine, but also broader commitments about the effect of individual actions in society and their beautifying impact (Abou El Fadl, 2006, pp. 119-121). With this notion of beauty as a process, rather than a point of arrival, the implementation of the law is more clearly aligned with social and religious outcomes, with an explicit connection drawn between the rightness and appropriateness of the process of interpretation and the beautifying social effect of the appropriate legal determination.

In doing so, this final stage returns to the arena of interpretative choice – it is not enough for Abou El Fadl’s methodology to chose an interpretation of the authoritative sources as universal, but rather, through the deployment of a contextual concept like beauty, the law can be responsive to the contextual requirements of beautification within particular and specific ethical circumstances as they arise. This final stage of the methodology deployed by Abou El Fadl operates to provide a structure for the act of interpretative choice. The previous stages have made this a critical aspect of the entire process of seeking clarity on a matter of law or ethics. This connection and referral to the tradition is a critical aspect of the perceived validity of ethical and legal positions within the Islamic tradition as a whole, and within specific Muslim communities (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 148). This final process also works in tandem with the initial step of delegitimation, by interfering with the continued ability of more authoritarian or universalising tendencies to present themselves as the sole originators of meaning and truth in the legal and ethical sphere, and by placing their pronouncements within a social context which examines the outcomes of legal decisions and norms in terms of social beauty (Abou El Fadl, 2006). This can be seen most clearly in the examples of Abou El Fadl’s critique of religiously motivated authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 117-119) and in his treatment of gender in the context of Islamic law and ethics (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, pp. 247-249).

This brief sketch of the overall programme that Abou El Fadl’s work follows has hopefully uncovered some of the methodological complexity and potential within it. This three-stage process of delegitimation, re-presentation, and interpretative choice reoccurs throughout his work and is a prominent feature of both his academic work as a scholar of the Islamic legal tradition and his social community work as an Islamic jurist. It obviously contains within it significant points of potential exploration for Christian-Muslim studies – both in terms of outcome and in terms of methodology – yet while the methodological approach might be an understandable potential point of comparison, there are crucially different epistemological, hermeneutical, ethical, and aesthetic considerations which motivate the formation of Abou El Fadl’s methodology in very specific ways. It is these considerations that this article aims to flag as critical to a fully formed understanding of the complexity of Abou El Fadl’s work and as a point of potential further, deeper, and more fulfilling forms of Christian-Muslim interaction. By highlighting the ways in which epistemological concerns, hermeneutical strategies, ethical processes, and aesthetic qualities interact to motivate Abou El Fadl’s approach, we uncover more of the particular ways in which the differing religious traditions arrive at their own conceptual systems of reference.

3. Systematic Considerations in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Systematic considerations like these are deeply relevant to the interface of Christian-Muslim dialogue and they must be considered if a fuller picture of the nature of the different religious traditions and their comparison is to be both accurate and productive. These considerations deal not just with the outcomes embedded within various traditions – the things that the traditions rely on in order to make sense of the world – but also the means and methods by which those answers are formulated. Indeed, as the increasing awareness of religious traditions as culturally specific, social grounded, and flexible changing responses to the difficulties of life grows, this area of comparison seems to offer much greater scope for fruitful engagement (Goddard, 2000, pp. 201-212). In this section, I want to take three specific areas of consideration in the interface the Christian and Islamic traditions which are pertinent to the discussion of the place of beauty in Abou El Fadl's work and examine them in turn. This is because this point of connection between the work of Abou El Fadl and the Christian tradition has been identified elsewhere as a potential site of useful discussion (Ralston, 2014) in examining the epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical differences that ground Abou El Fadl's use of aesthetics within his ethico-legal system, this immediate point of comparison can be more fully fleshed out. In doing so, it is not the case that these differences are to be seen as being viewed as somehow progressive, with hermeneutical differences arising only from epistemological differences, for example. Rather, the different choices and assumptions operating within these facets of difference interconnect and support one another in deeply complex and continually changing ways. Some of these considerations are general areas of significant difference in approach and assumptions between the Christian and Islamic traditions as a whole and some are more specific features arising from aspects of Abou El Fadl's own practice. Yet, both forms inform and structure the operation of the notion of beauty within his wider work, and thereby inform and structure the potential site of connection identified as arising from it.

3.1 Epistemological considerations

As my colleagues involved in inter-religious dialogue will know, inter-religious comparison and discussion is already a deeply difficult and complex endeavour. This is due to the myriad forms of beliefs, behaviours, and practices that emerge from those areas of human relationality we call 'religions' (Platvoet, 1990). Even within this, further difficulty arises in attempts to distinguish the meaning of those beliefs, behaviours, and practices for members of religious traditions and communities, because of the conceptually integrated nature of much religious belief, such as the dependence of aspects of doctrine or practice on other areas of doctrine or practice for their meaning (Moyaert, 2005). Our terms of reference, either as scholars or as practitioners, arise from within and are informed by the connections of meaning made between various aspects of religious or cultural belief, practice, or behaviour. Within these religious or cultural systems of referential meaning, the importance of aspects of belief, practice, or behaviour, arises from where, within the system of reference, meaning can be attached with a sense of certainty or reliability. This apportioning of meaning through the reliability of the sources of knowledge represents the epistemological framework of the religious tradition, touching on key questions such as where reliable knowledge can be found, how that knowledge interacts with other and alternative sources of reliable and unreliable knowledge, the constraints and expansiveness of those sources, and our human ability to comprehend and understand the relevance and meaning of those sources. Naturally, these epistemological assumptions and positions differ across religious traditions and in doing so, they expose fundamental and deeply influential differences between the motivations of religious belief, practices, and behaviours in each. In the specific case of the use of aesthetics as a concept for ethical determination seen in Abou El Fadl's work, the influence of epistemological positions is undeniable. These are apparent not just in the broad outlines of Islamic epistemology in the general sense (Yazdi, 1992), but also in the very specific ways that aspects of this tradition are used to further the methodological goals of his project (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 155-156) (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 311-312). There are three specific areas of epistemological particularity that most deeply influence the work of Abou El Fadl – the nature of the Qur'anic text itself, its relation to other sources of knowledge within the Islamic tradition, and the finitude of created beings in relation to the divine.

The nature of the Qur'anic text is of central importance in any discussion regarding theological beliefs, religious practices, or ethical guidance within the Islamic tradition as is the epistemological value placed on it. The Qur'an occupies the pre-eminent location for ethical reflection within the Islamic tradition on the basis of epistemological uniqueness (Akhtar, 2008) – as the source and foundational stone of the divine revelation, the Qur'an offers access to an epistemological certainty that cannot be matched elsewhere (p. 187). In seeking to understand, and relate to, the world around us through the matrix of a religious tradition, it is this potential of certain knowledge that foregrounds the importance of scripture across a number of religious traditions, but is perhaps most obviously the case within the Islamic tradition (Akhtar, 2008). Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the theological, philosophical, and ethical importance of the Qur'an within the Islamic tradition's intellectual architecture, both as a locus of certainty, but also as a repository of the content and appropriate form of ethical, philosophical, and theological reasoning.

In Abou El Fadl's case, the nature of the Qur'anic text itself intersects with his project in number of ways. This begins with how the epistemological primacy assigned to the text influences and shapes the juridical method according to which he aims to operate and according to which he critiques the operation of others, such as the SAS fatwa (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 115-118). This epistemological primacy can be seen in the immediate reference of the contextual ethical dilemma to the text – a seeking of certainty for the resolution of a particular issue through divine guidance (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 40-42). In doing so, the authoritative text, because of its divine origin and direct transmission, is applied to promote the authority of a specific interpretation and reading of it. This behaviour of the text, and the clarity of its epistemological primacy, is significantly different to the operation of similar religious scriptures such as the Gospels or New Testament of the Christian tradition (Burrell, 2011, pp. 165-173), or other forms of scripture in other religious traditions (Winkler, 2016). The Qur'an is, by the nature of its revelation and theological meaning, to be understood as both specific, in that it provides a singular account of revelation in specific time, for a specific place, and in reaction to specific social, religious, and political contexts, and universal, in that it offers a direct connection to the divine through its revelation that offers access to universal rules for behaviour, religious practice, and legal and ethical choices (Adeel, 2019, p. 111).

These characteristics of the Qur'anic text naturally have implications for the way that Abou El Fadl's methodology outlined above operates and interacts with the wider tradition. With the text of the Qur'an being central to ethical reflection within the Islamic tradition, the nature of the text necessarily also has implications. This characteristic nature, such as the finite and limited content of the text itself, the nature of the genres contained within it, and the initial purpose of the revelation and its text, all produce significant strains for the direct application of it into particular and contextual ethical dilemmas such as those discussed by Abou El Fadl in his work and its use as a universally applicable text for ethical reflection by believers. The limited nature of the text, in discursive and content aspects, means that its central epistemological place within the Islamic tradition necessarily requires on an extensive and expansive hermeneutical approach that encourages both thematic analysis, in order to determine the underlying themes and rules that govern behaviour within the Qur'anic frame, and an awareness of the necessity for flexibility regarding the application of these themes in specific contexts, as not all contexts or situations can be covered within the limited scope of the text itself (Galadari, 2018, p. 25). This means that the epistemological place of the Qur'an, both social and culturally in Islamic communities, and in the specific delivery of legal and ethical rules, results in significant hermeneutical needs within the Islamic tradition, in order to allow for the applicability of limited revealed knowledge to the universal application of its teachings.

This process of application is another aspect of the epistemological framing that undergirds Khaled Abou El Fadl's broader legal methodology. As we saw in the example given of his methodological process, the relationship of the Qur'anic text to other sources of religious knowledge is one of primacy, but given the limited nature of its extent, other sources of religious knowledge, such as the Hadith, are required in order to further the understanding, contextualisation, and application of the divine law (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, pp. 98-99). This leads to situations where explicit answers to ethical or legal issues are determined through a process which, although based on the divine certainty offered by the Qur'anic text, also involves varying degrees of textual and traditional certainty around knowledge being offered. This distinction is foregrounded by Abou El Fadl in his criticism of the role that the hadith material plays in the formulation of the SAS fatwa (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 47) – being misrepresented as forming an aspect of certainty in ethical and legal matters and being mis-contextualised in order to uphold a desired social outcome (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 108). Furthermore, the limited scope, but epistemological primacy, of the Qur'anic text relative to other sources of ethical knowledge within the Islamic tradition, such as the Hadith, or reason, or the consensus of the community, results not only in the initiating of an expansive notion of the Qur'an's relevance to matters of ethics and law, but also requires from the ongoing and changing tradition an ability to interpret the Qur'an in multivarious ways depending on the specific social context (Abou El Fadl, 2014, p. xxxiv).

While the two preceding aspects of epistemological consideration in Abou El Fadl's work stem from the characteristics of the Qur'anic text, there are other significant factors in way that knowledge is treated within the Islamic tradition that have an impact on the formation of his work. This can be clearly seen in the influence that aspects of Sufi thought have had on Abou El Fadl's intellectual and social work (Eman, 2004) (Slater, 2016) (Aini, 2019), particularly, and usefully contrasting to the considerations of text and law above, the way in which conceptions of the human finitude cause a distinction to be firmly drawn between the divine and certain knowledge, and the human and the intrinsic uncertainty within it. Within Sufi traditions, there is a strong emphasis on the ability of mystical practices to achieve a sense of knowledge beyond the reach of human reason, which in turn, has led to an emphasis on the practices and behaviours by which this knowledge can be acquired or unveiled (Weigel, 2004, pp. 13-16). In addition, we see the development of a traditional mistrust, or an expression of hesitancy around, certainty when it is applied to the human, or finite. Abou El Fadl draws, in his work, on both the Sufi tradition generally, and the specific concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd*, the transcendent unity of being, to further explore this dynamic of hesitancy, uncertainty, and human knowledge and its relevance to ethical determination (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, pp. 345-347). The concept relies on an understanding of the nature of things as fundamentally all connected to the divine, and dependant upon the divine, for their existence (Dobie, 2007, p. 313). The importance of this for Sufi's is noted in Nasr's explanation of the goal of Sufism as:

‘The Sufi is one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to Unity, from the particular to the Universal. He leaves the many for the One and through this very process is granted the vision of the One in the many’ (Nasr, 1972, p. 129).

It is this ability and desire to seek after the oneness of reality, through its expression in the diversity and plurality of our experienced reality, that undergirds the importance of the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* both mystically, and, for our purposes, epistemologically. It is Ibn ‘Arabi who is most closely associated with the development of the concept², having asserted that the core Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*, the unity and singularity of the divine, extended not just to the divine itself, but also to the created reality we experience. As Nasr again notes, Sufi's:

‘... have realized that Reality or *Wujūd* belongs ultimately to God alone, that not only is He One, but also that He is the only ultimate Reality and the source of everything that appears to

² Although Ibn Sabin dealt with the concept before him.

possess *Wujūd*. All *Wujūd* belongs to God while He is transcendent vis-à-vis all existents' (Nasr, 2006, p. 75),

meaning that the tradition sees the contingency of existence as resting ultimately on the divine being, rather than on an ontic self-existence. This necessarily has an impact on the framing and location of epistemological aspects of the tradition as well, such as the dependence on divine knowledge of human knowledge.

Being as *Wujūd* is the unknowable and inaccessible ground of existence, only possessed by the Divine and reflected in our own existences rather than possessed innately by them – 'everything is, in essence, identified with God while God infinitely transcends everything' (Nasr, 1966, p. 137). This difference between the divine self-existence and the dependant existence of reality promotes a distinction between the limitless and certain existence of the divine and our own fundamentally limited, relative, and finite existence. Certainty and finality are, within the Sufi tradition, confined to God, because God alone possesses *Wujūd* – only God is not limited by his dependence on an other for his being, but stands alone as One (Chodkiewicz, 1993, p. 36). This epistemological distinction is seen between the certainty of knowledge offered by the divine and divine revelation, and the uncertainty or limitedness of human knowledge – either human interpretations of the divine revelation or knowledge produced through the application of human reason alone. This can be seen most clearly in Abou El Fadl's invocation of the notion of human uncertainty in his broader ethical work, specifically when examining the applicability of aspects of the tradition beyond their immediate context. This can be seen in his approach to a number of social issues (Abou El Fadl, 2006), but is also clearly enunciated in his critique of contemporary Islamic approaches to the social implications of gender (Abou El Fadl, 2001a).

In each of these three cases, we see that epistemological aspects of the Islamic tradition exert a significant and central place on the formation of questions that are relevant to understanding the process and the functioning of Abou El Fadl's legal methodology, as well as its eventual use of beauty. The nature of the Qur'anic text itself and its epistemological primacy over other sources of religious guidance within the Islamic tradition exerts a significant pull towards the development of structured modes of interpretation of the text to allow for its application to contextual events, but also preserves and validates the retention of openness variety. Without this sense of openness, the epistemological primacy and limited direct scope of the Qur'an would result in a source of religious authority that was of limited relevance to new ethical situations and of limited usefulness for broader ethical reflection. The distinct epistemological qualities of the Qur'an, and other aspects of the Islamic tradition such as the *Wahdat al-Wujūd*, offer distinctive qualifications and characteristics to Islamic approaches to matters of epistemology, but also, crucially, to Islamic approaches to other areas of potential Christian-Muslim comparison including those of hermeneutics, ethics, and aesthetics.

3.2 Hermeneutic considerations

As we have seen aspects of so far, these characteristic qualities of the Islamic tradition regarding epistemology also have a significant impact on the role and formation of hermeneutical approaches within the tradition. It is not enough to identify where knowledge lies and its certainty or uncertainty, one must also produce, from the limited nature of certain knowledge, the readings and interpretations which can guide ethical action when faced with the ever-increasing plurality of ethical questions (Gleave, 2012, pp. 26-27). It is in this process of interpretation, which is both necessary and constant, that the universal guides of behaviour can be gleaned from the particular context of certain texts, that we can seek to determine the correct course of behaviour in a specific context.

This specific connection of hermeneutics to the production of ethical knowledge within the Islamic tradition is clearly connected to the epistemological positioning of the Qur'an and to the expansive

nature of the ethical guidance seen to be contained within it (Hallaq, 2009, pp. 72-124). However, this hermeneutical impetus is not necessarily towards a singular unified reading of the specific text, but rather, one that preserves within it aspects of the epistemological hesitancy seen before regarding the application of the authoritative Qur'anic text and the universality of specific interpretations derived from it (Knut, 2005, pp. 31-37). This extension of epistemological hesitancy into the hermeneutical realm can be seen in the pluralisation of religious knowledge within the classical Islamic legal tradition generally, but also amongst those scholars such as al-Juwayni, al-Suyuti, al-Ghazali, and al-Razi who formed the grouping known as the *musawibbah*, a group that stressed the lack of definitiveness in legal matters (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 87). This group and their approach is a prominent aspect of Abou El Fadl's legal practice, with particular mentions arising in both 'Speaking in God's Name' (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, pp. 148-151) and 'And God Knows the Soldiers' (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 87) to reinforce the validity of adopting a position of doubtfulness about the outcomes of legal reasoning produced in an authoritarian and singular fashion. We see this not only in the critiques offered by Abou El Fadl, but also in the forms of hesitancy that are apparent throughout his own work, such as the recurring references to traditional hedging in the use of the phrase 'and God knows best' (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 24-25) (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, pp. 32, 56, 131, 265, 271-272, 278).

The position of the *musawibbah* rests on an epistemological assumption that, should there be a definitive ethical resolution to an issue, the divine would have ensured that this definitive answer was conclusively and clearly demonstrated within the revealed text of the Qur'an (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 87ft8). Given that the physical nature of the text precludes that, being bounded by historical, geographical, and cultural contexts, but that the epistemological primacy of the text requires it, the group determined that it is the process of seeking an answer correctly that is praiseworthy, with only the divine being able to conclusively determine the correct interpretation. Al-Juwayni outlines this when he says:

'The most a *mujtahid* would claim is a preponderance of belief and a balancing of the evidence. However, certainty was never claimed by any of them... If we were charged with finding the truth, we would not have been forgiven for failing to find it' (Al-Juwayni, 2001, pp. 50-51).

It is the hermeneutical process that is both a necessary part of the legal and ethical determination but is also the resting place of ethical import in this process, for Al-Juwayni and others, rather than the definitiveness of a single, unitary outcome. This plurality is not a threat to the epistemological position of the text itself (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 90), nor is it a retreat to a hermeneutical (or ethical) relativism (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 87), but is rather an expression of the importance of hesitancy in the movement from a bounded, but authoritative, text to an expansive ethical system. The location of hermeneutics in the Islamic tradition occupies this middle role between the epistemological certainty of the Qur'an and the ethical hesitancy needed for the application of the text into multiple contextual situations. As Al-Juwayni notes, one should think it is as if God commanded:

'My command to my servants is in accordance with the preponderance of their beliefs. So, whoever preponderantly believes that they are obligated to do something, acting upon it becomes My command' (Al-Juwayni, 2001, p. 61).

This is a distinct qualification of the human ability to interpret the authoritative text with the same epistemological validity as the text itself has (Abou El Fadl, 2015, p. 474), highlighting the extent to which epistemological considerations about the primacy of the text and pragmatic difficulties in the application of the text, necessitate certain hermeneutical formulations. Here, Al-Juwayni is not arguing that there are no ultimate truths that can be grasped by humanity, that the text is too complex to ever allow a grasping of certainty, but he is arguing that where a distinct contextual difference exists between the text and the ethical situation, the preponderance of doubt has to mean that the ethical question remains open (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 87) – even after our best efforts at interpreting

the text have been undertaken. In the case of a conflict in hermeneutics, for Al-Juwayni, it is the role of *ijtihad* (Al-Juwayni, 2001, pp. 36-38) or human reasoning to then determine the most appropriate outcome for that specific situation, with no sense of universality or finality attached to its application in that specific context.

Al-Juwayni's process, and its use within the work of Khaled Abou El Fadl, highlights the obligation to diligently investigate situations on the believer, while suspending the finality of judgement within any specific application. This hesitancy invites a multiplicity of opinions and interpretations of the text, mirroring similar moves seen within the bounds of Islamic mystical practice (Hefner, 2014) – the awareness of the limit of an individual interpretation, a hesitancy over the fixing of meaning definitively and a self-awareness of the necessary particularity of interpretations. While Islamic jurisprudence, due to the social and political contexts of its functioning in a plural, multicultural caliphate, has always contained a certain ethos of diversity of opinions and pluralism between legal schools (Knut, 2005), even the methodologies of judicial process themselves contribute to the construction of this ethos.

The use of this form of hermeneutical openness in the ethical arena is clear in Abou El Fadl's broader legal practice. As an example, Abou El Fadl states:

'Muslim jurists asserted that only God possesses perfect knowledge – human knowledge is tentative; it must rely on the weighing of competing factors and the assertion of judgement based on an assessment of the balance of evidence' (Abou El Fadl, 2001a, p. 39).

In the wider context he is asserting that this approach is more accurate to the Islamic tradition as a whole, liable to result in better social and ethical outcomes, and part of a necessary corrective functioning of the methodology of the law against authoritarianism, whether in the interpretation of texts or in the implementation of rules derived from texts (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 330). This continual engagement and re-engagement with the process of hermeneutical interpretation of the divine text is a critical factor in Abou El Fadl's legal methodology as it allows for an anchoring of his attempt at methodological reform within the classical legal tradition and within the epistemological primacy of the Qur'anic text. The moves expressed are not a retreat or a form of hedging, either hermeneutical hedging or ethical hedging, but are rather deep commitments to a particular vision of the relationship of epistemological secure knowledge to the vagaries of contextual ethical dilemmas.

It is this hermeneutical connection between the epistemologically secure and the ethically applied that we must now turn our attention to. So far, we have seen the way in which epistemological positions have a deep and critical influence on the needs and processes of the tradition within the hermeneutical sphere, but this also applies in the grittier application of these interpretations to specific ethical queries. Abou El Fadl is a particularly useful example of this process and how embedded various questions of hermeneutics and epistemology are, as his work includes both theoretical legal texts and texts that deal with his own application of the law within a specific Islamic community. This application of the text to specific ethical queries is the essential aspect of his role as a legal scholar for a Islamic community.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The importance of this process of hermeneutical application to specific ethical contexts is most clearly seen in the direct work that Abou El Fadl engages in within his own Islamic community. While within the processes of Islamic epistemology and hermeneutics there has been a traditional assertion that it is only the text that is ultimately authoritative, rather than the particular interpretations of the text made by an individual jurist, or school of jurists, Abou El Fadl sees this traditional approach as having faded as the Islamic tradition has encountered forms of western modernity (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 19-34). He sees this as especially apparent within Islamic communities in the West and within

contemporary discussions surrounding the reading of the religious texts and their application to ethical situations. Abou El Fadl outlines this position in his account of the nature and role of religious authority in the Islamic tradition and the way in which he sees a lack of awareness of the need for this epistemological and hermeneutical hesitancy as leading to the development of an increasingly authoritarian aspect in the ethical sphere (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 44-48). This relationship between the epistemological positions held and the hermeneutical approaches developed within his work are explicitly framed both as a critique of contemporary authoritarian approaches (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 94-101) (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 271-281) and as a more authentic retrieval of the Islamic legal tradition. As he writes, describing his own approach:

‘The reader approaches the text because it is authoritative. The text is authoritative because of its origin. In the case above, the authority of the text is derived from its divine origin’ (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 84).

This approach distinguishes the epistemological authority of the text itself, before going on to delineate the problems found when that authority is claimed unequivocally by the hermeneutical interpreter – this is the difficulty we have seen developed in his critique of the SAS fatwa within ‘*And God Knows the Soldiers*’ (Abou El Fadl, 2001), but is also apparent in a more general form in his critique of ‘Islamicity’ in his more recent work ‘*Reasoning With God*’ (Abou El Fadl, 2014). As he later notes:

‘If the reader cites the text and then states a rule, the reader has unified himself with the text. The reader becomes one with the text and stands suspended, untouchable, and transcendent. The text and the construction the reader has given it become one and the same. Effectively, the text remains authoritative but the reader becomes authoritarian’ (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 84).

Abou El Fadl, in arguing against the authoritarian in the hermeneutical interpretation of texts for the purposes of Islamic jurisprudence, holds open the door for a return of the self-aware epistemological and ethical hesitancy around definition and finality that we have seen are crucial aspects of Islamic approaches to epistemology and hermeneutics, allowing a simultaneous narration for his retrieval of the tradition against reductive forms of modern western secularism (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 113-122) and reductive forms of Islamic fundamentalism (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 215-226). If particular hermeneutical interpretations are seen as definitively epistemologically authoritative, then alternatives and engagements – whether internal to the religious tradition, or with those standing outside it – with that perspective are rejected. By aligning one particular interpretation of the text with the authority of the text itself, the discourse surrounding that text becomes mono-dimensional, confined, and defined by the interpreter. Abou El Fadl notes that, in current circumstances:

‘Truth is only presented through the reading the reader chooses for the text. No other readings are possible; or at least, this is how the reader frames the discourse to his audience. The text is rendered subservient to the reader and, effectively, the reader is substituted for the text. In many ways, the reader has not only attempted to construct the meaning of the text but has gone beyond that and constructed the text itself’ (Abou El Fadl, 2001, pp. 84-85).

Given the danger Abou El Fadl identifies – of a conflation between the text's authority and the latent authoritarianism in the readers interpretation of the text – he proposes that judgements must be made with an awareness of the distance between the epistemological security of the text and the epistemological insecurity of the interpretation, disrupting their authority to define the meaning of the text in singular ways – and that where this is lacking as in the SAS fatwa, this must be challenged. In Abou El Fadl's view, and within the evidence of his own practice, rather:

‘The reader should not say, “This is what the rule of *Sharī'a* is”. Rather, the reader should say, “from this all the evidence presents...”, or “in my view...”, or “in my school...”, or “in my understanding...”’ (Abou El Fadl, 2001, p. 85),

tying hermeneutical and ethical self-restraint to the necessary diligence in the production of legal judgements. This suspension of ethical finality, mirroring the epistemological hesitancy and hermeneutical openness, functions as a continual check on the various actions involved in producing, from limited texts, the expansive systems of ethical reflection required in the contemporary world.

This discussion has taken us through the interconnection between hermeneutics and epistemology in the context of the Islamic ethical tradition, tracing the way in which our epistemological approach to texts influences and informs the way in which we approach our hermeneutical project. Similarly, our hermeneutical outcomes have an influence on the way in which we then come to conceive of the epistemic value of certain texts, or of certain authoritative interpretation of them. The difficulty, of course, lies with understanding and developing a methodology by which our ethical actions can be guided by the texts we have chosen to hermeneutically and epistemologically value. How is it that we move from texts, which we have epistemologically chosen to value as scripture, and hermeneutically chosen to interpret as instructions for our actions, towards living out everyday lives in a way that makes sense? Abou El Fadl wrestles with this question throughout his work, seeking to deliver a cohesive and coherent system not just of producing specific ethical judgements in specific contexts, but also seeking to answer the question of how the methods and processes by which the epistemological and hermeneutical variety present within the Islamic tradition can be navigated.

4. Aesthetics and the Epistemological, Hermeneutic, and Ethical frames

Abou El Fadl's answer to this problematic question centres on his invocation of aesthetics – that is the invocation of the notion of Beauty, in a broader sense than the purely physical. While we often deem beauty to be readily apparent and informed solely by the representation or physicality of an object, this elides the deep and distinctive ability of beauty to found beyond the physical – in the realm of the philosophical, the mathematical, the ethical, and the theological – and beyond a pure appreciation for fixity. Indeed, the rapture of Beauty is often exemplified as one of perfection aside from our desire to possess or own, an appreciation of the thing as is without the need to tinker, correct, or add (Eco, 2010).

Indeed, for Abou El Fadl, it is this unfixed and never settled quality of the aesthetic that encourages his methodological deployment of it in the epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical circumstances we have sketched out here (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 373-374). In addition, it is the sense of its transcendence of the particular and its pointing toward the universal that allows for its place within Abou El Fadl's methodology – bridging the gap seen in the universal relevance but specific context of the epistemologically certain text and the universally expansive but specifically contextual ethical dilemmas faced. As Abou El Fadl writes:

'I ask my God for a guideline, and I always find it in beauty, for my guide is beautiful and sublime. How can The Beautiful demand of us anything but the beautiful? If there is a beauty to life it is that we derive from the magnanimity of God, the urge for the beautiful and the refined. "Blessed be God the best of creators," (23:14), Who placed in us the desire to transcend in beauty the ravages of time' (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 114).

The aesthetic plays this role within Abou El Fadl's methodology of allowing the relation of specifically bounded ethical situations with other specifically bounded, but epistemologically certain, situations described within the textual sources, producing through their relation the potentiality for a harmonisation of their contextual differences (Abou El Fadl, 2015). In doing so, Abou El Fadl places the emphasis of coherency not on the limited text, or on the breadth of hermeneutical reasoning, but rather on the connection of specific contextual outcomes to the broader norms of aesthetics and their relation to the nature of the divine (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 330). In this way, the method functions as a return to the epistemological primacy of the divine, expressed initially in the text, but brought to coherency through its relation to the directly revealed nature of the divine as the former and maker of the beautiful.

The use of beauty as a marker for discerning the relevance of particular hermeneutic outcomes and juristic formulations to specific practical occasions allows Abou El Fadl to preserve flexibility in the law regarding contexts and particularities – it allows the aesthetic to, in some ways, exceed the ethical in particular situations where there may otherwise be inconsistency or incoherence between differing hermeneutical readings of the epistemologically secure texts (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 330) (Abou El Fadl, 2014, pp. 359-366). It is important to realise that this notion and use of beauty in Abou El Fadl's project is not just an appreciation for logical clarity in argumentation, the satisfaction of having resolved a legal problem, or a static position, but is instead envisioned as a process of making and becoming beautiful. In the same manner as the internalisation and practice of beautiful practices, *ihsan*, based on scriptural descriptions of divine beauty and the example of the Prophet, leads to the outward beautification of the believer as a *muhsin*, so the practice of picking the outcome of the law most in accord with the beauty of the divine becomes a continuous practice of self-reflection and improvement (Slater, 2016). His project therefore functions differently to the more commonly espoused *muqasid* reformism, which relies on a reduction of the law to broader principles (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. xix) – instead, Abou El Fadl works within the pre-existing structures and opinions of the law, before using beauty as a method for determining the best choice among the presented plurality.

This is perhaps most clearly to be seen in the overlap that becomes apparent when a question of the law is explicitly framed by Abou El Fadl as a choice between the beautiful and the non-beautiful – when the irresolvable hermeneutic and ethic plurality is to be determined by the aesthetic understanding of it (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 121). In the context of a discussion of the legal and ethical validity of spousal corporal punishment, Abou El Fadl states:

‘Before I ascribe to God something that torments the heart, before I admit to men the power of execution, I must weigh the possibilities in my head. If there is the glimmer of beauty to be pursued then my mind will search the subtleties of what has been said. If I have a shadow of doubt I will run to the refuge of the beautiful’ (Abou El Fadl, 2006, p. 114).

In doing so, and in making the interpretative pause and judgement at that point explicit, Abou El Fadl reflects on the nature of the interpretation he is engaging in and presents his decision as having a certain form of hesitancy that arises from its applicability beyond the specific circumstances within which it is offered. This framing relativizes the judgement made to within the particular contextual circumstances of the decision, allowing for a continued flexibility within the application of the law to better strive toward the perfection and beautification of society beyond and among a preserved hermeneutical and ethical plurality.

By engaging in this process and highlighting the role of the aesthetic in our hermeneutical and ethical deliberation, a move toward a more fully understood and explored epistemological and ethical pluralism can be preserved within complex and historically changing religious and cultural traditions. In this specific case, Abou El Fadl's aesthetic move seeks to allow the imperfection and never-finished quality of the aesthetic to guide us between and among competing and deeply attractive poles of certainty. In highlighting the extent to which Abou El Fadl's methodology of legal reform is grounded in the epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical aspects considered in this article, the hope is that the use of aesthetics in his project can be more fully brought into comparison with similar moves within Christian theology (Ralston, 2014). This similarity can be seen in many strands of Christian theology, where similar questions of authority and authoritativeness of religious sources are considered, similar questions of the relation of religious authority to social or communal authority emerge, and where political questions of organisation and relation to the secular are of pressing importance. In doing so, there is also a plea for greater attention to be paid in Christian-Muslim study to the comparative value of methodology and conceptual functioning, over, and as part of the oft-

compared religious and theological outcomes of these traditions. In doing so, not only will we glean significant new knowledge about the ways in which these differing religious traditions function, but also open up scope for greater detailed analysis of the similarities and differences of epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical approaches embedded within them.

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