

# Writing in the Eye of the Storm

BRUCE B. LAWRENCE

I am reading, absorbing, and reflecting on Talal's essay, "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein," in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic that has enveloped the world in spring 2020. COVID-19 has stopped ordinary activity almost everywhere, including the United States and North Carolina, where I live and from where I am writing.

The beauty of Talal's essay is its frontal engagement with big ideas, major thinkers, and long-term processes that most scholars ignore or deal with tangentially. Modernity is on trial, as is Western philosophy, science, and translation. Linguistics is foregrounded, via Wittgenstein and others, ethics are redeployed through MacIntyre, and Qur'anic idioms are reinvested with fresh meaning in English.

In what follows, I want to explore four themes—namely, modern thought, *barzakh*, conscience, and community—that offer the reader my deep read of Talal's essay. In effect, I am confirming the need for the grammar of a tradition, at once Islamic and global, that can be elaborated based on what Talal's grammar of Muslim tradition(alism) suggests yet does not fully develop.

At the outset, I confront the shadow of the curve. No one can escape the curve. It is the principal image dominating all American lives in spring 2020. It extends beyond America to the entire globe, but here, as everywhere, the question is: How does the curve look for you, where you live, where you interact with others, where you try to cope day by day with a virus that has no face, but also, seemingly, no predictability? And so the image of hope is "flattening the curve," taking whatever steps are possible, to limit the rate of the virus transmission now and for the long-term future.

"Flattening the curve," in an ironic twist, might also be seen as a metaphor for how the modernist subject views the universe. In this case, flattening the curve is not trying to reduce the spread of a pandemic virus but instead reducing dependency on a

model of the universe that privileges the vertical or metaphysical vector, the urge to look upward, to locate a transcendent: in short, to rely on a force above nature, the supernatural. Call it God, Fate, or Mystery, the upward curve goes beyond what is knowable for humans or other sentient beings. Its opposite is the natural and knowable world, accessible primarily by science and verifiable only by scientific protocols. There have always been tensions—even outright battles—between adherents to a supernatural, intangible order and proponents of a natural, empirical order. It could be argued that the decisive moment in modernity is the move from transcendent to immanent, or from vertical to horizontal, modes of reasoning. Think of liberalism, Marxism, pragmatism, each in its own way coming to terms with scientific categories and modes of reasoning; in short, flattening the curve of metaphysical reliance.

Another metaphor one might use to frame both the trajectory of modern/premodern reasoning and its process is “the Two Books.” Francis Bacon was among the first said to have popularized the Two Books: the Book of Nature (science) and the Book of God (scripture).<sup>1</sup> Both have a divine source, and so the one cannot contradict the other, according to Bacon. Yet in practice one must prefer one above the other, as does Bacon himself. The evolutionary account of human civilization rethinks the biblical account of creation in light of the discovery by Darwin that humankind has a very long history and that part of its prehistory was not limited to biblical and Qur’anic accounts, but instead included a gradual ascent from mammals who predated and prepared for the emergence of human beings.

My point in this essay is not to review or support evolutionary history but just to note it as the crucial backdrop to what Talal is addressing in “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein.” The most evident instance of the supernatural/natural, the vertical/flattening curve, is the essay’s pervasive infusion of natural or scientific discourse, even in projecting a counter-scientific or meta-scientific perspective. Talal’s two major interlocutors are Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both have been shaped by a modern world and the dominance of empirical science as a paradigm for accurate reasoning and reliable knowledge. It is no accident that Wittgenstein was an engineer, grounded in mathematics, before becoming a philosopher, while MacIntyre was a Marxist, grounded in a quasi-metaphysical science that took society rather than the Deity as the first, decisive referent in charting human thought. One can, and should, note how both figures developed beyond their initial fields of interest and expertise, yet neither Wittgenstein nor MacIntyre can be understood except as residual byproducts of the very disciplines/perspectives that they later rejected.

It is possible to read Talal’s brilliant foraging into the axes of modern reflection on religion, with Wittgenstein and MacIntyre as his pilot lights, as three interventions that crisscross the physical and the metaphysical. The first is a rigorous and

thorough refutation of modern, post-scientific thought in general but of religion in particular. There follows, secondly, a retrieval of virtue ethics as a substitute for blind materialism, spineless liberalism, or scientific atheism. And then comes a third: the use of Qur’anic language, and particular Qur’anic verses, to chart a way through Wittgenstein and MacIntyre to imagine a new ethical frontier that includes Muslim, as well as other fideist, voices in a global chorus of hope.<sup>2</sup> Each of these perspectives has its own value, but I want to stress how the first and third intercalate with a different kind of logic.

Talal begins by establishing two categories of interlocutors, rationalists and traditionalists. They are not so much descriptive markers of actual opponents as nominal explorers in the same terrain—physics/metaphysics, natural/supernatural, science/religion. At the outset, Talal tries to see himself as straddling both while fully committed to neither. He treats rationalists and traditionalists as separate yet convergent, noting, “I sometimes speak at once from inside and outside because the two positions cannot always be kept apart—even if it were desirable to do so” (405). To speak “at once from inside and outside because the two positions cannot always be kept apart” is what I have called elsewhere *barzakh* logic, a fuzzy logic that both affirms and denies, while neither affirming nor denying,<sup>3</sup> and I think it helps Talal’s argument if we consider how *barzakh* logic shapes his critical move in the third part of his essay: invoking Qur’anic terms to speak to the challenges raised by Wittgenstein and addressed by MacIntyre. After exploring the ways in which contraries can become complementaries, avoiding making dyads into dichotomies, Talal introduces the ensouled body:

What is being addressed in the Qur’an [he argues] is what I want to refer to as the ensouled body. . . . According to the Qur’anic view, the more one exercises a virtue the easier—the less deliberately intentional—it becomes. . . . To master the use of a particular grammar, to inhabit a particular form of life, is to be a particular kind of person, including one to whom virtue is *intrinsic*: mastery is its own reward. A virtuous person is one to whom a particular kind of behavior “comes naturally.” (423)

In other words, belief and action are conjoined in practice, even as analytically they remain separate. This is an exercise of *barzakh* logic. Neither dualistic nor binary but triadic, it both affirms and denies, while neither affirming nor denying. I call it *barzakh* or fuzzy logic because it requires its practitioners to be grounded in science, like Wittgenstein, a mathematician-engineer turned linguistic philosopher. To see the limits of science, one has first to know its protocols. A theorist does not eliminate science but rather tries to recover the ground preceding and undergirding all true science, as did Bacon, but also Pascal, and later Polanyi and Peirce. *Barzakh* logic does not destroy or deny reason, but instead probes its frontiers, which

are internal and sentient as much as external and cognitive. One way to practice *barzakh* logic is to conjoin *mindbody*, as did the philosopher William Poteat, a Pascal partisan and Polanyi enthusiast,<sup>4</sup> or to speak of the ensouled body as Talal does in this essay. Mindbody precedes and parallels ensouled body; it helps us understand how both mind and body embody, literally, a paradox. There is no hyphen to *mindbody*. It is not two parts conjoined, but one phenomenon, a single existent: mindbody. Like mindbody, ensouled body relies on the conjunction of seeming opposites: *barzakh*. *Barzakh* itself is a Persian word found in the Qur'an (23:99–100, 25:53, 55:19–20). At its simplest, the *barzakh* evokes the division between this life and the next, between our present life in this world and a future life beyond knowing, but *barzakh* also refers to the divide between salt and fresh water, found in some oceans and rivers. *Barzakh* is at once barrier and bridge. It moves beyond the binary dualism *either/or* and instead confirms the dyads *both/and* and *neither/nor*. *Barzakh* might be defined as interactive, uninterrupted connection, linking two things—whether two cosmic realms or two bodies of water or two key terms—without reducing or diluting either.

What is crucial is the irreducibility of the *barzakh* itself. It cannot be triangulated to produce yet another form of what Talal aptly decries as disembodied abstractionism.<sup>5</sup> If *barzakh* logic is to prevail, it requires constant vigilance against the reflex back to binary logic, and in its place, a commitment to a more restrained, patient engagement with dyadic logic, twos combined or elided, as in *mindbody* or *ensouled body*.

From the outset of Talal's essay, we can see how his introduction of "soul" talk requires a tacking back and forth to Qur'anic precedents. The very act of Qur'anic translation requires recognizing what is omitted as well as what is confirmed from revelation—in this case, from Qur'anic verses. Early on in the essay, Talal introduces the intimate connection of the self to the soul, and does so with an appeal to childhood experience and the earliest stages of learning. Here is the crucial paragraph:

The self is not necessarily the one that knows itself best. The precondition of the self is the potentiality of *an ensouled body*, the living ability to act intentionally in the indefinite web of life, to have a world—a language—together with others (I, you, she, he, they) who are themselves *persons* in process of being made and remade. . . . But self-knowledge cannot rely simply on itself: there is always need for another who can trace the patterns of its uncontrolled desires and actions. . . . There is no object that can be called a soul, we (moderns) say, because its existence can't be measured independently of the physiological processes of the body; the soul is merely a pre-scientific superstition, or an archaic term used when counting persons. Yet it is the soul that enables the child to develop a self, to learn—not simply what exists in the world but how one can (or can't) live with humans and animals in it. (407; emphasis added)

Talal's note 13, below, is required to make sense of this definitional move to *ensouled body*. As interesting as are all these definitional moves on their own terms, not least for speculating that *soul* cannot be a modern (because not scientific) category and so must remain a pre-modern, non-scientific category, most interesting—at least to me—is its justification in terms of a series of citations from the Islamic discursive tradition, specifically the Qur'an. Note 13 needs to be revisited:

The Qur'an attributes this condition [of the self not knowing itself] to the self's duality: a "soul that urges evil" (*an-nafs al-ammāra bi-ssū'*, Qur'an 12:53) and a "blaming or criticizing soul" (*bi-nnāfsi-l-lawwāmati*, Qur'an 75:2); that is to say, the tendency to mislead oneself, on the one hand, and to overcome that tendency through increasing awareness of right and wrong on the other. (432n13)

Here, as elsewhere, Talal echoes the translation by his father Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*.<sup>6</sup> While note 13 opens up a Qur'anic register of language particular to Muslim practices, one must expand the citation: there are not two but three registers of the self. The one omitted is *an-nafs al-mutma'inna*, "the soul pleased or serene (in paradise)" (Qur'an 89:27). This third register of the self is rendered in *The Message of the Qur'an* as "O thou human being that has attained to inner peace" (1086). Interpreting the first *nafs* (*an-nafs al-ammāra bi-ssū'*, Qur'an 12:53) as "man's inner self inciting to evil" (387), Muhammad Asad also eschews *soul* in his rendering of the second *nafs*, *an-nafs al-lawwāma*, "the accusing voice of (a hu)man's own conscience" (1042), which he explains in a footnote as "(a hu)man's subconscious awareness of her/his own shortcomings and failing."

The purpose of quoting the father to the son, Muhammad to Talal, on these two verses is not to evaluate, or prefer, one over the other,<sup>7</sup> but instead to note the explicit innovation of Talal. The language of self-soul, which Talal here uses to introduce a new key term, *ensouled body*, into his own argument, at once opens up a query about what role conscience might play in the collective moral plane, the virtue-oriented communitarian ethic that Talal, following MacIntyre, goes on to explore. Can *ensouled body* escape a link to conscience, or are the two not inextricably interactive? While Wittgenstein rejects consciousness as a private inner essence, conscience/consciousness might implicitly function as a moral barometer, informing what Talal later discusses as the *ensouled body* exemplifying a theory of virtue (423). Especially when Talal introduces the three levels of belief/practice in Islam, as he does with reference to hadith (an adjacent branch of Islamic discourse, second only to the Qur'an), it is difficult to imagine the highest level, *ihsan*, that is, the cultivation of practical values, without some collective expression that would also include a shared conscience about critical virtues: to wit, a reverence grounded in the collective consciousness of like-minded practitioners.

And so the major critique I would offer to enhance the value of this bold essay is to heighten the accent on collective practice within a community. Bruce Lincoln included community as the third—and I would argue, pivotal—element in his oft-cited definition of religion.<sup>8</sup> Peirce also had noted that it is the community though which reality is mediated, so much so “that reality depends on the ultimate decision of the community.”<sup>9</sup> And so following both Peirce and Lincoln, I suggest that the expanded import of all Talal’s arguments for retrieving and foregrounding the ensouled body requires a return to the importance of community practice in applying *barzakh* logic. How might that work? I close with my own emended version of Talal’s restatement of using the Qur’an within a “traditional” Muslim context that confronts but also enhances life/death:

For “traditionalists” the Qur’an is not a text that addresses God’s existence as a problem requiring a solution: it is a *demand* for a practical engagement with an essentially indescribable force, an engagement that includes the complex passion of reverence-fear-awe, by which one’s form of life is oriented and deepened [always within a faith-based community]. Because death awaits every one of us at the end of life it helps the living to define what that life is and to mark the fact that one cannot know what lies “beyond” [except through a *barzakh* logic that always operates with reference to, and reliance on, a particular community] (425).

To answer the query implicitly posed at the end of Talal’s essay we can only avert “a world of incredible viciousness” (431) by our conscious embrace of compassion for others, and collective reverence for the good order expressed through the practices of ensouled bodies.

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**BRUCE B. LAWRENCE** is Marcus Family Humanities Professor of Religion Emeritus at Duke University and adjunct professor at Alliance of Civilizations Institute, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul. His research interests include contemporary Islam as religious ideology, South Asian Sufism, Islamicate cosmopolitanism, and the multiple roles and uses of the Qur’an. Among his monographs are *The Koran in English—A Biography* (2017), *Who Is Allah?* (2015), and *The Qur’an—a Biography* (2006). He is working with Professor Rafey Habib on a multi-year project, *The Qur’an—A Verse Translation*, forthcoming in 2021.

#### Notes

1. While Augustine is often credited with introducing the metaphor of the Two Books, it is Bacon who popularized it when he wrote in *Advancement of Learning* (1605): “God has, in fact, written two books, not just one. Of course, we are all familiar with the first book he wrote, namely Scripture. But he has written a second book called creation” (quoted in

McKenzie, “God’s Two Books”). Because he valued both books, some have called Bacon “the founder of modern science because he introduced and systematised the rationale for the use of experiment and induction” (McKenzie, “God’s Two Books”). Yet at the same time, Bacon tried to preserve religion (as an upward curve) by underscoring the notion of God’s Two Books as a metaphor/model for understanding the relationship between science and the Bible. See McKenzie, “God’s Two Books.”

2. I recognize that *fideist* as an ascription can have negative connotations, but I am applying it to certain philosophers— not just Pascal, Kierkegaard, James, and Wittgenstein, but also Poteat, Peirce, MacIntyre, and Talal himself—who couple belief with rational inquiry in order to expand the value of both.
3. Because it is unfamiliar to most readers, let me provide a brief genealogy to *barzakh* logic. It may be summarized as follows: It is less than two decades old; its pioneer is Taieb Belghazi (see Belghazi, “Mediterranean(s)”). More recently, it has been applied to the Arab/Persian Gulf in cooke, *Tribal Modern*, where one reviewer noted that “cooke exquisitely captures the civilizational *barzakh* of the Arab Gulf states—the generative space connecting/disconnecting, mixing/separating ‘the tribal’ and ‘the modern.’” For my own development of *barzakh* logic, with reference to the Andalusian philosopher-mystic Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi, see Lawrence, *Who is Allah?*, 40–45.
4. William H. Poteat was a much beloved and widely influential professor of philosophy, religion and culture at Duke University, where I knew, and revered, him as a senior colleague. He died in 2000, and a posthumous publication dedicated to his legacy was published as *Recovering the Personal: The Philosophical Anthropology of William H. Poteat*, edited by Dale W. Cannon and Ronald L. Hall. My own essay, “The Genealogy of Poteat’s Philosophical Anthropology,” is included as chapter 4 and applies *barzakh* logic to Poteat’s mindbody in anticipation of its application here to Talal’s ensouled body.
5. Time and space do not permit an exploration of all Talal’s insights, but his reflection on defining *God*, linked to the crucial Qur’anic surah 112, or Surah al-Ikhlās, I take to be the major instance where he reclaims God beyond “thingness” or “abstraction.” “God is not a *thing* nor is he an *abstraction*. Since all *things* can be represented and abstractions made from them (so secular reasoning goes) a god that can’t be represented does not (for all intents and purposes) exist. But the non-representability of God does not equal his absence” (436n53). And the *presence* of God is above all channeled through the Qur’an for Muslims, as we are later told: “The Qur’an is neither a physical text (*mushaf*) nor a mere vocalization (*tajwid*); it is God speaking and his audience hearing” (423).
6. For more on the singular importance of Muhammad Asad as a pathbreaking Qur’an translator, best depicted as “a forensic rationalist,” see Lawrence, *Koran in English*, 65–80.
7. Much more could be said about Talal’s engagement with his father’s practice of Islam. Talal has provided several insights in an earlier essay, “Muhammad Asad, Between Religion and Politics.” The most salient comment for the present essay might be: “He belonged to a rich historical tradition of thought and practice within Islam, a tradition (like others) that offers a variety of interpretive possibilities” (88). One might assert that the current essay has as its major intent to expand the interpretive possibilities of the Islamic tradition for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, for traditionalists and rationalists of all persuasions.
8. “Religion is: (1) A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal and contingent, and that claims a similarly transcendent status. (2) A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious

- discourse to which these practices are connected. (3) *A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices.* (4) An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value” (Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 5–8; emphasis added).
9. Buchler, *Philosophical Writings*, 250. I am indebted to Ebrahim Moosa for this book, and for many conversations inspired by its insights. I am indebted to Ali Altaf Mian for apt comments on drafts of this essay, as also to miriam cooke for vigilance beyond the duties, or claims, of matrimonial bonding.

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