1 Introduction

I grew up calling two men my father. In the West, where many people have a biological father and a step-father, this is not as unusual as it was in Pakistan where I grew up. I did not meet my biological father, Moulana Ali Haidar Upal Shaheed, until I was seven years old. The only contact with my father during my early childhood was his weekly letters and the occasional black and white photograph that he mailed us from West Africa where he was working as a missionary. My mother says that my primary motivation for learning to read was to be able to read Abbijan’s (Urdu for father) letters on my own instead of having to beg her to read them to me. The older man in whose house we lived and whom I called Abba ji (also meaning father in Urdu) was actually my maternal grandfather. I called him Abba ji because my mother called him Abba ji. I also called my maternal grandmother Ammi ji (Urdu for mother) following my mother (whom I called Ammi jan, also meaning mother). Rather than correcting me, my grandparents took pleasure in my childish behavior perhaps because they didn’t have a son of their own. In the fiercely patriarchal Pakistani culture not having a son is almost as bad as being childless.

Abba ji, my grandfather, had been a proud man in his youth. He was the first one in his village to go to college and the first one in his family to learn English. He graduated as an overseer from an engineering college and worked as a public servant first for the government of British India and then Pakistan. An estimated twelve million Hindus and Muslims died during the ethnic cleansing that followed the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947. My grandfather who was born and bred in East Punjab followed most Eastern Punjabi Muslims in abandoning his ancestral home for Western Punjab which became part of Pakistan. He avoided the fate of six million Indian Muslims, who were killed by Hindu and Sikh mobs during their ill-fated journeys to Pakistan, in part because he was a member of the well-organized Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Caravans of Ahmadi trucks moved together, sometimes under police protection, carrying thousands of Ahmadis from their headquarters in the East Punjabi village of Qadian to the West Punjabi city of Lahore, which became part of Pakistan.

Once in Pakistan, the Indian refugees were offered a chance to claim properties in Pakistan abandoned by Hindus and Sikhs in lieu of the properties they had left behind in India. The head of the Ahmadiyya Community, known as the Khalifa (Arabic for Caliph)-Allah’s infallible viceroy on earth, advised Ahmadis against abandoning their Indian properties because Allah would soon victoriously return Ahmadis to Qadian—the small village where their faith had been born a bare half-century earlier in 1889. This meant that Abba ji and thousands of other pious Ahmadis started their lives from scratch in the new country. Abba ji did well enough to buy a house in the city of Gojra where he raised his three daughters. When the Khalifa (whom Ahmadis affectionately call Hazoor, meaning honourable) founded the new Ahmadiyya headquarters on the barren western shores of Chenab river in the early 1950s, Abba ji bought a tract of land
there as his future retirement home. The modest home that he built in Rabwah came in handy when he decided to arrange for his middle daughter to marry an Ahmadiyya missionary school (called *Jamia Ahmadiyya*) student in 1967 who couldn’t afford a home of his own.

Abbijan, my biological father, stood out among the Jamia students for a number of reasons, not the least of which was his age. In his mid-twenties, he was almost a decade older than some of his youngest class fellows. In order to become a Jamia student, one had to take a vow to offer all of one’s capacities in the service of Hazoor without ever asking for anything in return. For a typical Jamia student, this was often done by the parents writing to Hazoor to seek his permission to offer their children to God. These students would then enter Jamia as soon as they finished their middle school. In order to induce their sons to keep their word to Hazoor, the parents would often promise to pay them a stipend for the rest of their lives. My paternal grandparents, who farmed in a small village in Sialkot, Pakistan, did not offer any of their six sons to the movement. Instead, they supported their second eldest son’s decision to become the first person in the village to go to college and study sciences. After graduating with a degree in Physics and Mathematics, Abbijan took up a government job as a high school science teacher. It was after a few years of teaching that he received his calling from God and offered himself to the head of the community.

Because Abbijan had essentially neither any income of his own as a Jamia student nor a parental stipend, my mother had to work outside the house to support the family, an indignity for a middle-class Pakistani woman. This meant that as the movement sent my father from one Pakistani town to another following his graduation in 1970, my mother had to stay behind at her parent’s house and close to her job. Thus, when I was born, it was Abbaji who wrote the letter to Hazoor (customarily written by father of the newborn) requesting him to bless the newborn with a name. Hazoor, perhaps thinking that the author of the letter (i.e., Abbaji named, Muhammad Sharif) was requesting a name for his own son, gave to me my grandfather’s (and Prophet Muhammad’s) first name and wrote with his own hands, “Muhammad Afzal, congratulations!” on Abbaji’s postcard. More than forty six years have passed but that postcard is one of my mother’s most prized possessions, not just because it is the first time my name was written, but also because it once touched the hands of Hazoor. “Afzal” can be either a comparative or superlative term in Arabic meaning better or best (depending on the context). Just as no English speaking parents would name their child Better/Best, Arabic speakers do not name their children Afzal!

By the time I was born, the persistent efforts of Ahmadi pioneers had managed to turn the inhospitable saline and rocky soils of Rabwah into the first planned city of Pakistan fulfilling the divine dream of Rabwah’s founder, the second Ahmadi Khalifa (son of the founder of the Ahmadiyya Community who reigned from 1914 to 1966). The city of 40,000 entirely populated by Ahmadis served as the headquarters of the millions-strong worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Unlike Qadian where Ahmadis had to cohabit with a large number of Hindus and Sikhs, Rabwah was a
city built from scratch by Ahmadis for Ahmadis. The Ahmadi officials, all personally appointed by Hazoor, not only served as spiritual guides but also as the city’s civil administration. Rabwah was divided into about thirty precincts with a mosque serving as the focal point for each precinct. The community enforced complete gender segregation with separate schools and colleges for men and women. Women had to cover themselves from head to toe in a black burka with only their eyes showing when they had to leave their houses. The city had no cinemas because even Pakistani films promoted immorality by showing unveiled women. Anyone caught visiting cinemas in the neighbouring city of Chiniot (or caught violating any of the other numerous bans such as the ban against flying kites, the ban against males clapping publicly, the ban against celebrating birthdays, the ban against associating with non-Ahmadis e.g., by taking part in their weddings or funerals4 etc.) was punished by excommunication and/or expulsion from Rabwah. To encourage people to attend the daily Islamic ritual prayer of Fajr (offered at pre-dawn) groups of boys and young men went around shouting “prayer is better than sleep” at pre-dawn hours in the streets of Rabwah.

We, the residents of Rabwah, took great pride in our status as the most organized and the most disciplined of all Muslims who were ready to sacrifice our lives to ensure a fulfilment of God’s eschatological plans of making Islam the dominant religion before the end of the world. At our weekly boys’ association meetings (and later at men’s association meetings, as I grew older), we eagerly chanted our pledge “to sacrifice my life, wealth, time and honour for the sake of our faith” and “for guarding the institution of Ahmadiyya Caliphate.”

While the community sent my father to various parts of Pakistan and to other countries, we lived with my mother and maternal grandparents in Rabwah, where my mother taught at a girl’s primary school. My father’s first missionary appointments were in various Pakistani cities so he must have seen me on one of his visits home but I have no memory of that. When I became old enough to remember faces, he was working in the West African nation of Ghana (where Jama’at had sent him in 1973). I learned of my father’s face from the few black and white photographs that he had mailed us from Africa. These pictures looked eerily similar to the author’s picture on the back cover of the well-known Ahmadi Urdu book on the shroud of Turin. In his book, Hasan Muhammad Khan Sahib, a local celebrity, defended the heretical Ahmadiyya doctrinal position on Jesus’ crucifixion. Imagine my surprise when I finally saw my father for the first time, at the age of 7, and he didn’t look anything like Hasan Muhammad Khan Sahib! My father stayed with us in Rabwah for about six months before being sent to Mirpur Khas in Sindh province of Pakistan. The few times that I got to see my father between his various missionary assignments, I never heard him complain about having to sacrifice his family life. In fact, I heard countless times from him and from other Ahmadis that sacrifices for the community were the real cause of any success, however small, that our family had had. My good health, my good grades in school, and my success in constantly ongoing religious competitions in Rabwah were all a direct result of my father’s missionary vows5.
The early 1970s were a heady time for Ahmadis in Pakistan. Ahmadis believed that they had played a decisive role in the victory of the socialist Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Pakistan's first elections based on universal suffrage held in December 19706. They believed that PPP would pay them back for their support by allowing them to preach unmolested which, in their minds, could only lead to one outcome, namely, a quick acceptance of Ahmadiyyat (Arabic for Ahmadism) as true Islam first by all Pakistanis and then by the rest of the world. This elation turned into a deep sense of betrayal in 1974 when Prime Minister ZAB Bhutto capitulated to the Sunni mullahs demanding a constitutional amendment to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims. When Bhutto was hanged by the military in 1979, the atmosphere at the Annual Ahmadiyya Convention, that brought hundreds of thousands of Ahmadis from across the globe into Rabwah every year for a long weekend in December, was openly celebratory. There was a strong sense that prophecies predicting destruction of any worldly power that took on God's chosen people had been fulfilled in front of our eyes.

With the centennial of the community's founding only a decade away, we were eagerly anticipating people joining Ahmadiyyat in droves. I remember frequently running into the community's official historian Moulana Dost Muhammad Shahid (who worked at Khilafat Library, two blocks from our new house in the Foreign Missionaries' Colony where we moved in 19837). Every time I saw him, he would ask me what would my age be in the year 2000 when people around the world would be flocking to Ahmadiyyat. Will I be ready to accept the hordes of non-Ahmadis desperately looking for anyone knowledgeable enough about Ahmadiyyat to save their souls? The fact that the world was going to be saved through Ahmadiyyat was not in any doubt. What was doubtful was whether we, as individuals, were willing to play our role (and gain salvation for ourselves). At the daily religious lectures that were delivered following the evening prayers at our neighbourhood mosque, at our weekly Atfal (Young Ahmadi Boys’ Association) meetings, at the yearly Quranic-education classes, and at the Annual Ahmadiyya Conventions, we were routinely told about the success that Ahmadi missionaries, such as Abbijan, were having in converting non-Ahmadis to Ahmadiyyat around the world. This success proved that God was on our side.

While both my “dads” were proudly faithful Ahmadis, their faith-styles differed from each other. Abbijan had the cerebral faith of a born-again scholar, having heard God’s calling after studying and teaching science for years. My father had spent seven years in Jamia Ahmadiyya Missionary School learning the minutia of theological arguments. He had travelled around the world engaging people of all faiths in religious debates. This set him apart from most other Ahmadis (such as my Abbaji) who hadn’t read all the books of Hadith or Ahmadiyya doctrine or traveled widely but had a strong emotional attachment to the Jama’at and a firm belief in the supernatural. This included a belief in the miraculous powers of the Khalifa and an irrational reverence for anyone (such as the family of the founder of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at) or anything connected to the founder of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at. My grandfather would get extremely upset if he heard anyone say anything that he perceived as insulting
towards a member of the *khanidan* (hundreds-strong progeny of the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement who lived in a gated area in central Rabwah).

Similar to most devoted Ahmadis, my grandfather endeavored to give ever more of his meagre resources to the community. Not content with contributing the obligatory 1/16th of his modest government pension to the movement, Abbaji wrote to Hazoor to grant him permission to donate 1/8th. Once he was allowed to do that, he wrote another letter asking for permission to contribute 1/4th of his income. Once that request was granted, he asked the proportion to be increased to 1/3rd. Hazoor, to his credit, denied that request. Abbaji refused to take ‘no’ for an answer and kept writing (to be more accurate, he kept asking me to write because by this time he was too old to write) until he had his way. Had he lived longer, I’m sure he would’ve requested permission to donate ½ of his income and eventually all of it! In 1979, when the third Ahmadi Khalifa (grandson of the founder of the movement who reigned from 1966 to 1982) launched the decade-long campaign to raise funds to celebrate the centennial of the founding the Ahmadiyya movement in 1889, Abbaji sold his house in Gojra and donated the entire proceeds to the Ahmadiyya Centennial Fund. I don’t think I ever saw him happier than he was on the day he received an invitation to a private meeting of major donors with Hazoor. He had my mom put starch on his new *shalwar kameez* (long shirt and tunic) and his white turban that he proudly wore to the meeting with Hazoor. His face beaming with happiness at the prospect of being able to spend time in the physical presence of God’s infallible regent on earth.

While I barely knew my absent father, my grandfather was my role model. Like him, I would get up well before sunrise to offer the optional *tahajjud* prayer. I prayed for Allah to make me a success both in the secular and the spiritual world, like my Abbaji. I wanted to be ready to play my part in God’s plans for the end times. During the Jalsa when we had a house full of relatives from across Pakistan, I led everyone in the ritual prayers, just as Abbaji often did at our neighbourhood mosque. I read the Quran (first in Arabic and then in translation in Urdu), first from Abbaji, and then from Moulana Zakriya Khan Sahib—the community’s official Albanian language translator. I read the books by the founder of the community and his successors (i.e., the Khalifas). I eagerly enrolled in the annual *Talim-ul-Quran* (Quranic-education) classes and took part in competitions of religious knowledge, rhetoric, and Arabic recitation. Above all, as did my Abbaji, I internalized being a good believer as a critical part of my identity. I still remember some of the verses of my favourite childhood poem that I used to sing to anyone who would listen:

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hum Ahmadi bache hain kuch kar ke dikha dain gay   [we’re Ahmadi kids, we will do something big]
shaitan ki hakumat ko dunia se mita dain gay   [we will abolish Satan’s government from the earth]
aey Shad guman mat kar, kamzor nahin hain hum   [don’t worry for us, we are not weak]
jab waqt para hum apni janain bhi ganwa dain gay   [when the time comes we’ll even sacrifice our lives]
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I think I was seven when I memorized the whole poem and sang it for a delighted Abbaji, who kissed me on the forehead. He had the face of a revolutionary filled with the satisfaction of having passed his revolution to his “son.”

I always sided with my grandfather when, on occasion, his strict interpretations of Islam, contradicted with, what seemed to me back then, relatively more liberal interpretations of my parents. My mother enjoyed listening to Indian and Pakistani songs on radio when she cleaned the house. This used to irk Abbaji who often found the lyrics to be lewd and distasteful. According to him, the only acceptable use of a radio was to listen to news (Radio Pakistan news and BBC Urdu service news that came at the turn of every hour). As his eyesight became weaker, I became his eyes and hands. I mastered the fine art of tuning the radio to receive the hard-to-catch BBC Urdu signal. I also decided to do a bit of research at the Jama’at library and found ahadith (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) expressing displeasure with music. With Abbaji’s approval, I plastered handwritten notes with these ahadith all over our house in Rabwah. I did the same thing at the missionary’s quarters in Karachi in 1979 posting anti-smoking ahadith everywhere when I heard that my father enjoyed an occasional cigarette when he was alone (he never smoked in front of us). On such occasions, my parents made fun of my overly dogmatic attachment to religion by calling me a “moulavi” (i.e., an Islamic cleric) and “imam-manja” (i.e., the prayer leader of the beds”). At other times, when I was not annoying them with my self-righteousness, they asked me to pray for them because they said God especially listened to my prayers. Somehow I had acquired the identity of being the most devoted Ahmadi in a family of extremely devoted Ahmadis.

Ahmadis believe that “belief in a living God” who talks back when people call on him distinguishes them from non-Ahmadi Muslims who believe that God has only communicated with holy personages in the past. Cultivating an active communicative relationship with God is an aspirational goal for all Ahmadis. From my grandfather, I also inherited the sense of a personal relationship with God. Throughout my childhood I felt that not only was God listening to my prayers but that he was also actively telling me things by showing me his signs. One of the signs of God’s special favours for me was shown to my eighth grade public school teacher, Master Nazeer Sahib. Just a month or so before our dreaded Middle School Standard Exams, our homeroom teacher at the Talim-ul-Islam School, called me to the front of the class to tell the whole class about a supernatural experience that he had had in the early hours of that morning in February 1983. He said that as he was walking in the dark from his house to the mosque for the morning prayers, he heard a distinct voice saying “Muhammad Afzal, scholarship.” This, he said, was Allah himself foretelling him that not only would I top my competitors in Section A but that I was destined to score high enough marks to earn the coveted government scholarship in high school. The fact that the prophecy
revealed to Master Nazeer Sahib came true and I won top positions in middle school, and then high school and college, as well as in the religious competitions organized by the community only reinforced my identity as God’s chosen one. Growing up poor on the mean streets of Rabwah without an older brother or a protective father, I found security in the belief that I could always count on Allah. It was comforting to know that there was someone there who always had my back. I wish that I could describe in words the sense of purpose, meaning, and joy that comes from knowing that you have a direct channel of communication with the creator and all-powerful lord of the universe.

Sometimes, late at night, especially when I’m having trouble going to sleep, I think about how I lost that feeling and I cannot point to any single event but I think that it all started with the typical teenage rebellion and Abbaji’s passing away in 1989 (the Ahmadiyya centenary year that he had so longed to see). My grandfather’s death was one of many factors (including an opportunity for my mother to take early retirement with government pension, a decline of Rabwah’s status as a mecca for Ahmadis following Hazoor’s move from Rabwah to UK in 1984, and general economic malaise in Pakistan which made moving to the West a trend among Pakistani Ahmadis) that convinced my parents that we should join our father in Canada. As luck would have it, by the time, we got our immigration papers and arrived in Saskatoon, Canada, Jama’at had decided to send Abbijan back to Africa (this time to the small West African country of Gambia). This meant that as I arrived in Canada I had to find my own way in a radically different world.

Saskatoon of the early 1990s seemed as different a place from Rabwah as possible. When we arrived there in December 1990, streets were covered with some white powder (locals called it “snow”) instead of the brown dirt that littered Rabwah’s streets. When the sun came out, the weather got colder and not warmer. People drove on the right side of the road and not the left side. People called football “soccer” and they called something resembling group-wrestling football. Women had shorter hair and wore more revealing clothes than men. Everything seemed upside down. The most bewildering thing was that this opposite-world somehow seemed to work better. My father put it best when he said that if the hadith “cleanliness is half the faith” is to be believed then clearly Canadians are better Muslims than Pakistanis! Many of the egalitarian ideals that Ahmadis claimed to aspire to, such as justice and equality of the rich and poor, seemed closer to being met in the West than they ever were in Rabwah. Instead of finding any Western converts (that I expected to find given what we were told in Rabwah about the success of Ahmadi missionary efforts in the West), the only Canadian Ahmadis, I met were Pakistani Ahmadis who had immigrated to Canada. Instead of finding droves of non-Ahmadis wanting to convert to Ahmadiyyat, I found Canadians, by and large, apathetic to the message of Ahmadiyyat and Islam. Instead of finding immorality, injustice, and moral filth in the West (as proclaimed by Ahmadi leaders as well as by many other Pakistanis) I found the West to be a pretty nice place to live. All of that shook up my worldview and made me question that maybe
everything I was told was not as true as I thought that it was. This made me open to the West’s liberal narrative that the road to egalitarianism rests on a foundation of constantly questioning authority and not in blindly following it.

When I enrolled in the University of Saskatchewan’s computer science program, I was required to take social science courses to fulfill my breadth requirements. I chose Philosophy and Anthropology classes. I found the social science and humanities approach of adopting multiple perspectives quite refreshing. This was opposite to the experience of many of my fellow computer science students who were baffled by the lack of consensus among social scientists on issues of fundamental importance to the disciplines. Afflicted by typical immigrant fears of not finding a job, I just could not muster the courage needed to change my major to social sciences. After completing my PhD in Computer Science, however, I continued my own reading of Psychology, Anthropology, and Philosophy while working as a computer scientist. The more I read about the theory of evolution, the less certain I became of the traditional Islamic explanations for the beginning of life and human existence.

Most of the Ahmadis who move to the West do not go through this transition and I have often wondered why not? Why do people continue to hold blind faith in cult leaders in an era of instant information and social media? I have spent most of my adult life contemplating these questions as well as other questions that my friends and family ask me. Not a day passes by that my mother, my in-laws, my siblings, or my friends don’t ask me as to why I am not as active in the Ahmadiyya community as I used to be during my childhood. Why don’t I take a place of honour, distinction, and leadership in the community that my talents and lifetime of achievements would surely bring me? My family and friends genuinely do not understand how I could have so easily given up the blessings of Ahmadiyyat and lost my enthusiasm for “true Islam.” My scientific colleagues, on the other hand, do not understand how and why any rational person could believe in cultish ideas such as those proclaimed by the founder of the Ahmadiyyah Community and held in such high esteem by most of my family and friends. Only simpletons can be brainwashed by cult leaders into blindly following them, argue my scientific colleagues. This book is both a deeply personal account of my struggle to find answers to these puzzling questions and a scientific account of why new religious movement founders come up with their counterintuitive ideas and why others accept them and join new religious movements.

1.1 Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

The founder of Ahmadiyyah Muslim Community, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was born in the Punjabi village of Qadian around 1839. He was the younger son of the village chief, Mirza Ghulam Murtaza. His family was part of the Central Asian armed bands that moved eastward to India along with Mughals who ruled India for centuries before losing most of their territory to Marathas and Sikhs in the eighteenth century.
Ahmad’s family lost their estate (including their ancestral home in their capital of Qadian) to the Sikhs, only to be allowed back around the time of Ahmad’s birth. By the time Ahmad was ten, the Sikh rule over Punjab ended marking the culmination of the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1846-49. After the British crushed the 1857 mutiny of Indian soldiers, a quick restoration of Muslim dominance over India seemed impossible. The British occupation also hastened the pace at which Punjab was exposed to new ideas and technologies. These included schools and colleges that taught an ever-larger number of Indians how to read and write and new technologies such as the printing press that allowed mass production of books, pamphlets, and journals in English as well as local languages, particularly Urdu.

Ahmad, as the younger son of a feudal family, was well positioned to become an early adopter of the new media because he had the luxury of time and money. Ahmad, while in his thirties, started writing articles defending Islam against objections by Hindu revivalist movements and Christian missionaries. These efforts were lauded by the small literate Indian Muslim elite. This encouraged Ahmad to dream big and launch the ambitious project of publishing a 50-volume book series that would comprehensively rebut all Hindu and Christian arguments against Islam. The first volume of the series, *Braheen-e-Ahmadiyya*, published in 1884, stated that the goal of the series was to establish Islam’s superiority over all other religions (particularly Christianity and Hinduism). One of Ahmad’s key arguments was that, unlike Christianity and Hinduism, Islam endowed its faithful followers with the ability to communicate with a living God who supported them through his signs. Ahmad offered evidence of this in his own dreams that had come true and that divine revelations he had received about many future events, including the death of his father. Ahmad challenged Hindus and Christians to come to Qadian and live there at his expense for at least a month so that they could witness firsthand how God still showed his signs through him. While some Muslim clerics were bothered that Ahmad was claiming too much spiritual powers (especially the power to show miracles) for himself, others lauded Ahmad’s noble attempts to defend Islam at his own expense. Either way, Ahmad was unapologetic in insisting that he was doing all this only to prove Islam’s superiority and to save Muslims from converting to Hinduism and Christianity.

In the late 1880s Ahmad came to believe that Christianity was the bigger threat facing Islam and that traditional Islamic doctrine had left Islam vulnerable to Christian attacks. He believed that these doctrines needed to be reformed. Ahmad blamed the Muslim belief in Jesus having escaped crucifixion by being raised to heaven as the key culprit. He said that Evangelical missionaries were arguing that this showed that Jesus was superior to Muhammad, who lay buried underground in Medina. Missionaries reminded Muslims of their own eschatological beliefs in Jesus’ physical descent from heaven towards the end of times to bolster their arguments for the superiority of Jesus over Muhammad. Ahmad claimed that God had told him that Jesus had survived the indignity of crucifixion and had traveled to India where he died a natural death. Furthermore, he said that since the old Jesus was dead and
could not return, God had appointed him as the Messiah of the end times because he was similar to Jesus in many ways. These claims lost Ahmad any remaining support among Muslim notables who now almost uniformly criticized him as an innovator and a false prophet. Ahmad felt the need to call on his supporters to sign a formal oath of allegiance to him. Such oaths had traditionally been used by Sufi teachers to formally accept those seeking to learn from them as their students. Forty people gathered in the Punjabi city of Ludhiana on the morning of March 23, 1889 at the house of one of Ahmad’s supporters to sign their pledges. A decade later he asked his followers to register themselves as Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at in the 1901 India census, cementing their status as a distinct religious community.

Ahmad made paying 1/16th of one’s income as a condition of membership in the Jama’at and established organizational offices (called sadr-anjuman) in Qadian to administer the funds. He established a press in Qadian that published Urdu and English periodicals and books. He also established the tradition of holding annual Ahmadiyya conventions (called Jalsa Salana) in Qadian in December. Despite almost universal opposition by Muslim clerics, or perhaps because of it, Ahmad continued to gather new converts. He claimed thousands of middle class followers by the time of his death in 1908.

Ahmad’s best friend, and his biggest financial benefactor, Hakeem Nur-ud-Din, assumed Jama’at’s leadership following Ahmad’s death as the first Ahmadi Khalifa. After Nur-ud-Din’s death in 1914, the community split up into two factions. While Ahmad’s son Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad assumed the role of the second Khalifa of the larger faction of Ahmadis who stayed in Qadian, a smaller number of Ahmadis moved to Lahore and set up a rival faction. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Movement of Lahore claimed that Ahmad was not a prophet but a lower-ranked reformer (called mujaddid) and hence he should not be succeeded by a Khalifa but by an administrator. When the British partitioned their South Asian colony in 1947 into Pakistan and India, Qadian fell on the Indian side of the border. This forced the Qadian faction to move their headquarters to Pakistan (first to Lahore and then to Rabwah). After Bashir-ud-Din’s death in 1966, his eldest son Mirza Nasir Ahmad assumed the role of third Khalifa. On September 7, 1974, Pakistan’s parliament unanimously adopted the second amendment to the constitution to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims. On Nasir Ahmad’s death in 1982, his step-brother Mirza Tahir Ahmad became the fourth Khalifa. On April 26, 1984, Pakistan’s military dictator issued an ordinance (later approved by Pakistan’s parliament) which made Ahmadiyya proselytization (an integral part of the faith) a crime punishable by a jail term and a fine. Three days later, Tahir Ahmad moved to London to avoid prosecution under the new law. In 1989, he dissolved all international Ahmadi organizations formerly headquartered in Rabwah and moved many Jama’at offices to Tillford, UK. Upon his death in 2003, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s great grandson, Mirza Masroor Ahmad became the fifth Khalifa. He resides in London, UK.

Table 1 shows key differences between Ahmadiyya doctrine and mainstream Sunni Muslim doctrine. Table 2 show a brief timeline of key events in Ahmadiyya history.
Table 1: A summary of key doctrinal differences between mainstream Sunni Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Mainstream Sunni Muslim Position</th>
<th>Ahmadiyya Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is Allah’s final prophet on earth?</td>
<td>Muhammad was the final prophet of God. There can be no prophet after him.</td>
<td>There are two different types of prophets: those who bring a new religious system (i.e., a shariah) and those who come to restore an old one. While Muhammad was the final law-bearing prophet, Ahmad was only a reformer prophet who came to restore the true Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was Jesus (whom all Muslims consider to be a prophet) raised to heaven alive?</td>
<td>Yes. God saved Jesus from the indignity of crucifixion by raising him to heaven while he was still alive and by making someone else look like him. The lookalike was hanged on the cross.</td>
<td>No. Jesus was the one who was hanged on the cross but he only suffered minor injuries. He recovered and traveled to India to continue his mission to the lost tribes of Israel who lived in Afghanistan and Kashmir. He died at the age of 120 and is buried in Srinagar, India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When will Jesus return to earth?</td>
<td>Jesus is alive in heaven. He will descend from the heaven towards the end of times to fight the anti-Christ and establish Islam as the dominant religion worldwide.</td>
<td>Jesus is dead &amp; will never return to earth. The Messiah whose return in prophesized in Ahadith is someone who is similar in character to Jesus. The Jesus-like Muslim Messiah will fight the anti-Christ and establish Islam as the dominant religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the Imam Mahdi?</td>
<td>Jesus and Imam Mahdi will be two different people. Jesus, similar to other Muslims, will follow Imam Mahdi as his guide. Neither leader has appeared yet.</td>
<td>Imam Mahdi and Jesus were supposed to be the same person. Both these prophecies were fulfilled in the person of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad- the founder of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: A timeline of key events in Ahmadiyya history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>Syed Ahmed Barelvi, whom some Indian Muslims considered Mahdi is slain by the Sikhs during a battle at Balakot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (MGA), founder of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at is born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1846-49</td>
<td>Anglo-Sikh wars won by the British result in the British takeover of Punjab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>MGA is married by his parents to his cousin from whom he has two sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>The mutiny of Indian soldiers claiming to restore the last Mughal King in Delhi is crushed and the King is exiled to Burma. Queen Victoria assumes direct control of India</td>
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<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>MGA's father, Mirza Ghulam Murtaza, dies in Qadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>MGA announces the launch of his “Braheen-e-Ahmadiyya” book series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Publication of first two volumes of “Braheen-e-Ahmadiyya” &amp; MGA’s second marriage to the daughter of a prominent Ahl-e-Hadith (a reformist Islamic sect) family from Delhi is arranged by his friend &amp; Ahl-e-Hadith leader Moulavi Muhammad Hussain Batalavi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>MGA has forty of his followers sign pledge of allegiance laying foundations of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at (AMJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>MGA publishes three books (“Fath-e-Islam,” “Tauziay Maram,” &amp; “Azala-Auoham”) proclaiming that Jesus survived crucifixion and died of natural causes in his old age. He also claimed to be both the prophesized Mahdi and Messiah. MGA announces the Annual Ahmadiyya Convention (Jalsa Salana) to take place in the last week of December in Qadian</td>
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<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>An Ahmadiyya Press is established in Qadian</td>
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<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>An Urdu Ahmadiyya periodical “Al-hakm” and a boys’ school (called Talim-ul-Islam School) is established in Qadian</td>
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<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>MGA publishes “Jesus in India” outlining his theory that Jesus traveled to India after recovering from his injuries on the cross, died at the age of 120, and is buried in Srinagar, India</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>MGA asks his followers to register themselves as “Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at” in the 1901 British India census</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>The English language periodical “Review of Religions” is launched to preach Islam to the West</td>
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<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>MGA publishes one of his last books titled “The will” creating a special category of tithe-paying Ahmadis who will be buried in the Heavenly Cemetery initially established on the grounds of his family cemetery in Qadian</td>
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<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>MGA establishes Jama’at’s administrative offices called Sadar Anjuman Ahmadiyya in Qadian</td>
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<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>MGA asks Ahmadis to take missionary vows to dedicate their lives to propagation of Islam in India and around the world without asking for any compensation in return</td>
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<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>MGA passes away and Maulavi Nur-ud-Din assumes the title of Ahmadi Khalifa</td>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The first Ahmadiyya missionary to the West, Khawaja Kamal-ud-Din, establishes a mission at Woking Mosque in London</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Maulavi Nur-ud-Din passes away and the movement splits into Lahori and Qadiani sects. Ahmad’s eldest son from his second wife, Mirza Basheer-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad, assumes the title of 2nd Khalifa in Qadian while the Lahori Ahmadis abolish Caliphate</td>
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<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Qadiani Ahmadis move their offices to Pakistan (temporarily to Lahore and eventually to Rabwah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Mirza Bahir-ud-Din identifies the barren rocky land on the western shores of Chenab river as the divinely promised land for a new headquarters shown to him in a revelation and names it Rabwah</td>
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1.2 Scholarly Studies of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at

The origin and spread of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at has confounded both historians and scholars of religion. “A curious religious phenomenon in Indian Islam has been the advent of Ahmadiyya movement,” wrote the eminent scholar of Islam Fazl-ur-Rahman. “Historians remain baffled as to how a group that is regarded as so outside mainstream Islam attracted enough followers to remain viable until now”, said scholar of religion Shazia Ahmad (2010). Reviewing Friedman’s book “Prophecy Continuous” (which deals with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s various claims), Fusfeld (1992) wrote:

The relationship between the Ahmadiyya movement and the political, economic, and social environment (as distinct from its intellectual origins) is . . . largely unexplored. There is never any satisfactory explanation offered to show why the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement chose to take positions that were so outlandish when viewed from the perspective of mainstream Islam. . . . how he benefited from taking a position on the finality of prophethood that many other Islamic leaders viewed as beyond the acceptable boundaries of Islam. . . . why the Ahmadiyya came to be in such an unorthodox and (from the point of view of other Muslims) unacceptable positions...

(Fusfeld, 1992: 347-348)

Fusfeld faulted the traditional approach to new religious movements for its shortcomings to explain their origin and growth by exclusively appealing to sociological factors. “The Ahmadiyya movement was to a large extent the result of one person’s view of the world he found and his efforts to come to grips with the
problems he perceived. If the solution was a peculiar one, it may owe its peculiarity to the person who made it work” said Fusfeld (1992: 348).

Ahmadiyya is not the only religious movement to have been influenced so profoundly by the radically innovative ideas of its founder. Many new religious movement (NRM) founders (such as Joseph Smith, Sun Myung Moon, and Mary Baker Eddy) appear to have based their respective movements on similar innovations. Joseph Smith (1805-1844) claimed to be “a prophet and apostle of Jesus Christ”. He also claimed to have received divine knowledge of the journey of a group of Israelites into the Western hemisphere. Smith believed that he was given special powers to interpret this lost knowledge into English. Using these powers, he composed the *Book of Mormon* which is considered scripture by most members of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) claimed to be a “God-appointed messenger” who was chosen by God to give “full and final revelation of truth.” According to the doctrine of the Church of Christian Science, “she is so closely related to Christian Science that a true sense of her is essential to the understanding of Christian Science; in other words, the revelator cannot be separated from the revelation”. Similar to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012) also claimed to be the second coming of Jesus. He claimed titles of “the Messiah, the Lord of the Second Advent,” and “father of the universe”. Rev. Moon also claimed that Koreans were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel (Hodge & Patterson, 2015).

It is clear that no explanation for the radically-innovative ideas of these new religious movement (NRM) founders can be complete without looking inside the heads of these individuals. A scientific explanation must be able to answer questions such as how and why do NRM founders invent radically new ideas, how and why do they communicate these ideas to others, and how and why others come to place their faith in these ideas. In a 2005 article “towards a cognitive science of new religious movements” I argued that this can be accomplished by complementing the sociology of new religious movements by a cognitive science of new religious movements (Upal, 2005b). The first goal of this book is to fill more details into the broad outline of the theory presented in that article, by developing a multidisciplinary theoretical framework drawn from cognitive science of religion and social psychology (in particular social identity theory, and leadership as social identity change entrepreneurship). The second goal is to illustrate how this socio-cognitive account of the origin and evolution of NRMs can be used to understand origin and evolution of a real-world NRM, namely, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at.

### 1.3 Approaches for Studying New Religious Movements

Religion is a one of the most fascinating aspects of human life. Since time immemorial, it has provided answers to ultimate questions of existence for some people from a variety of cultural traditions. It motivates some people to offer sacrifices for the good
of their fellow human beings. It provides a sense of meaning to many people’s lives. It brings communities together by binding people in social ties of friendship. While questions of the origins of new religious ideas may perplex modern people living in largely secular societies, they have not been systematically investigated until the rise of modern social sciences. Studies of new religious movements gained strength in the West with the emergence of eastern-inspired movements in the 1960s. While there is no consensus on what constitutes a new religious movement, the label is usually reserved for religious movements of historically recent origin (founded in the last 200 years or so) that “have been assigned to the fringe of the dominant religious culture” (Lewis, 2008: 17). Bainbridge and Stark (1979) categorized the existing research on the origin of new religious ideas into three groups: the psychopathology model, the entrepreneur model, and the subculture evolution model. While the first two models emphasize the role played by individuals (particularly the NRM founders), the subculture evolution emphasizes the group interactions processes that can lead to the emergence of NRMNs without guidance by any individual. I will spend some time on the first two models because they are relevant to the development of a bottom-up model of religious innovation.

According to the psychopathology model, NRM founders suffer from various mental illnesses which cause them to have psychotic episodes resulting in hallucinations of having received divine wisdom. Havelock Ellis suggested that most of the Israelite prophets were psychologically ill when he said that, “the whole religious complexion of the modern world is due to the absence, from Jerusalem, of a lunatic asylum,” a view that is consistent with Freud who considered religion to be a projection of neurotic wish fulfillment which should be treated with therapy (Hockney, 2014; Freud, 1964). Religion Scholar George Feuerstein argues that NRM leaders are authoritarian personalities who want to control their followers (Feuerstein, 1991). After examining a number of religious movement leaders including Shabbatai Zwi, Jim Jones, David Koresh, and Rudolph Steiner, the British Philosopher Colin Wilson concludes that NRM leaders have psychological problems similar to those suffered by serial killers, namely, that they are driven by power and sex beyond the normal limits (Wilson, 2000). A number of psychological problems have been alleged to result in the claims of special divine insight by religious leaders. These include epilepsy (Saliba, 2004), hysteria (Zweig, 1932), paranoia (Gardner, 1957), and schizophrenia (Storr, 1996). Mary Baker Eddy’s inspiration of Christian Science is often cited as the classic case of hysteria. The British Psychiatrist, Anthony Storr, argued that people such as Rudolf Steiner, Paul Brunton, Ignatius of Loyola, Gurdjieff, Rajneesh suffer from a “creative illness” that leads them to the creation of novel ideas.

When the American scholar, Dr. Hervey De Witt Griswold (I’ll tell you more about him later), asked an Indian Muslim about Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s claims, he was told that:

Mirza Sahib’s brain has become meddled (“US KA DIMAGH BAITH GAYA”). This opinion concerning the Mirza Sahib is similar to the opinion of Festus concerning Paul... In connection with the theory of the Mirza Sahib’s insanity, it may not be without interest to mention that at
least two persons in the PANJAB, who are acknowledged to be insane, have lately claimed to be Jesus Christ, one a weaver of Ludhiana, and the other a former student of the Forman Christian College, Lahore. The madness of the latter takes the shape of writing periodical letters to the Principal of the College and urging that his claim to be the Messiah be speedily admitted. In the light of these facts, the theory that the Mirza Sahib himself is insane is certainly a possible one. (Griswold, 1902: 25)

Another unnamed American psychologist who also visited Ahmad was so convinced that Ahmad’s revelations were a result of a brain disease that he directly asked Ahmad, “have you ever been affected with a brain disease? If so, what and when? Does its attack recur? Did you begin to have revelations before you suffered from an attack of such disease or after that?” After narrating this incident, Rev. Howard Arnold Walter opines that:

I am indebted to Professor D. B. Macdonald, of Hartford, U.S.A., for the suggestion here advanced as perhaps best accounting for Ahmad’s claims and so-called revelations, viewed in the light of our modern knowledge of psychology is that Ahmad like his great leader Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is a “pathological case”? It is evident that from comparatively early days he had trances; fell into fits in which he saw and heard strange things. There came to him voices, either apparently in a trance condition or when he was awake. Driven by fear for his soul, he had got into the habit of retiring into desert recesses, and there spending days in solitary prayer. So there the voices came to him; there he even saw figures—vague, dim—and the fear fell upon him, What are they? What is the matter with me? Is this of God? Or am I possessed by some spirit? (Walter, 1902: 45)

The image of religious innovators as social deviants is so well entrenched in popular culture, perhaps thanks to the tireless efforts of ‘cult-hunters’, that often little or no evidence is considered necessary to justify accusations of mental illness against them. However, as popular, widespread, and intuitive as this view is, we still must subject it to scientific scrutiny so that we do not fall prey to what philosopher Dan Dennett calls “premature satisfaction of curiosity” (Dennett, 2006: 103).

Let us take the mental illness hypothesis seriously and fully explore all its implications. One of the unfortunate consequences of mental illness is that the people suffering from the illness are stigmatized in a variety of ways. Surveys show that such people are wrongly believed to be stupid, lazy, unpredictable, unreliable and dangerous. This appears to be the case both in Western industrialized societies of North America and Europe as well as in non-industrialized societies of Asia and Africa. Unlike religious innovators whose adoring followers consider them as sources of divine knowledge, counterintuitive utterances of mentally ill people are ignored at best and ridiculed at worst. A recent survey of UK mental illness sufferers showed that a vast majority (70%) reported suffering stigma as a result of their illness. A majority also reported being stigmatized by their own family (56%) and friends (52%). Similarly, a vast majority of Americans (75%) consider mentally ill people to be ‘dangerous’ (Crawford & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, there is no historical or anthropological evidence that mentally ill people were respected for their wisdom
and insight in the past. It is fitting then that life stories of religious innovators such as Ahmad show no history of a debilitating mental illness. Not only were they considered normal and healthy by their peers, they were actually respected by their followers (and sometimes even by their opponents) for their intellect, their wisdom and their insight. Dr. Griswold, for instance, describes that he found Ahmad to be “about sixty four years of age, venerable in appearance, magnetic in personality, and active in intellect” (Griswold, 1902: 1).

Newberg and D’Aquili (2008) in “Why God Won’t Go Away” argue a subtly different position. They suggest that some founders of religions were ‘mystics’ who learned to experience a different state of consciousness through ‘spiritual exercises.’ This extraordinary state of cognition offered these people a unique view of reality which was ‘more real than reality itself.’ After studying brain scans of Tibetan Buddhists and Franciscan Nuns in meditation, Newberg and D’Aquili concluded that the meditative experiences of these mystics were not delusions or “the result of emotional mistakes or simple wishful thinking, but were associated instead with a series of observable neurological events.” They conclude that “mind’s machinery of transcendence may in fact be a window through which we can glimpse the ultimate realness of something that is truly divine” (Newberg & D’Aquili, 2008: 7).

Another common explanation for the behavior of religious innovators is that they are charlatans, frauds, and con artists who make sensational religious claims for financial and material gains. Religious scholars Shupe and Bromley (1981) summarize this view as arguing that religious movements are “profit-making ventures operated by egomaniac charlatans for their own personal aggrandizement” (Shupe & Bromley, 1981: 186). A problem with this view is that a vast majority of religious movements make little or no financial or material profit for their founders. More commonly, the religious innovators end up losing their fortune, family, and friends because of their claims. They end up losing social and financial capital that it took them years to earn. Their willingness to suffer abuse solely because of their views and their refusal to reconsider their claims when presented with overwhelming material incentives to do so suggests that they sincerely believe their claims.

Even though Ahmad’s status as a feudal lord and the efficient British-Indian law and order machinery mostly protected him from physical abuse, he still suffered tremendously because of his claims. None of Ahmad’s family members, who inhabited the same village as he, accepted his prophetic claims. They included his first wife and their children, his siblings, his cousins, and his uncles. His cousins were so strongly opposed to Ahmad that one of them called him “a cunning schemer” (Griswold, 1902: 25). Mirza Imad-ud-Din erected a wall to block Ahmad’s access to their family mosque forcing Ahmad to go to court against Imad-ud-Din. Strong opposition by Ahmad’s sons and cousins also played a critical role in preventing Ahmad from contracting his third marriage. Having claimed divine support for the marriage, Ahmad had to suffer significantly, when his own wife and son convinced parents of the young bride-to-be—Muhammadi Begum—to reject Ahmad’s overtures. Anti-Ahmadi Muslims
continue to use this episode in their polemical against the community to this day. One of Ahmad’s friends and a prominent Ahl-e-Hadith leader, Muhammad Hussain Batalavi, who had earlier played a critical role in promoting Ahmad as a defender of Indian Islam, renounced his friendship once he heard of his prophetic claims. He swore to “take Ahmad down” (Dard, 1948). Batalavi traveled throughout India asking Muslim scholars to issue a fatwa of 
*kufr* (infidelity) against Ahmad. *Kafir* (i.e., an infidel) was not the worst name Muslims called Ahmad. Batalavi called his former friend by much worse names:

raving drunkard, intriguer, swindler, accursed, the one-eyed Dajjal, slave of silver and gold, whose revelation is nothing but a seminal discharge, shameless, the ring-leader of sweepers and street vagabonds, dacoit, murder, whose followers are scoundrels, villains, adulterers, and drunkards. (Dard, 1948: 575)

That the Qadiani is a Dajjal of this time, a second Musaylimah, perfidious, deceiver, cheat, liar and impostor, and that he is the enemy of the faith of Islam and all other heavenly faiths. (Dard, 1948: 608)

According to Griswold, Batalavi was not alone in condemning Ahmad. Many North Indian Sunni Muslim leaders stood with Batalavi against Ahmad.

In the numerous FATWAS, which Muhammadan Associations all over India have issued against the Mirza Sahib, the strongest words of denunciation are used. Thus he is called KAFIR ‘unbeliever’; DAJJAL ‘Anti-Christ’, mulhid ‘heretic’, murtadd ‘apostate’, KAZZAB ‘LIAR’, Be-Iman ‘Faithless’, Daghabaz ‘Deceitful’ etc; etc; with such epithets as these is the ‘certificate’ filled, with which Muhammadan orthodoxy has dismissed the Mirza Sahib from its fellowship and service. (Griswold, 1902: 20)

In his 1898 book “Kitab-a-Bariya”, it took Ahmad six pages to summarize the damning words used by his former friends and supporters among the Ahl-e-Hadith (Ahmad, 1898: 118-124). As a result of vitriolic anti-Ahmadiyya propaganda by Muslim leaders, on several occasions Ahmad was physically assaulted by mobs when he travelled outside his home village of Qadian. In 1905, while lecturing in Amritsar, he was pelted with stones (Ali, 1937: 53). When Griswold asked the aforementioned Indian Muslim about Ahmad in 1902, he was told that if Muslims such as “the Amir of Kabul were only in authority here” Ahmad would’ve lost “his head” (Griswold, 1902: 25). This was by no means the isolated opinion of a man on the street; Batalavi said the same thing.

Had we been under Muslim rule, we would have given you (Ahmad) a proper reply. We would have at once cut off your head with a sword and made you a dead body. (Dard, 1948: 608)

Two of Ahmad’s followers, who had the misfortune of living under the authority of the aforementioned Amir of Kabul, were jailed, tortured, and publicly stoned to death. Their families were exiled to Turkistan. At each successively brutal step in their
torture, they were offered a chance to recant their faith in Ahmad but they refused choosing death over worldly gains.

If religious innovators are not mentally disturbed or charlatans, then why do healthy and seemingly rational human beings make the radical claims that they do? Stark and Bainbridge (1987) developed their entrepreneurship model of religion to answer such questions. They consider NRM founders to be entrepreneurs who produce, market, and sell compensators in exchange for other rewards (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). A compensator is an unverifiable promise of a future reward that is in low supply or unavailable at present. According to the Stark-Bainbridge theory, in situations where some rewards are in low supply or not available at all, people are willing to accept compensators in lieu of the actual rewards. For instance, a religious founder may be able to sell the unverifiable promise of life after death to those agents that intensely value immortal life. Entrepreneurship theory’s most useful contribution is highlighting the similarities between the role of an entrepreneur and an NRM founder who also has to fashion a new product, market it, and sell it. Elaborating these similarities has allowed the use of economic analysis tools for explaining the higher rates of religious participation in societies with more religious pluralism such as the United States as compared to religiously homogenous societies such as Sweden. However, the Stark-Bainbridge entrepreneurship model falls short of a complete theory as it does not explains as to why NRM founders invent and propagate new ideas that seem so radical to most of their fellow group members and why some people buy these ideas? In this book, I will reserve the term radical to refer to those ideas that are considered to be so outside the pale by the primary target audience members (invariably the group members whose interests the NRM founder is claiming to defend) that they consider the NRM founder to be a deviant and not a full-fledged member of their group.

The multidisciplinary approach I outlined in my 2005 article (Upal, 2005b) builds on Stark and Bainbridge’s entrepreneurship theory as well as developments in the new field of cognitive science of religion (Barrett, 2000; Boyer, 1994; Lawson & McCauley, 1990; McCauley & Lawson, 2002), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), and leadership as social-identity-change-entrepreneurship (Haslam, Reicher, & Hopkins, 2005; Reicher, Haslam, & Platow, 2011; Upal, 2005b). Cognitive science of religion (CSR) assumes that ordinary cognitive processes result in creation and spread of religious ideas and that special mechanisms devoted to religious cognition are not needed to understand religion. Barrett calls it the naturalness-of-religion thesis.

...much of what is typically called ‘religion’ may be understood as the natural product of aggregated ordinary (emphasis in the original) cognitive processes. This perspective may be called the ‘naturalness-of-religion thesis’. Much as language is naturally acquired as a result of cognitive preparedness plus exposure to a typical sociolinguistic environment, ordinary cognition plus exposure to an ordinary environment goes a long way towards explaining religion. (Barrett, 2000: 29)
The cognitive science of new religious movements which I proposed in 2005 subscribes to CSR’s naturalness-of-religion thesis and focuses on connecting macro-level phenomenon of religion to micro-level cognitive processes. I assume that most NRM founders and believers are rational agents functioning in ordinary states of consciousness. The task for cognitive science of NRMs then is to identify the ordinary cognitive processes that cause NRM founders and believers to behave in ways that most observers find outlandish, and result in social ostracization of the NRM founders and their followers by the very community they claim to be saving. We will see that many of these processes are social psychological in nature. They are initiated and led by people who believe that their religious group’s prosperity will be enhanced through a change in their shared beliefs and seek to sell that message of change to their fellow group members. Those community members who buy this idea become their followers and those who seek to preserve the old belief system become their primary opponents and chief persecutors.

As we will see in Chapter 4, I caution against the tendency among some cognitive scientists of religion who argue that universality of cognitive explanations blunts the need for understanding the sociocultural and historical context that leads to the creation and spread of radical religious ideas. Indeed, I strongly believe that an explanation of religion that focuses solely on universal cognitive processes that are common to all human beings is doomed to fail. Universal cognitive processes simply do not provide a complete explanation unless they are instantiated in a particular sociocultural context that is investigated by historians of religion. Thus a history of religion is (and always will be) a necessary complement for a cognitive science of religion. This also means that unlike most other cognitive science of religion works that you may have read, we will be doing a deep dive into the history of nineteenth century India to fully understand the context which led Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to develop his ideas that resulted in establishment of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at and led people such as my maternal and paternal grandfathers to accept his innovative religious claims.

1.4 Sources for the Book

An interdisciplinary effort such as this must draw its sources from a variety of scholarly traditions. In the case of the cognitive science of NRMs theory and its application to understand the origin of the Ahmadiyya doctrine presented here, these include a history of South Asian Islam (particularly the 19th century), (Allen, 2006; Cox, 2002; B. Metcalfe, 1982; Powell, 1993), new religious movements research (Bainbridge & Stark, 1979; Stark & Bainbridge, 1987), cognitive science (Schank, 1999; Simon & Newell, 1972), social psychology (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002), and cognitive science of religion (Boyer, 1994).
For history and doctrine of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at (AMJ or movement hereafter), I use non-Ahmadi (Western scholarship as well as Muslim) sources as well as Ahmadi sources. The early Westerners who wrote about AMJ were Christian missionaries working in India. These include Rev. Robert Clark (1825-1900), the first secretary of the Church Missionary Society who served in Punjab from 1851 till his death in 1900. Clark’s adopted son Henry and Ahmad debated each other and following their debate Ahmad was charged by police for ordering one of his disciples to murder Clark (Ahmad was acquitted by the judge for lack of evidence). Missionary reports by Clark and others (such as Rev. Dr. Imad-ud-Din) published in the Church Missionary Intelligencer offer a rich source of not only of missionary perceptions of Ahmad and other Punjabi Muslims and their strategies for converting Muslims but also the broader socio-cultural environment in the nineteenth century Punjab. The earliest scholarly report on the Ahmadiyya movement was penned by the Presbyterian missionary Hervey De Witt Griswold (1860-1945), who moved to Jhansi, India in 1890. He seems to have met Ahmad around 1900. He wrote his report on AMJ in 1902 and presented it to the Victoria Institute in 1905 (three years before Ahmad’s death). The American Methodist missionary, Rev. Howard Arnold Walter (1883-1918), published the first English-language book-length treatment of the movement in 1918. John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929), a Scottish missionary to India, included a discussion of AMJ in his 1915 book, “Modern Religious Movements in India.” The American Episcopalian missionary James Thayer Addison wrote an article on the movement for the Harvard Theological Review in 1929. More recent scholarly publications include the books by Spencer Lavan, Yohan Friedman, and Adil Hussain Khan and an article by Shazia Ahmad (S. Ahmad, 2010; Friedman, 1992; A. H. Khan, 2015; Lavan, 1974).

The primary Ahmadiyya source is the approximately fifty Urdu books written by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as well as his letters (“Maktoobat”) and pamphlets (“Ishtiharat”). These are available from the AMJ’s official website (alislam.org) as well as the website run by the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha’at-e-Islam Lahore (aail.org). Official English translations of about forty of Ahmad’s works are also available from alislam.org. Unless otherwise noted, citations from Urdu books are my own translation. The secondary sources include the five-volume “Malfoozat,” a diary of his utterances noted by three of his disciples (Moulavi Abdul Karim, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, and Yaqub Ali Irfani) and published in Ahmad’s lifetime, and the eight of his seerat biographies also written by his disciples and published after Ahmad’s death. The most extensive among these is the three-volume “Seerat-ul-Mahdi” written by his son Mirza Bashir Ahmad and published from 1927 to 1939. These are complemented by the twenty-one-volume history of the movement titled “Tarikh-e-Ahmadiyyat” written by the movement’s official historian Dost Muhammad Shahid and published by AMJ’s official press (Shahid, 1958).

My final source of information about Ahmadiyya beliefs and practices is my own lifetime of “field observations” as a lay Ahmadi as well as part of the Ahmadiyya officialdom as I held various offices in the Jama’at organizations during the first twenty
years of my life in Rabwah as well as immediately after arrival in Canada. By praying five times a day at the neighbourhood mosque and listening to the *daras* following the namaz, and by participating in Jalsa Salanas, Atfal and Khuddam Annual Ijtemas, Talim-ul-Quran classes, Ramadhan daras, and weekly mohalla meetings I learned Jama’at’s version of its doctrine and history directly from Jama’at’s best scholars. These include Sir Muhammad Zafrullah Khan, Dost Muhammad Shahid, Malak Saifur Rahman, Abdul Malik Khan, Abdu Sami Khan, and Hafiz Muazzafar Ahmad. I also had a chance to meet and listen to several aging companions of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and Ahmad’s grandchildren including the 3rd and 4th Ahmadi Khalifas, Mirza Nasir Ahmad and Mirza Tahir Ahmad, respectively.

1.5 Outline

The next three chapters lay out the multidisciplinary theoretical framework of the cognitive science of new religious movements. Chapters Five through Seven apply this model to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad’s radical claims that were seen as outside the range of acceptable Muslim beliefs by many of Ahmad’s Sunni Muslims peers whom Ahmad claimed to be defending against the vigorous Christian and Hindu missionary efforts.

Chapter 2 traces the origin of ideas of us-versus-them to our basic psychological need to feel good about ourselves. According to social psychologists, people need to have a positive self-esteem to function as healthy members of a society. The need to have a positive self-esteem drives various groups (including religious ones) to create myths that tell their members why they are better than members of their competitor groups. Because our cultural world is constantly changing, these myths need upkeep so that they stay relevant for each successive generation. This job is taken up by those high-status group members for whom group forms a large part of their identity. They have the most to lose if their group’s status declines and most to gain if their group’s status is elevated. Chapter 3 argues that NRM founders are such social-identity-change entrepreneurs who repair and refashion their group’s myths ostensibly to ensure their group’s future prosperity. It reviews the development of the ideas of social identity entrepreneurship from social psychology to politics to new religious movements.

Chapter 4 explains why people are naturally attracted to counterintuitive ideas. It starts with the traditional cognitive science of religion work on memory for counterintuitive religious concepts. It proceeds to present the context-based model of memory for counterintuitive ideas. By placing the cognitive science of religion work in the larger framework of psychological research on human memory, the context-based model explains that people are attracted to novel ideas because evolution favours eager learners who pay more attention to those aspects of their environment that their memory fails to predict. It also presents empirical evidence that I and my
colleagues have collected through numerous lab studies of memory for various types of concepts. The evidence favours various predictions of the context-based model (Russell & Gobet, 2013). These include ratcheting up of counterintuitiveness that allows us to understand how layers of counterintuitiveness can build on top of one another and result in a complex tapestry of ideas that seems so bizarre to those who grew up outside of that tradition.

Unlike the traditional content-based model of memory for counterintuitive concepts, which asserts that there are differences between memory for maturationally natural ideas and practiced natural ideas such as the culturally-learned ideas, the context-based model asserts that there are no such differences. This allows us to generalize the traditional cognitive science of religion notion of individual counterintuitiveness to social counterintuitiveness as violations of shared beliefs of a group of people. This key development, presented in Chapter 5, allows us to understand the spread of a much broader class of ideas including doctrinal innovations of new religious movement founders such as Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.

Chapter 6 focuses on the context of British Indian Islam in which Ahmad made his socially counterintuitive claims. An in-depth historical examination of sociocultural beliefs of 19th century North Indian Sunni Muslim elite allows us to uncover the shared beliefs of Ahmad’s target audience and is critical to understanding the cognitive appeal of Ahmad’s message for them. I review shared beliefs of North Indian Muslim elite about themselves, as well as about British government, Christian missionaries, and their eschatological beliefs about Jesus’ second coming and about Mahdi. An understanding of a group’s shared beliefs is crucial for figuring out their expectations, whether a concept is perceived as intuitive or counterintuitive by them, and whether or not they are able to make sense of the counterintuitiveness of a concept and hence perceive it as catchy.

Chapter 7 continues the historical study begun in Chapter 6 to examine the life of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad paying particular attention to religious influences in his life. It particularly explores the hitherto unexplored influence that nineteenth century reformist Ahl-e-Hadith leaders such as Syed Nazir Hussain and Muhammad Hussain Batalavi played in preparing the fertile ideological ground that gave birth to Ahmad and also led some among the Ahl-e-Hadith to make sense of his claims and become his early followers. I argue that historians of religion need to pay more attention to the Ahl-e-hadith context if they want to fully understand the origin of the doctrine of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama’at.

Chapter 8 traces the evolution of AMJ’s doctrinal beliefs about Ahmad’s prophetic claims in the period following Ahmad’s death and leading to the split of the movement into two groups. Using the ratcheting-up-of-counterintuitiveness model, I carefully analyse the advantages and disadvantages of the competing strategies adopted by the two Ahmadi factions, namely, the Qadiani Ahmadi strategy of claiming a full prophetic status for Ahmad and the Lahori Ahmadi strategy of claiming a lower reformer status for Ahmad. I examine the attraction of each missionary strategy
to their primary target audiences of fellow Ahmadis as well as non-Ahmadi Sunni Muslims whom both groups wished to convert to Ahmadiyyat. The chapter ends with an examination of the similarities between the branding strategies adopted by both factions in the West where an increasing number of Ahmadis have migrated to escape persecution in Pakistan and other Muslim-dominated countries, e.g. Bangladesh and Indonesia.

The final chapter (Chapter 9) concludes by summarizing the main axioms of the cognitive science of new religious movements and prospects for future work in this field.