

AN EPISTEMIC DEFEATER FOR ISLAMIC BELIEF? A REPLY TO BALDWIN AND MCNABB

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Abstract. This article seeks to outline how a Muslim believer can *deflect* a defeater for Islamic belief put forward by Erik Baldwin and Tyler McNabb. In doing so, it aims to reject the suggestion that an Islamic religious epistemology is somehow antithetical to a model of Reformed epistemology (RE) which is not fully compatible with Plantingian. Taken together with previous work on Islam and RE, the article not only aims to provide reason to think that Baldwin and McNabb's proposed epistemic defeater for Islamic belief isn't problematic, it also seeks to show how the concerns raised by Baldwin and McNabb over a Plantingian model of RE in Islamic milieu, are no longer tenable.

I. INTRODUCTION

In simple terms, Reformed epistemology (RE) refers to the idea that “religious belief can be justified or warranted apart from argumentation.”¹ Alvin Plantinga, RE's primary advocate, offers an account of RE predicated on his epistemic theory of *warrant*, i.e., that quantity enough of which turns true-belief into knowledge.² Plantinga's account of warrant is coined “proper-functionalism”, which roughly has it that a belief is warranted for a subject *iff* the belief is produced by proper functioning cognitive faculties, successfully aimed at truth, in environments for which they were designed to apply.³

Plantinga holds that in conformity with such conditions belief in God can be *properly basic* and, as such, known.⁴ He argues that *if* God exists then He would want us to know Him, and hence would make this knowledge widely available. Thus, it is plausible to think that God may have placed within us a *sensus divinitatis* (a sense of the divine), which upon the apprehensions of the splendor of the universe; through deep loving relationships or prayer, produces basic beliefs about God. If the products of the *sensus divinitatis* meet the conditions of proper-functionalism, then one's basic belief in God will be warranted, i.e., properly basic. Plantinga goes on to extend this account to full-fledged Christian Belief.⁵ Yet, crucially, Plantinga also acknowledges that such beliefs and any other for that matter, are *defeasible*.⁶

Defeasibility for one's belief refers to “a beliefs liability to *lose* some positive epistemic status, or to having this status *downgraded* in some particular way.”⁷ We can distinguish between different types of defeaters. On the one hand there are *rebutting* defeaters, and on the other there are *undercutting* defeaters. According to Michael Bergmann, “*d* is a *rebutting* defeater for *b* iff *d* is a defeater for *b* which is (or is an epistemically appropriate basis for) the belief that *b* is false ... [whereas] *d* is an *undercutting* defeater

1 Tyler McNabb, “Proper Functionalism”, in *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on the Knowledge of God*, eds. John M. DePoe and Tyler McNabb, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 107.

2 Cf., Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

3 *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

4 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 168–198.

5 *Ibid.*, 241–323.

6 Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, x.

7 Michael Sudduth, “Defeaters in Epistemology”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008.

for *b* iff *d* is a defeater for *b* which is (or is an epistemically appropriate basis for) the belief that one's actual ground or reason for *b* is not indicative of *b*'s truth."⁸ In other words, a *rebutting* defeater provides one with grounds for thinking that a belief is false. On the other hand, an *undercutting* defeater attacks the way in which a belief originated, or the grounds on which one came to hold the belief; the defeater offers reason to suspect that those grounds do not indicate the truth of the belief in question.

Defeaters, however, are a *prima facie* as opposed to *ultima facie* threat to a belief: defeaters can themselves be defeated. So, although a defeater may pose an initial challenge for the positive epistemic status of one's belief that challenge can in theory be overcome. This means that rebutting/undercutting defeaters *D*, can themselves be *defeated* by further rebutting/undercutting defeaters *D**, i.e., an initial defeater gets a *defeater-defeater*. So, "in general, it's possible for one defeater to defeat another defeater because defeaters ... [are] *prima facie* reasons to give up a belief."⁹ Moreover, a potential defeater may be either *defeated* or *deflected*. A *defeater-defeater* is where one has "a defeater *D* ... and then acquire[s] another belief that defeats *D*".¹⁰ Whereas a *defeater-deflector* is a reason that "prevents *D* from being a defeater in the first place".¹¹ So, some alleged *defeater D*, won't necessarily be a *D* for subject *S*, because *S* may have some means of *deflecting D* and hence wouldn't be in (epistemic) need of an additional rebutting/undercutting defeater i.e., a *defeater-defeater*, because they already have a *defeater-deflector*.

In light of the above, this article seeks to consider whether Islamic belief succumbs to a kind of *undercutting* defeater, and considers how this might impact an Islamic model of RE. In doing so, the article aims to articulate one particular strategy for *deflecting* (as opposed to *defeating*) the defeater. The proposed defeater which has been raised by Erik Baldwin and Tyler McNabb, is considered to be akin "in structure to Alvin Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN)", such that it threatens to "undermine all of a Muslims warrant claims".¹² Baldwin and McNabb "presuppose that Muslims who may be subject to the defeater ... are 'reflective Muslims'."¹³ That is, Muslims who "are seriously engaged in addressing questions that arise in contemporary philosophy of religion, such as Plantinga's account of warrant, his religious epistemology more generally, as well as the prospects of other religious traditions taking up something like Plantinga's religious epistemology."¹⁴ According to Baldwin and McNabb, "it is just these Muslims who are in a position to be aware of the sorts of considerations that underlie the defeater we develop in this paper."¹⁵ Therefore, on the grounds that this defeater is aimed at the "reflective Muslim", the article aims to develop a *defeater-deflector* with that assumption in mind. But first, we must consider Baldwin and McNabb's proposed defeater in detail, and so it is to their defeater that we now turn.

II. THE EPISTEMIC DEFEATER

Baldwin and McNabb begin consideration of their proposed defeater by re-stating Baldwin's previous work outlining an Islamic account of epistemic *externalism* in the context of Plantingian RE. According to Baldwin,¹⁶ Islam holds that God has designed our cognitive faculties to acquire true beliefs about Him, but such that they will naturally produce doubts about the veracity of their basic theistic beliefs

8 Michael Bergmann, "Defeaters and Higher-Level Requirements", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 220 (2005), 424.

9 Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 98.

10 Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts", in *Naturalism Defeated?* ed. James Beilby, (Cornell Univ. Press, 2002), 224.

11 *Ibid.*, 224.

12 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, "An epistemic defeater for Islamic belief?", *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 4 (2015), 352.

13 *Ibid.*, 353.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 Erik Baldwin, "On the Prospects of an Islamic Externalist Account of Warrant", in *Classic Issues in Islamic Philosophy and Theology Today*, eds. A-T. Tymieniecka and Nazif Muhtaroglu, (Springer, 2010), 19–41.

received through the faculty of the heart (*qalb*).¹⁷ Upon acquaintance with such doubts, the believer is epistemically required to reflect upon the basic beliefs received through the *qalb*. Thereafter, they may come to *see* that their basic beliefs are in fact true, and if so, the believer can be sufficiently warranted to *know* the theistic beliefs in question. Crucially, the design-plan on *this* Islamic model of RE means that, “the Muslim just couldn’t endorse that he/she could be warranted in his/her belief, apart from *any* propositional evidence or argument.”¹⁸ However, Baldwin and McNabb conclude that, “Islamic belief nonetheless is compatible with proper-functionalism *simpliciter*,”¹⁹ by which I take them to mean that at face value, an Islamic religious epistemology can make sense of a proper functionalist framework i.e., particularly the proper function and truth-aimed conditions. However, in scratching the surface a little deeper, this initial compatibility runs into a problem: according to Baldwin and McNabb, an Islamic epistemology predicated on proper functionalism will not in fact be able to satisfy the crucial truth-aimed condition. This latter assertion forms the basis of their proposed epistemic defeater. The idea is roughly that, an Islamic religious epistemology—all things considered—will be unable to sufficiently satisfy the truth-aimed condition of proper functionalism, and this will present the Muslim with an *undercutting* defeater for trusting their cognitive faculties, because on an Islamic framework, they can’t be shown to necessarily aim at truth.

The crux of this idea centres on certain passages in the Qur’an which refer to Allah as *khayru al-mākirīn*,²⁰ or to *makrAllāh*,²¹ or *fa lillāhi al-makru jamī’an*.²² The key term in all of these Qur’anic phrases (which I have left untranslated for the moment), is *makr*. According to Baldwin and McNabb, the Arabic word *makr* is most plausibly translated in reference to “deception/scheme.”²³ Thus, the above phrases would translate in the following ways: “[Allah is] the best of deceivers/schemers”, “the deception/scheme of Allah”, and “but to Allah belongs the deception/scheme entirely”. Following the alleged Qur’anic depiction of God as “the best of deceivers”, they argue that the Qur’an also depicts Allah as explicitly deceiving the faithful Muslim community at the time of the Prophet, citing the following verses:

[Remember, O Muhammad] when Allah showed them to you in your dream as few; and if he had shown them to you as many, you [believers] would have lost courage and would have disputed in the matter [of whether to fight], but Allah saved [you from that]. Indeed, He is Knowing of that within the breasts. And [remember] when He showed them to you, when you met, as few in your eyes; and He made you [appear] as few in their eyes so that Allah might accomplish a matter already destined. And to Allah [all] matters are returned. (Qur’an 8:43–44).²⁴

On the basis of these verses, Baldwin and McNabb hold that the Qur’an depicts God as deceiving the faithful Muslims’ cognitive faculties in order to achieve some “greater good”. Consequently, if the Qur’an does reveal to us a God who boasts of his ability to scheme or deceive and who has deceived faithful believers, they ask: “how would the faithful Muslim know that God isn’t deceiving him about the Qur’an being the inspired word of God?”²⁵ Therefore, they suggest that the Muslim might have an *undercutting* defeater for her Islamic belief. They formulate this argument in the following premises, where (GD) stands for “God is the greatest deceiver” and GDF stands for “God deceives faithful believers only in order to actualize a greater good.” I quote the argument in full:²⁶

17 The idea that this model represents *the* Islamic tradition per se or *the* Islamic view on RE and epistemology more generally, has been challenged in a previous article of mine, cf., “An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology” (2021). The article demonstrates that Plantingian RE predicated on proper functionalism, is compatible with the Islamic tradition much more evidently than what Baldwin & McNabb suggest, drawing on the thought of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Yet, I also doubt whether Baldwin’s model of RE is explicitly congruent with any theological-epistemology developed within the Islamic tradition.

18 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 355.

19 Ibid., 355–356.

20 Qur’an 3:54; 8:30.

21 Qur’an 7:99.

22 Qur’an 13:42.

23 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 356.

24 Qur’an 8:43–44 (Trans. by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem).

25 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 357.

26 Ibid., 357.

- (1) Given GD and GDF, God could be deceiving faithful Muslims by not aiming their cognitive faculties successfully toward producing true beliefs for a greater good.
- (2) Upon seeing that (1) could be the case, if a Muslim lacks a justified reason for thinking God is not deceiving him, the Muslim would see that the probability that the faculties are reliable (R) is inscrutable.
- (3) If a Muslim sees that the probability for R is inscrutable, then he has a defeater for trusting his faculties.
- (4) If the Muslim has a defeater for R, then he has an undercutting defeater for his belief that the Qur'an is the inspired Word of Allah.
- (5) If one has a defeater for their belief, it cannot be warranted.
- (6) The Muslim who comes to see that (1) could be the case and lacks a justified reason for thinking that God is not deceiving him has a defeater for his belief that the Qur'an is the inspired Word of Allah and that belief cannot be warranted.

Having outlined the defeater, and in considering how a Muslim may go about responding to it,²⁷ Baldwin and McNabb imagine a case where the Muslim *does* acquire this defeater, that is to say, acquires the defeater (in the subjective sense) into her system of beliefs (or noetic structure). If so, and in taking the passages of 8:43–44 at face value, Baldwin and McNabb argue that a Muslim believer would have antecedently believed that, “*if Islam is true, then God sometimes deceives even believers but only if he has a good reason for doing so*”.²⁸ Moreover, they suggest that it's likely that the Muslim believer will also be assured that God would not instil such doubts in the faithful, “without making possible the resolution of that doubt”.²⁹ Yet, Baldwin and McNabb argue that the Muslim in *grip* of this defeater, will have reason to doubt whether that antecedent belief is true, as well as the consequent of the above conditional. In other words, the Muslim won't be able to rely on propositions that are true, only *if* Islam itself is true, in order to resolve the issue because doing so would be epistemically circular.

However, Baldwin and McNabb speculate that although a Muslim might not be able to rely upon propositions that are true only *if* Islamic belief is true, there may be other mental states that can be of use, such as certain *nonpropositional* evidence (i.e., religious experiences), which when newly formed will allow them to overcome their doubts gained by the defeater. As a result, “a Muslim may come to understand that God may sometimes deceive Muslims without thereby having a reason to think that their cognitive faculties are generally unreliable”.³⁰ Nevertheless, they conclude that although Muslims may appeal to *nonpropositional* evidence or personal experience in thinking that God is indeed trustworthy and His revelation is true, such tactical moves would only work, “if both the Qur'an is in fact true and a reflective Muslim has sufficient reason to trust that these sources of evidence are veridical”.³¹ However, according to Baldwin and McNabb both are questionable and so it apparently follows that “there is a subjective defeater for *some* Muslims based on Plantinga's truth aimed condition”.³²

27 They suggest that the Muslim has open to him essentially two strategies: (a) to refer the passage in the Qur'an 8:43–44 to the classical science of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), and consider a more appropriate interpretation or rendition of its meaning. Or (b), to consider the defeater in connection with other aspects of Islamic belief. That is to draw on other Qur'anic passages, or *nonpropositional* evidence i.e. certain religious experiences, to *defeat* the defeater. For the purposes of this paper it will be sufficient to only focus on strategy (2).

28 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 361.

29 *Ibid.*, 361.

30 *Ibid.*, 362.

31 *Ibid.*, 365.

32 *Ibid.*, 365.

III. A RESPONSE: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In what follows, we'll consider how a Muslim believer might be able to *deflect* the proposed epistemic defeater. However, before doing so, I want to make some important preliminary remarks about the epistemic defeater as it currently stands. On the basis of those remarks I will recommend a fairer and more plausible rendering of the argument for an epistemic defeater. In their six-premised argument, Baldwin and McNabb begin with the following premise,

- (1) Given GD and GDF, God could be deceiving faithful Muslims by not aiming their cognitive faculties successfully at true beliefs (for a greater good).

Accordingly, GD is supposed to stand for “God is the Greatest Deceiver”, and GDF for “God deceives the faithful”. Now, it is my initial contention that the evidence for GD proposed by Baldwin and McNabb fails to substantiate that claim, and that the evidence from classical and contemporary mainstream Muslim tradition, gives us positive reason to reject GD. Therefore, in extending the principle of charity to that mainstream tradition, I will argue that premise (1) is more plausibly rendered in the following way:

- (1') Given GDF, God could be deceiving faithful Muslims by not aiming their cognitive faculties successfully at true beliefs (for a greater good).

However, I also intend to point out that premise (1') fails to fairly represent an argument for an epistemic defeater on the basis of the Qur'an 8:43–44. This is because that central case taken at face value, is not one of God rather loosely deceiving the faithful communities' cognitive faculties (including a *sensus divinitatis* type faculty primed for theistic/Islamic belief), but is specifically: (a) a deceiving of the faithful communities' *faculty of sight*, (b) on only *one occasion*, and (c) *later informing the community* of it. (This is a point implicitly conceded by Baldwin and McNabb in their articulation of the context of those verses). Therefore, premise (1') also needs to be amended now as follows (where GDF* stands for, “God deceived the faithful communities' *faculty of sight, once, and later informed them*):

- (1'') Given GDF*, God could be deceiving faithful Muslims by not aiming their cognitive faculties successfully at true beliefs (for a greater good).

Now, I am not entirely sure that given GDF*, it would seemingly follow that God may be deceiving the faithful communities' entire cognitive apparatus, but be that as it may, I shall overlook the concern for now. Instead, I will focus on offering the reasoning behind the amendment of premise (1) to premise (1'').

According to Baldwin and McNabb, there is reason to believe GD. In defense of this claim, they put forward passages from the Qur'an where God uses the term *makr*. For example, they cite the verse with the phrase, *wallāhu khayru al-mākirīn*, translating it as follows: “and Allah is the best of ‘schemers/deceivers’”.³³ Their translation and interpretation of *makr* (or *mākirīn* in this case) in reference to deception/scheme, is based upon: (a) definitions from Lane's Lexicon and the Hans Wehr dictionary, and (b) a quotation from Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan.³⁴ In other words, two modern Arabic-English dictionaries/lexicons and a quote from a contemporary Saudi scholar. There is no reference to *classical* Arabic lexicons, Islamic scholars, theologians or exegetes, i.e., the mainstream Islamic tradition. However, if we do take heed of that mainstream tradition, we ought to reject GD.

Consider classical Arabic dictionary definitions on the meaning of *makr* Allah. According to the lexicon, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, “al-Athīr said: the *makr* of Allah is punishing His enemies.”³⁵ In the *Lisān al-'Arab* of Ibn Manzūr, we read that according to Laith, “the people of knowledge said that the *makr* of Allah is His recompense for those who practised *makr* ... Ibn al-Athīr said the *makr* of Allah is His punishment befalling His enemies and not His allies.”³⁶ Moreover, in *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, the

33 Ibid., 356.

34 Ibid., 356.

35 Fairūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Mu'asasa al-Risāla, 2005), 377.

36 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab vol5* (Dār Ṣādir, 1993), 183.

Qur'anic exegete al-Iṣfahānī notes that there are two kinds of *makr*, one “praiseworthy, when it is done in order to achieve good ... whilst the other is done to achieve something evil.”³⁷ It is on the basis of this mainstream tradition that we find the vast majority of Qur'anic translation into English *not* rendering, “*wallāhu khayru al-mākirīn*” as “and Allah is the best of deceivers”, but rather as the “best of planners”:

- a) “... and Allah is the best of planners.”³⁸
- b) “... and the best of planners is Allah.”³⁹
- c) “... and Allah is the best of all planners.”⁴⁰
- d) “... and Allah is the best of the planners.”⁴¹
- e) “... and Allah is the best of planners.”⁴²
- f) “... and Allah is the best of planners.”⁴³
- g) “... and God is a much better planner.”⁴⁴
- h) “... and God is the best of devisers.”⁴⁵

Yet, there are also problems with Baldwin and McNabb's evidence itself, or more correctly, their use of it. Baldwin and McNabb (in part rightly) suggest that in Lane's Lexicon *makr* is “used to express deceit, guile or circumvention.”⁴⁶ However, after discussing *makr* in reference to deception, on the next page Lane notes the following,

Makr is praised or dispraised according to the nature of its object [El-Basair] ... *makr* also signifies he managed with thought, or consideration, or acted with policy ... *makrAllah* and *amkar* are syn. signifying God recompensed, or requited, for *makr* (or the practising of deceit) ... *makrAllah* signifies God's granting a man respite or delay, and enabling him to accomplish his worldly aims ... (Er-Raghib, TA:) or, accord. to IAtH, God causing his trials to befall his enemies, exclusively of his friends.⁴⁷

So, Baldwin and McNabb seem to ignore the rest of the passage in Lane's lexicon, which gives us reason to think that *makrAllah* should not be understood as simply the “deception/scheme of Allah” In addition, their use of Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan is also suspect. They quote al-Fawzan as stating that:

The cunning added to God Almighty and ascribed to him is not like the cunning of creatures, because the cunning of creatures is blameworthy, and the cunning added to Almighty God is praised, because the cunning of creatures means deception and misinformation, and the delivery of harm to those who do not deserve it, and the cunning of God Almighty is good: as it is delivered to those who deserve punishment, so it is justice and mercy.⁴⁸

Baldwin and McNabb's use of this quotation is tendentious. Since Sheikh al-Fawzan, an Arabic speaker, offers his explanation of *makrAllah* in the Arabic language, he used the untranslated term “*makr*”, not the English translation “cunning.” That translation simply assumes what it aims to prove. Left untranslated, al-Fawzan's explanation of *makr* coincides with what we find in the classical dictionaries above—that *makrAllah* is good and “is delivered to those who deserve punishment, so it is justice.” Al-Fawzan does *not* take the phrase *makrAllah* to mean cunning, scheming, deception. Rather, al-Fawzan's position aligns

37 Al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾān* (Maktaba Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1991), 609.

38 Qur'an 3:54 (Trans. by Sahih International).

39 Ibid., (Trans. by Yusuf Ali).

40 Ibid., (Trans. by Mufti Taqī Usmani).

41 Ibid., (Trans. by Muhsin Khan).

42 Ibid., (Trans. by Dr. Mustafa Khattab).

43 Ibid., (Trans. by Shakir).

44 Ibid., (Trans. by Muhammad Sarwar).

45 Ibid., (Trans. by Arthur J. Arberry).

46 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 356.

47 William Lane & Stanley Lane-Poole, *Arabic-English Lexicon: Volume 7* (F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1955), 257.

48 Erik Baldwin & Tyler McNabb, “An epistemic defeater”, 356.

with scholars of the same theological tradition, such as Sheikh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen, who rightly concludes that “Allah cannot be described as scheming in absolute terms; we cannot say ‘Allah is a schemer’”.⁴⁹ Therefore, in extending the principle of charity toward the mainstream Islamic tradition concerning the notion of *makrAllah* (which I have tried to point out by way of classical lexicographers and exegetes, the contemporary theological tradition Baldwin and McNabb make use of, as well as the mainstream traditions’ translation of the Qur’an), it’s more plausible to accept its semantic and theological rendering of that notion. Consequently, given that *makrAllah* in the tradition does not refer to the “deception of Allah”, but something more like the “plan of Allah”, then the idea that Allah is *khayru al-mākirin* shouldn’t be understood as “Allah is the best of deceivers”, but simply that “Allah is the best of planners”, hence GD is implausible, and the amendment of premise (1) to premise (1’) reasonable.

Moreover, I think that the amendment from premise (1’) to premise (1’’) is also reasonable, because it captures what’s actually going on in the case that Baldwin and McNabb make the basis of their argument: Qur’an 8:43–44. As already pointed out above, we merely have one case in which the faithful communities’ *faculty of sight* is deceived, and later informed about.⁵⁰ But for now, the main point I want to get across is that there is an important difference between faculties primed specifically for theistic belief, and faculties of sight, a difference which, we will return to.

Finally, before moving on to consider how a Muslim might *deflect* the proposed defeater, I wish to say something brief about premise (2), because it is the first two premises which are the crux of the argument, and which, given our amendments above from premise (1) to premise (1’), will take on a small amendment itself:

(2’) Upon seeing that (1’’) could be the case, if a Muslim lacks a justified reason for thinking God is not deceiving him, the Muslim would see that the probability that the faculties are reliable (R) is inscrutable.

Premise (2’) as it is now framed then, holds that *essentially* on the basis of GDF*, in the absence of some justified reason available to the Muslim for thinking God is not deceiving him, he’d see that the probability that his cognitive faculties (as a whole) are reliable, is inscrutable. Now, the consequent of the conditional in that premise is making an empirical claim that I doubt could be substantiated, but I shall overlook the concern. More importantly, it is on the basis of this (amended) premise and the first, that Baldwin and McNabb claim the Muslim could have an *undercutting* defeater for their Islamic belief as explicated in the next two premises.

- (3) If a Muslim sees that the probability for R is inscrutable, then he has a defeater for trusting his faculties.
- (4) If the Muslim has a defeater for R, then he has an undercutting defeater for his belief that the Qur’an is the inspired Word of Allah.

Thus, taking the premises together they essentially suggest that a Muslim who grants GDF* would have reason to think that her Islamic belief hasn’t been formed reliably, because it has been formed on the basis of cognitive faculties that are unreliable. Therefore, a Muslim have an *undercutting* defeater for their Islamic belief.

49 cf., “Scheming is Only Ascribed to Allah in the Context of Perfection,” Islamweb.net English, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.islamweb.net/en/fatwa/381910/scheming-is-only-ascribed-to-allah-in-the-context-of-perfection>.

50 The relative significance of the fact that it was merely the faithful’s sense perceptual faculties that were deceived on one occasion and that they were later informed about this event, ought to be seen in light of the response to the defeater offered in the proceeding section. As previously noted, the response is a *defeater-deflector*. I think that it is relevant that what is excluded from the deception here are those faculties or cognitive dispositions primed for specifically theistic/Islamic belief, i.e., *fitra*, because it makes possible a narrative account which plays a role in the *deflection* more readily available when the deception is of merely a sense perceptual kind. If the deception included faculties primed for specifically theistic belief, I suspect it would raise more doubts for the Muslim concerned as to whether her Islamic belief has been reliably formed. The same may be said for the fact that it occurred once and that the faithful were later informed of the event. This may not have been the case if the Muslim acquires the defeater into their noetic structure (because they’d already have reason to doubt the reliability of all their faculties), but given that the response offered in this paper is a *defeater-deflector*, I think it is (epistemically) relevant.

In light of the above and turning to our proposed *defeater-deflector*, I aim to show how a Muslim believer can justifiably reason that her Islamic belief has been formed in a reliable way. If a Muslim can justifiably show that her Islamic belief has been formed reliably, then by the reasoning implicit in the above argument, it *must* mean she has reason to believe that her cognitive faculties as a whole are probably reliable as well.⁵¹

IV. DEFLECTING THE DEFEATER

In what follows, I will consider how a Muslim believer is able to *deflect* the proposed epistemic defeater. I will take as an example the case of a Muslim believer who is what Baldwin and McNabb—following Zain Ali—coin a “reflective Muslim”;⁵² and as mentioned previously, has been made the sole target of the defeater. That is, a Muslim who is engaged in addressing questions that arise in contemporary philosophy of religion, such as those that concern RE and its relation to Islamic epistemology.

First, remember that by *deflecting a defeater*, we mean that a subject *S* has some reason *X* such that it prevents some defeater *D* from being a *D* in the first place. In other words, *X* prevents *D* from being (justifiedly) acquired into *S*’s noetic structure. Second, by adopting an approach borrowed from Andrew Moon’s “*Case of Hannah*”;⁵³ I want to argue that a Muslim believer, let’s call her *Layla*, can adopt the same sort of epistemically circular reasoning as “*Hannah*”, in deflecting the proposed defeater for Islamic belief.

Let us suppose that upon reading the Qur’an 8:43–44, and the (amended) defeater proposed by Baldwin and McNabb, it prompts Layla to reflect on why it is that she considers her Islamic belief to be reliably formed, and as a result, she reasons in the following way (Islamic belief* = ‘my (Layla’s) Islamic belief was formed reliably’):

1. Islamic belief is true.

Suppose that Layla has no other defeater for her Islamic belief, so we will assume that her Islamic belief is *prima facie* warranted. Thus, Layla justifiedly believes premise 1.

2. If Islamic belief is true, then Islamic belief* is probably true.

In addition, let us presume, given her reflections over the Qur’an 8:43–44, and Baldwin and McNabb’s (amended) defeater, that Layla is aware that GDF*. Given her background knowledge of Allah—as the Merciful Lord who created her to know Him—and her own religious experiences, granting GDF* is unlikely to move her. For suppose that part of that background knowledge includes the recognition that God is not “the best of deceivers”, and that God informed the community of the event in the Qur’an 8:43–44 such that they can trust their faculties once more. Crucially, we can suppose that Layla as a “reflective Muslim” also recognises, following a Taymiyyan Islamic model of RE,⁵⁴ that *if* Islamic belief is true then Islamic belief* is probably true. That is, given the truth of Islam, her Islamic belief is probably the result of the natural workings of *fitra*—in conjunction with her other relevant cognitive faculties—upon an apprehension of the *āyāt* of the Qur’an. More specifically, she comes to see that *if* Islam is true, then the following is true:

- a) God as the Creator of the universe has instilled within human beings different cognitive faculties in order that they may acquire true beliefs about Him.

51 This is because in the context of the proposed defeater, the *only* way she could justifiably believe that her Islamic belief has been formed reliably, is if she shouldn’t also believe that the probability that her cognitive faculties are reliable is (low or) inscrutable.

52 Zain Ali, *Faith, Philosophy and the Reflective Muslim* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3–4.

53 cf., Andrew Moon, “Circular and question begging responses to religious disagreement and debunking arguments”, *Philosophical Studies* 178, no. 3 (2021), 791–796.

54 cf., Jamie B. Turner, “An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology”, *Philosophy East and West* 71, no. 3 (2021), 767–792.

- b) God created all of humankind upon an innate natural constitution (*fiṭra*). This *fiṭra* urges them to recognize Him, to know Him, and to worship Him alone ... [and] when one's *fiṭra* functions properly, it 'triggers' within the heart an immediate awareness of God.⁵⁵

Suppose Layla also realises that this way of coming to know God, "can be warranted in accordance with Plantinga's account of proper functionalism", then it seems Layla can justifiably believe premise 2.

3. Islamic belief* is probably true.

Finally, let us speculate that Layla formed her Islamic belief in response to conditions typical of the Muslim believer, and what one would expect given the truth of Islamic belief on a Taymiyyan model. In other words, through contemplation (*tadabbur*) of Allah's *āyāt* in the Qur'an; through prayer (*ṣalāh*); supplication (*du'ā*); meditative remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) etc. So, Layla reasons that if indeed Islamic belief is true, it would be through these means—which she herself engages in and forms rich religious experiences from—that Islamic belief would be (reliably) formed in accordance with the proper function of her cognitive faculties, undergirded by *fiṭra*. Therefore, she can justifiably believe that Islamic belief* is probably true, so Layla justifiably believes in premise 3, and by *modus ponens*, justifiably reasoned from premise 1–3.

Now, Layla's belief in premise 3 is *epistemically* circular. For a belief to be *epistemically* circular, I mean to say that, S used some belief source X to come to believe that X is reliable.⁵⁶ This is exactly what happened in Layla's case. Layla came to believe premise 1 through some belief source X. Then drawing on her Islamic belief (i.e., the contents accepted to be true in premise 1), she inferred that her Islamic belief was formed through X, which was undergirded by *fiṭra* on the basis of her apprehension of Allah's *āyāt*. In other words, a divinely guided reliable process. So, she concluded that Islamic belief* is probably true, because she believed her Islamic belief was formed on the basis X, which was guided for the culmination of Islamic belief. Therefore, by Layla's reasoning X has been believed to be reliable because of a doxastic deliverance of X. So, Layla's reasoning is *epistemically* circular. In other words, she used X to come to believe premise 1, and then concluded by the above argument, that X is reliable.

However, following Bergmann and Moon, I want to claim that this epistemic circularity is "benign" as opposed to "malignant". Malignant epistemic circularity (EC) according to Bergmann is the sort which occurs in QD ('question-doubting') situations: "where, prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject *is or should be* seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X [i.e. the source of the belief] or the reliability of B's formation."⁵⁷ In contrast, benign cases of EC occur in non-QD situations where: "prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject *neither is nor should be* seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation."⁵⁸ In Layla's context, it doesn't seem that she *should be seriously questioning or doubting* the reliability of X when she concluded that X is reliable.

First, this is because Layla has a narrative account of the Qur'an 8:43–44: an acceptance of GDF*; a recognition of God's loving nature and His plans to make Himself known to humanity; her rich religious experiences. Second, the fact that one is aware that one's faculties missed the truth-mark on one occasion, shouldn't I suspect give them reason to doubt their faculties as a whole. Plantinga makes the point that, "the designer [of our cognitive faculties] aims at a cognitive system that delivers truth (true beliefs), of course; but he also has other constraints to work within."⁵⁹ Plantinga cites as an example the cognitive constraints that result in a cognitive system being built into a human bodily framework, subject to certain natural laws and regularities. Consequently, he remarks, "within these constraints imposed by these other factors ... this may require trade-offs."⁶⁰ That is to say, although the primary aim is for

55 Ibid., 775.

56 cf., Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 179–182.

57 Ibid., 199.

58 Ibid., 199.

59 Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 38.

60 Ibid., 39.

the cognitive system to produce *true beliefs*, given the constraints, trade-offs may be required to design a cognitive system that works best given other considerations. Although you'd want a lawn mower big enough to cut your grass in next-to-no-time, you'd still have to reduce its size for it to be mobile and easily stored! In the same sort of way, our cognitive system might have been designed for the production of true beliefs, whilst at the same time satisfying some other desiderata. So, for all we (or Layla) knows(s), such constraints were in play in the case of the Qur'an 8:43–44, as constraints may be in play when our cognitive system makes it such that a "straight stick looks bent in water".⁶¹ Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that a belief can't be warranted, for when that segment of the design plan which produced your doxastic response is *directly* aimed at the production of true-belief, your belief can be sufficiently warranted.⁶² So, following Plantinga's reasoning, it's plausible to think that Layla need not *seriously question or doubt* the reliability of X prior to concluding X is reliable, just as it's plausible to think one need not *seriously question or doubt* their cognitive faculties as a whole on the case of an optical illusion. Therefore, it is benign that Layla formed her belief that Islamic belief* is probably true, in an epistemically circular way.

As a result, Layla's argument works as a justified *defeater-deflector* for the proposed defeater. Given her justified reason in holding to the probable truth of Islamic belief*, Layla has positive reason for thinking that the probability her cognitive faculties as a whole are reliable, is high. This is evidently the case, because here reasoning includes the idea that God wants human beings to come to knowledge of Him, and makes it possible that they do. In other words, with this argument available to Layla, she has a justified reason to think that her Islamic belief has been reliably formed, but if she has justified reason to think that her Islamic belief has been reliably formed, she will also have justified reason to think that her cognitive faculties as a whole are reliable (if she didn't, she couldn't justifiably believe that her Islamic belief has been reliably formed).

V. ISLAM AND REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

Given their proposed epistemic defeater for Islamic belief, Baldwin and McNabb have implied that there is some lack of congruence between Islamic epistemology and Reformed epistemology—at least of the Plantingian variety. This is evident because the defeater itself is predicated on the apparent inability of Islamic epistemology to account for the crucial truth-aimed condition of proper functionalism. As we have seen, this idea is grounded in the notion that Islamic theology has an inherent problem in addressing some form of "Divine Deception" (DD). However, in light of the above, I see little reason why the Muslim believer should consider that on the basis of one apparent case of DD, and especially given that claims to the effect that God in Islam should be attributed with Deception as part of His very nature, are unfounded. In fact, it may be argued that the Christian tradition could have a more difficult time in accounting for numerous Biblical cases of DD.⁶³

As previously alluded to, the model of RE I have outlined elsewhere has demonstrated how the conditions of proper functionalism in the context of Islamic belief can be satisfied (including the truth-aimed condition), given the theological-epistemology of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 C.E.): "According to the Taymiyyan model, upon the proper function of the heart in conjunction with the *fitra*, both of which have been designed to successfully acquire true beliefs about God when placed in suitable environments for this to occur ... will produce basic belief in Islam which can be said to be *warranted* in a *properly basic way*."⁶⁴ So, in following the aforementioned work and in light of this article, I don't think we have good grounds to suppose that there is any fundamental rift between Islamic belief and the truth-aimed condition of

61 Ibid., 38.

62 Ibid., 40.

63 cf., Erik J. Wielenberg, "Divine Deception", in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* eds. Trent Dougherty & Justin P. McBrayer, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 236–249. Wielenberg discusses four such cases of divine deception which involve members of the faithful community.

64 Turner, "An Islamic Account of Reformed Epistemology", 784.

proper functionalism. Rather, just as Christian theology works coherently within a proper functionalist epistemology, so too can an Islamic theology be made congruent with proper functionalism.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to demonstrate two fundamental points: (1) that a “reflective Muslim” can employ *epistemically circular* reasoning in *deflecting* the proposed epistemic defeater for Islamic belief put forward by Baldwin and McNabb. And (2) that the aforementioned failed to provide us with good reason to think that an Islamic epistemology is unable to satisfy all of the conditions of a proper functionalist epistemology, particularly the truth-aimed condition. In doing so, the article offered an amended version of the defeater, which in light of a principle of charity toward the mainstream Muslim tradition, rejected the assertion that God in Islam is to be conceived as “the greatest deceiver”. In light of those amendments, the article outlined a parallel case to Moon’s “case of Hannah”, and suggested that the Muslim can wield a justified reason that *deflects* the proposed defeater at hand, and prevent it from entering into her noetic structure. Consequently, it is no longer tenable to maintain that reformed epistemology—when construed through the lens of proper functionalism—is “only compatible with something like a Judeo-Christian framework”,⁶⁵ for it is equally at home within an Islamic framework as well.

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65 Tyler McNabb, *Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018), 33.

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