

BEYOND ARGUMENTS: FITRAH AS A PRE-DISCURSIVE AWARENESS OF THE DIVINE

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of fitrah—the innate, God- given disposition that orients humans toward belief in the Divine—as an epistemic foundation for theism independent of inferential arguments. Drawing on Qur’anic and Hadith texts, classical Islamic thinkers (al- Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, Sa’d al- Din al- Taftazani, Shah Waliullah), and contemporary philosophy of religion, the study reconstructs a model of fitrah as a form of pre- discursive, properly fundamental belief in God. It situates fitrah within broader epistemological debates about evidentialism and fundamental beliefs, compares it with Alvin Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis*, and examines empirical findings from developmental psychology and cognitive science that suggest humans naturally favor purposive explanations and dualist intuitions. The paper contends that fitrah provides a rational, warranted basis for theistic belief, not through syllogistic proofs but through the proper functioning of innate cognitive faculties. By distinguishing fitrah from formal arguments, the research highlights its role as a non- inferential source of knowledge. It proposes a framework for understanding belief in God that honors both revelation and reason.

Keywords. Fitrah; Theism; Innate Disposition; Islamic Epistemology; Basic Belief; Alvin Plantinga; Intuitive Theism; Cognitive Science; Ibn Taymiyya; Taftazani; Shah Waliullah.

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INTRODUCTION

Belief in God has often been defended through sophisticated philosophical arguments. Cosmological, ontological, and teleological proofs testify to the rationality of theism and remain cornerstones of natural theology. However, religious traditions also teach that faith in God is written into the human soul and does not merely depend on complex argumentation. In the Islamic worldview, this innate orientation is called *fitrah*—the primordial disposition or nature God instills in every human being. The Qur’an refers to this innate nature when it instructs believers:

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ
“Set your face towards the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the *fitrah* of Allah upon which He has created [all] people; there is no changing the creation of Allah” (Qur’an 30:30). Classical theologians elaborated the idea that humans are born with a natural awareness of God and an inclination toward truth. Modern cognitive science, meanwhile, reports that children and adults alike demonstrate intuitive tendencies to perceive purpose, agency, and duality in the world, suggesting that theistic belief may arise naturally without formal instruction (Kelemen, 2004; Jarnefelt, Canfield & Kelemen, 2015).

This paper investigates *fitrah* as a pre- discursive awareness of the Divine and assesses whether it can function as a justifiable basis for theistic belief. The study contrasts *fitrah* with philosophical arguments and shows that, rather than being an argument itself, *fitrah* is an innate cognitive faculty through which knowledge of God is directly apprehended. By appealing to scriptural sources and classical theological authorities, the research clarifies the Islamic conception of *fitrah*. It then engages contemporary epistemology and cognitive science to evaluate whether such an innate disposition can yield warranted belief. Finally, the paper addresses objections that non- inferential belief is irrational and explores how *fitrah* relates to rational inquiry and moral development.

Background and Significance

The term *fitrah* derives from the Arabic root *fatara*, meaning “to create, split or cleave open,” and is often translated as “natural disposition,” “primordial nature” or “innate constitution.” The Qur’an and Hadith portray *fitrah* as a divinely endowed capacity enabling humans to recognize their Creator and distinguish truth from falsehood. The Qur’an (30:30) exhorts believers to remain steadfast in the religion of monotheism because it corresponds to the *fitrah* God established. Another verse reports God’s covenant with humanity:

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ شَهِدْنَا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ

“When your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we testify’” (Qur’an 7:172).

In an authentic Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) states:

مَا مِنْ مَوْلُودٍ إِلَّا يُولَدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ، فَأَبَوَاهُ يُهَوِّدَانِهِ، أَوْ يُنَصِّرَانِهِ، أَوْ يُمَجِّسَانِهِ، كَمَا تُنْتَجُ الْبُهَيْمَةُ بِهَيْمَةِ جَمْعَاءَ، هَلْ تُحْسِنُونَ فِيهَا مِنْ جَذَعَاءَ؟

“No child is born except upon *fitrah*. His parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian” (Al-Bukhari, *Ṣaḥih al-Bukhari*, hadith 1358; Muslim, *Saḥih Muslim*, hadith 2658)

Underscoring that the natural disposition is universal and uncorrupted until external influences intervene. Classical scholars examined the epistemological implications of *fitrah*. **Ibn Taymiyya** (d. 1328) argued that *fitrah* provides immediate, non- inferential knowledge of God’s existence and perfection. In his *Dar’ ta’arud al- ‘aql*

wa al- naql,

“[God] made the fitra of his servants disposed to the apprehension and understanding of the realities [of things] and to know them. Moreover, if it were not for this readiness within the hearts/minds to know the truth, neither speculative reasoning would be possible, nor demonstration, discourse, or language” (Dar’ ta’arud al-’aql wa al-naql, vol. 5, p. 62). He wrote that knowledge of the Creator and prophecy does not depend on syllogisms; instead, it is obtained through signs in nature and non- inferential knowledge.

Al-Ghazali (1111/2000) also acknowledged the role of *fitrah* but combined it with rational reflection; he emphasized that humans are equipped with reason, sense perception, and intuitive faculties that, when properly directed, lead to certitude in God’s existence and attributes (al-Ghazali, 1111/2000). Sa’d al-Din al-Taftazani (1390/2002) highlighted *fitrah* in his *Sharh al-MaqaSid*, stating that children are born with sound natures that would choose knowledge over denial if left intact (al-Taftazani, 1390/2002). Shah Waliullah al-Dihlawi (1762/1980) similarly described an innate disposition guiding humans toward divine knowledge (al-Dihlawi, 1762/1980).

The significance of *fitrah* extends beyond theology. In epistemology, it intersects with debates about the foundations of belief, the conditions for knowledge, and the role of evidence. The concept anticipates modern discussions of fundamental beliefs and the possibility of rationally justified belief in God without reliance on argumentation. Alvin Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* mirrors *fitrah* by positing a cognitive faculty through which humans naturally form beliefs about God. Recent cognitive science research has explored “intuitive theism” in children and the persistence of purposive explanations across cultures (Kelemen, 2004; Jarnefelt et al., 2015). Findings that children as young as six to ten spontaneously attribute purpose to natural objects and imagine non- human intentional causes support the notion of a fitri orientation toward theism. Thus, the concept of *fitrah* bridges classical Islamic thought and contemporary cognitive science, offering a fertile domain for interdisciplinary inquiry.

Purpose and Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to articulate a coherent account of *fitrah* as a pre- discursive awareness of the Divine and to assess its role as a basis for theistic knowledge. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. **Clarify the concept of fitrah** by examining Qur’anic passages, prophetic traditions, and classical theological writings to determine how the term was understood and employed within Islamic thought.
2. **Analyze the epistemic function of fitrah** in grounding belief in God independent of formal arguments. The research asks whether *fitrah* yields knowledge or only inclinations and how it relates to rational faculties.
3. **Compare fitrah with contemporary epistemological ideas**, especially Alvin Plantinga’s theory of the *sensus divinitatis* and discussions of properly fundamental beliefs, to evaluate compatibility and points of divergence.
4. **Engage empirical studies** from developmental psychology and cognitive science that investigate intuitive theism, dualist intuitions, and innate predispositions toward supernatural beliefs. The goal is to determine whether these findings lend support to the *fitrah* model.
5. **Address objections** to non- inferential theistic belief, including challenges from evidentialism, cultural pluralism, and cognitive science interpretations that dismiss innate beliefs as evolutionary by- products.

6. **Construct a philosophical framework** that integrates *fitrah*, reason, and moral intuition, demonstrating how these elements work together to provide a holistic epistemology of theism.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: What do the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic scholars teach about *fitrah* and its relation to knowledge of God?

RQ2: Can belief in God be rationally justified as properly basic through *fitrah* without recourse to inferential arguments? How does this compare with Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*?

RQ3: What do contemporary cognitive science and developmental psychology say about humans' intuitive predisposition toward belief in God or purposeful creation, and how do these findings align with the concept of *fitrah*?

RQ4: How can *fitrah* be defended against objections that non-inferential belief is irrational, culturally contingent, or a by-product of cognitive biases?

Hypotheses

H1: Classical Islamic sources present *fitrah* as an innate capacity for knowing God that operates independently of discursive reasoning.

H2: Belief formed through *fitrah* can be properly fundamental, warranting rational acceptance in the absence of defeaters.

H3: Empirical evidence from developmental psychology supports the claim that humans are predisposed to theistic belief, consistent with the *fitri* model.

H4: *Fitrah*, when properly understood, does not negate the role of rational arguments but complements reason and moral intuition to yield a comprehensive epistemology of theism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scriptural Foundations of *Fitrah*

The Qur'an and Hadith provide the primary textual basis for the doctrine of *fitrah*. Surah al-Rum (30:30) commands:

"So set your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people; there is no changing the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know."

Classical exegetes interpret this verse as affirming that monotheism corresponds to humanity's natural constitution. God fashioned human beings with an inherent proclivity toward *tawhid* (divine unity), and deviations from this natural orientation result from external influences. Surah al-A'raf (7:172) recounts a primordial covenant in which the progeny of Adam testify to God's lordship, symbolizing the Creator's implanted awareness. The Hadith cited earlier further underscores the universality of *fitrah*, describing every child as born with this disposition, which is shaped only by cultural or familial factors. In another narration, the Prophet likened the heart to a polished mirror that reflects truth but becomes rusted by sins, implying that *fitrah* may be obscured but can be restored through repentance and remembrance of God.

Classical scholars drew theological and epistemological implications from these texts. Ibn Taymiyya interpreted the verses to mean that belief in God is natural and not dependent on syllogistic reasoning. In *Dar' ta'arud*, he argued that God endowed the human heart and mind with the capacity to recognize truth and falsehood and that if such readiness were absent, rational arguments would be ineffective. He wrote that the affirmation of the Creator and His perfection is innate (*fitri*) and necessary (*daruri*) for one

whose *fitrah* remains intact. Ibn Taymiyya's student **Ibn al- Qayyim** (d. 1350) developed similar themes, emphasizing that every created being is a sign and proof of the Creator and that the heart's natural response is to recognize these signs without elaborate argumentation. **Al- Ghazali** acknowledged the possibility of innate awareness but insisted that reason and revelation must guide the intellect to prevent misdirection; he saw *fitrah* as one of multiple faculties (alongside senses, reason, and inner inspiration) that collectively secure knowledge. **Taftazani** explicitly connected *fitrah* to cognition, stating that the human mind is disposed to apprehend realities and choose knowledge over denial. **Shah Waliullah** later described *fitrah* as the Divine imprint that guides humans toward recognizing God and moral truth.

Fitrah and Classical Epistemology

Islamic epistemology recognizes various sources of knowledge, including sense perception (*hiss*), reliable testimony (*khabar al- Sadiq*), reason (*'aql*), introspection (*shahud*), and intuitive insight (*firasa* or *badiha*). *Fitrah* belongs to the category of innate, self- evident knowledge (*'ilm daruri*), which is contrasted with acquired or inferred knowledge (*'ilm nazari*).

Ibn Taymiyya argued that humans possess two types of intellect: a basic intellect that recognizes fundamental truths immediately and a secondary intellect that engages in deduction. Knowledge of God, in his view, arises from the basic intellect as part of the *fitri* constitution. He criticized the reliance on Aristotelian syllogism to prove God's existence, warning that discursive arguments can lead to confusion if detached from *fitri* foundations. **Al- Ghazali**, however, advocated a holistic approach that combines innate disposition with rational reflection and mystical experience; he did not rely solely on *fitrah* but saw it as part of God's grace guiding the seeker to certainty.

The classical Islamic view that knowledge of God is both necessary and self-evident was challenged by later philosophers influenced by Greek thought. The peripatetic philosopher Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) argued that such knowledge is **not innate**, but must be deduced from the principle of contingency (*imkān*), which holds that every contingent being requires a necessary existent as its cause (Avicenna, 2005). This position spurred debates among Muslim theologians. Fakh al-Dīn al-Rāzī critiqued an overreliance on necessary existence arguments and reaffirmed the *kalām* tradition, which contends that the universe's origination (*ḥudūth*) implies the existence of a Creator (Rāzī, 1990). The distinction between **innate recognition** and **discursive proof** thus became a central intellectual fault line between the *kalām* tradition and the philosophers of *falsafa*.

Within *kalām* itself, schools diverged on the role of **fiṭrah**. The Mu'tazilites emphasized human rational capacity and free will, arguing that humans can recognize moral truths and obligations through reason alone (Hourani, 1971). The Ash'arites, in contrast, upheld occasionalism, holding that God is the sole creator of all events. They maintained that human perception of causal relations arises by divine habit, not necessity (Frank, 1992). For them, **fiṭrah** functioned as part of God's mercy—guiding humans toward recognizing truth—while **reason** and **revelation** were also necessary to resist external corruption and misguidance (Winter, 2008).

Fitrah and Modern Epistemology

In contemporary philosophy of religion, the question of whether belief in God can be rationally justified without evidence has been debated extensively. **William Alston** (1991) argued that experiences of God can confer justification akin to perceptual experiences. **Alvin Plantinga** (1983, 1993, 2000) developed the concept of the *sensus divinitatis*—a

cognitive faculty implanted by God that produces theistic beliefs under appropriate conditions. Plantinga argued that belief in God is properly fundamental and warrants belief if the faculty is functioning correctly in a suitable cognitive environment. His epistemology parallels *fitrah* in that both posit a God-given faculty that yields belief without inferential evidence. However, Plantinga's model emerges within a Christian context and emphasizes design plan and epistemic virtue; *fitrah* is grounded in Islamic scripture and relates to a primordial covenant with God.

Critics of correctly basic theism contend that beliefs lacking inferential support are unwarranted. **W.K. Clifford** famously argued that it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. **Richard Swinburne** acknowledged that some beliefs may be fundamental but insisted that theism requires probabilistic evidence. **Michael Martin** and **J.L. Mackie** argued that appeals to a *sensus divinitatis* are circular and unverifiable. Plantinga responded that many beliefs (e.g., memory beliefs, beliefs in other minds) are fundamental yet justified, and that the theistic faculty can be analogous if designed by God. Islamic epistemology likewise recognizes basic knowledge; *fitrah* is a non-inferential source akin to sense perception, though revelation and reason help verify and refine it. Modern discussions of religious experience, reformed epistemology, and virtue epistemology provide tools to assess *fitrah* as a credible epistemic source.

Cognitive Science and Intuitive Theism

Recent empirical research in psychology and cognitive science suggests that humans are naturally predisposed to theistic and dualistic beliefs. Cognitive developmental studies by **Deborah Kelemen** show that children as young as five attribute purpose and design to natural phenomena. In one study, six- to ten- year- old children answered questions about animal body parts and natural objects. Many children assigned purpose to natural entities (e.g., "mountains exist so animals can have a place to climb"), and their design reasoning correlated with attributing non-human intentional causes (Kelemen, 2004). Kelemen concludes that children's explanatory approach may be accurately described as **intuitive theism**—they naturally prefer intentional explanations for natural phenomena. Another study compared non-religious adults from Finland and North America. Despite the absence of a strong theistic cultural discourse in Finland, Finnish atheists were more likely than North American atheists to default to creationist explanations under cognitive load (Jarnefelt, Canfield & Kelemen, 2015). The researchers argue that ambient theistic culture is not the only factor; cognitive tendencies toward teleology persist even when explicit belief is lacking.

Other psychologists have explored children's and adults' intuitive dualism—the idea that the mind or soul can exist independently of the body. A research project led by **Justin Barrett** at Oxford University synthesized findings from over forty studies across twenty cultures. The team concluded that humans are "predisposed" to believe in gods and an afterlife; participants across cultures easily conceived of minds persisting after bodily death and attributed purpose to natural events (University of Oxford, 2011).

Olivera Petrovich found that preschool children from Japan and the United Kingdom spontaneously generated theological explanations (e.g., citing God as the origin of natural entities) without explicit instruction. She argued that belief in God is innate and untaught, whereas atheism is an acquired stance (Petrovich, 2008). Some have interpreted these empirical findings as evidence for the truth of theism, while others see them as by-products of cognitive mechanisms evolved for other functions.

Michael Shermer (2010) posits that humans are pattern-seekers; they infer agency

behind patterns, which leads to supernatural beliefs as “natural- born supernaturalists.” **Richard Dawkins** acknowledges that humans feel awe and attribute it to a creator, but argues that science offers emancipation from this impulse (Dawkins, 1992/2023).

Comparative Religious Perspectives and Contemporary Debates

While *fitrah* is an Islamic term, the idea that humans are innately disposed toward the divine is found in other traditions as well.

In Christian thought, the notion of *imago Dei* (image of God) implies a spiritual faculty enabling humans to know their Creator. The Apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans (1:20) asserts that God’s attributes are manifest in creation and that humans are without excuse for failing to recognize Him. Christian philosophers from Augustine to Calvin emphasized an internal witness of the Holy Spirit and a natural law inscribed on the heart. Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* continues this theme in a contemporary analytic framework. In Indian philosophy, Advaita Vedanta speaks of *tat tvam asi* (you are that) and the self’s unity with Brahman.

Buddhism, however, rejects a personal creator but appeals to an innate Buddha- nature (*tathagata garbha*) that must be awakened. Anthropological studies show that hunter- gatherer societies often hold animistic and theistic beliefs. Thus, *fitrah* resonates with cross- cultural notions of innate spirituality while retaining distinct features shaped by Islamic revelation.

In debates on religion and science, proponents of New Atheism (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris) argue that theistic beliefs are remnants of evolutionary cognitive biases and that science has superseded the need for supernatural explanations. They regard innate theism as a psychological adaptation for pattern recognition and social cohesion. Conversely, theists argue that if humans are naturally disposed to believe in God, such dispositional belief may reflect a truth about the human condition and the reality of the Divine. The Islamic concept of *fitrah* offers a framework for interpreting innate theism as a blessing and a sign rather than a mistake. The challenge is to articulate how *fitrah* yields warranted belief while engaging with scientific explanations that seek to naturalize religious cognition.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative, analytical methodology grounded in textual analysis and interdisciplinary synthesis. The principal steps are:

1. **Exegesis of Islamic scriptural sources:** The study examines Qur’anic verses and Hadith texts that mention *fitrah* and related concepts. Exegetical works (tafsir) by classical scholars provide context and interpretation. Key passages include Qur’an 30:30 and 7:172 and Hadith reports in Sahih al- Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.
2. **Analysis of classical theological texts:** Works of al- Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, al- Taftazani, Shah Waliullah, and other theologians are analyzed to extract their views on *fitrah*, innate knowledge, reason, and revelation. The research cross- references these perspectives with secondary literature from modern scholars and historians.
3. **Engagement with contemporary epistemology:** The paper draws on works by Plantinga, Alston, Swinburne, Clifford, Reformed epistemologists, and virtue epistemologists to situate *fitrah* within modern theories of knowledge and belief. Concepts such as properly fundamental beliefs, warrant, rationality, and evidentialism are employed.

4. **Review of empirical studies:** Developmental psychology and cognitive science literature on intuitive theism, teleology, dualism, and supernatural belief is surveyed. Studies by Kelemen, Jarnefelt et al., Petrovich, Barrett, and other researchers provide empirical data. The research summarises findings and evaluates their implications for the *fitri* model.
5. **Philosophical synthesis:** The study synthesizes data from scriptural, theological, philosophical, and scientific sources to develop an integrated framework. It explores how *fitrah*, reason, and moral intuition interact in forming belief and how objections can be addressed.

FINDINGS / RESULTS

Conceptual Reconstruction of *Fitrah*

The analysis of scriptural and classical sources yields a nuanced understanding of *fitrah*. Several key elements emerge:

1. **Universality and Originality:** *Fitrah* is a universal aspect of human nature instilled by God at creation. It precedes cultural conditioning and is the default state upon which children are born. Deviations from *fitrah* occur through external influences (parents, society, environment), implying that atheism or polytheism are not original dispositions but acquired positions.
2. **Capacity for Theistic Recognition:** *Fitrah* includes an intrinsic orientation toward recognizing God as the Creator and Sustainer. Classical theologians describe this orientation as *daruri* (necessary) and *fitri* (natural). It is not conceptual knowledge of detailed theological doctrines but a pre-discursive awareness of divine reality. *Fitrah* also includes moral intuition, leading humans to discern fundamental ethical truths.
3. **Epistemic Faculty:** Ibn Taymiyya and Taftazani portray *fitrah* as an epistemic faculty analogous to sense perception and introspection. It yields knowledge (not mere belief) and does so non-inferentially. Reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*naql*) confirm and refine this knowledge but do not generate it *ex nihilo*. The heart's readiness to receive truth is essential for rational argumentation to be effective.
4. **Vulnerability to Corruption:** While *fitrah* is innate, it can be obscured by sin, negligence, wrongful desires, and cultural indoctrination. The restoration of *fitrah* requires moral discipline, repentance, remembrance of God, and engagement with revelation. Without such cultivation, the innate disposition may be suppressed, leading to doubts or disbelief.
5. **Complementarity with Reason:** Classical scholars do not present *fitrah* as a replacement for reason or revelation. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that properly functioning cognitive faculties include reason, senses, memory, and *fitrah*. *Fitrah* sets the orientation, reason articulates and defends beliefs, and revelation guides and perfects both.

Comparison with *Sensus Divinitatis*

Alvin Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* closely resembles the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. Both posit a cognitive faculty given by God to all humans, which produces belief in the Divine under appropriate circumstances. Plantinga argues that the *sensus divinitatis* is part of the human design plan and that beliefs generated by it can be properly fundamental and warranted. He lists conditions for proper functioning: standard cognitive capacities, a suitable epistemic environment, and absence of defeaters. When these conditions are met, belief in God formed by the *sensus divinitatis* is rational even if the believer lacks

arguments. This mirrors the fitri claim that belief in God is natural and does not depend on syllogism.

However, differences exist. Plantinga develops his theory within a Reformed Christian framework, linking the *sensus divinitatis* to the work of the Holy Spirit and emphasizing the noetic effects of sin. Islamic *fitrah* arises from a primordial covenant and applies to all humans regardless of religious identity. Plantinga stresses that the faculty is suppressed due to sin, while Islamic scholars emphasize corruption and also highlight external cultural influences. Furthermore, Plantinga's interest is in epistemic warrant, whereas Islamic discourse often blends epistemology with theology, ethics, and spirituality. Nonetheless, the structural parallels support cross-religious dialogue on innate theism.

Empirical Evidence of Intuitive Theism

The survey of cognitive science supports several fitri claims. Kelemen's experiments show that children naturally prefer teleological explanations and attribute purposeful design to natural objects. When children were asked why different animals and natural features exist, they frequently responded that they serve functions (e.g., "rivers are for people to swim in"), suggesting an intuitive theism (Kelemen, 2004).

Jarnefelt and colleagues found that cognitive load increases reliance on teleological explanations among atheists, indicating that teleological reasoning is a default cognitive mode suppressed by reflective processes (Jarnefelt et al., 2015). Petrovich's research on preschool children in Japan and Britain suggests that belief in a creator emerges naturally and that atheism is learned later (Petrovich, 2008).

The Oxford research program led by Justin Barrett concluded that humans across cultures are predisposed to believe in gods and an afterlife (University of Oxford, 2011). Participants spontaneously represented mind and soul as continuing after death and attributed purpose to natural events. Shermer (2010) and Dawkins (1992/2023) interpret these tendencies as evolutionary by-products, but their acknowledgment of pervasive supernatural beliefs inadvertently corroborates the fitri perspective.

Objections and Counterarguments

Objection 1: Evidence requirement. Critics argue that belief in God without evidence is unjustified. The classical Islamic view that knowledge of God is both necessary and self-evident was challenged by later philosophers influenced by Greek thought. The peripatetic philosopher Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) argued that such knowledge is **not innate**, but must be deduced from the principle of contingency (*imkān*), which holds that every contingent being requires a necessary existent as its cause (Avicenna, 2005). This position spurred debates among Muslim theologians. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī critiqued an overreliance on necessary existence arguments and reaffirmed the *kalām* tradition, which contends that the universe's origination (*ḥudūth*) implies the existence of a Creator (Rāzī, 1990). The distinction between **innate recognition** and **discursive proof** thus became a central intellectual fault line between the *kalām* tradition and the philosophers of *falsafa*.

Within *kalām* itself, schools diverged on the role of **fiṭrah**. The Mu'tazilites emphasized human rational capacity and free will, arguing that humans can recognize moral truths and obligations through reason alone (Hourani, 1971). The Ash'arites, in contrast, upheld occasionalism, holding that God is the sole creator of all events. They maintained that human perception of causal relations arises by divine habit, not necessity (Frank, 1992). For them, *fiṭrah* functioned as part of God's mercy—guiding humans toward recognizing truth—while reason and revelation were also necessary to resist external corruption and misguidance (Winter, 2008).

Beyond its theological role, **fiṭrah** serves as an **epistemic faculty** that provides a foundation for religious certainty in Islam. It is closely tied to the Islamic concepts of **‘ilm al-yaqīn** (knowledge of certainty), **‘ayn al-yaqīn** (vision of certainty), and **ḥaqq al-yaqīn** (truth of certainty). Critics have argued that belief in God without evidence is unjustified. The fiṭri response maintains that **fiṭrah provides direct, non-inferential knowledge** of God, analogous to sense perception. Just as no one demands deductive proofs for the external world, belief based on fiṭrah is considered **prima facie justified** if fiṭrah is viewed as a reliable cognitive faculty created by God (Plantinga, 2000). In this view, evidence is broader than formal arguments; **fundamental beliefs can be rational in the absence of defeaters**. As long as there is no strong counter-evidence, trusting the deliverances of fiṭrah is reasonable. For those whose fiṭrah has been altered or clouded, Islam provides **logical, theological, and scriptural proofs** to help restore clarity and guide them back toward recognition of the divine.

Objection 2: Cultural relativity. Some suggest that innate theism is a product of cultural conditioning and disappears when theistic discourse is absent. Jarnefelt et al.’s cross-cultural data contradict this, showing that teleological intuitions persist among Finnish atheists despite low levels of theistic discourse (Jarnefelt et al., 2015). The persistence of supernatural beliefs across cultures, even in secular societies, supports the universality of the disposition. Islamic theology recognizes that culture can distort *fiṭrah*, but the underlying orientation remains.

Objection 3: Evolutionary by-product. Evolutionary psychologists argue that supernatural beliefs are spandrels—by-products of cognitive modules evolved for survival (e.g., agency detection). While this may explain the mechanism, it does not invalidate the truth of the beliefs. From a theistic perspective, God could use evolutionary processes to create beings with faculties oriented toward Himself. Thus, evolutionary explanations are not defeaters; they are complementary causal accounts. Furthermore, Shermer’s assertion that humans are natural-born supernaturalists underscores the robustness of the fiṭri tendency (Shermer, 2010).

Objection 4: Epistemic circularity. Critics note that appealing to God’s creation of *fiṭrah* to justify belief in God seems circular. However, the fiṭri position is internalist: the believer trusts in the cognitive faculty because it reliably produces belief. External justifications (e.g., revelation) support but are not necessary for initial justification. Plantinga similarly argues that the *sensus divinitatis* is warranted if designed by God; one cannot step outside all cognitive faculties to justify them without circularity.

Fish and Man Analogy

Within contemporary Islamic epistemology, the concept of **fiṭrah**—the innate human disposition to recognize the Divine—has been illustrated and explored through a variety of conceptual metaphors and arguments. One commonly discussed theme concerns the **foundations of belief**: individuals often accept religious belief through family tradition, cultural inheritance, or unexamined conviction. While these may instill faith, they do not, by themselves, establish epistemic strength. Islamic theologians and philosophers have therefore emphasized the **importance of reflective awareness** of why one believes, arguing that a belief grounded in understanding is more stable and resistant to doubt (Winter, 2008).

A related line of reasoning draws from the **Qur’anic epistemic framework**, in which human beings are invited to recognize God through reflection upon both the external world and their own inner awareness. The Qur’an states, “*We will show them Our*

signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth” (Qur’an 41:53), and commands believers to “*set your face toward the religion, inclining to truth—the fiṭrah of Allah upon which He has created all people*” (Qur’an 30:30). These verses are often cited as textual grounding for the claim that recognition of the Divine is not an external imposition but rather **an internal orientation inscribed within human nature**.

Fiṭrah is also linked to **moral intuition**: a felt sense of right and wrong that transcends social construction and provides immediate, pre-discursive knowledge of value and purpose. If humans are naturally disposed toward recognizing God, such a belief may be regarded as **rational and justified**. Philosophically, this is analogous to treating fiṭrah as a **basic cognitive faculty**, whose deliverances are **prima facie warranted** unless defeated by counter-evidence (Plantinga, 2000). Just as individuals are not required to construct formal proofs to justify their belief in the external world, belief in God may be warranted by this internal faculty, provided its reliability is assumed.

A commonly used analogy to explain this dynamic compares humans to **fish in a tank**. Just as fish are unable to conceptualize or experience the world outside the water they inhabit, human beings cannot directly perceive the transcendent realm. However, the persistent human capacity to **conceive of the Divine** suggests the operation of an inner faculty that points beyond the empirical domain. This analogy reinforces the broader fiṭrī argument: the **limitations of sensory perception do not preclude genuine knowledge** of metaphysical realities. Instead, fiṭrah functions as a **pre-rational, non-inferential awareness that**, when supported by reflection, reason, and revelation, contributes to a coherent and resilient theistic belief.

“Reverse Ontological Argument” or Argument from Intuition (Fiṭrah).

1. If **naturalism** is true, then all human cognitive experiences must be fully explainable within a naturalistic framework, limited to material and empirical reality.
2. If cognitive experiences are limited in this way, they should not produce meaningful concepts that go beyond the naturalistic domain.
3. However, human beings do form meaningful transcendent concepts—such as belief in God, the soul, and ultimate purpose—which cannot be reduced merely to material processes.
4. The natural emergence of such concepts indicates that human cognition is oriented beyond naturalism’s explanatory scope.
5. Therefore, naturalism is insufficient or false as a comprehensive explanation of human cognition, and the existence of transcendent concepts points to a transcendent source or innate faculty (fiṭrah).

This argument challenges **philosophical naturalism**, which holds that reality is exhausted by natural, physical facts and processes. If naturalism were correct, then human thought would be confined to the material realm, making it impossible for us to conceive of anything genuinely beyond it or experience **anything beyond it**.

However, humans across history and cultures naturally **form concepts of God, transcendence, the soul, and ultimate meaning**. These are not mere anomalies—they are central to human consciousness. The **presence of these transcendent concepts** suggests that our cognitive faculties are oriented toward more than just the physical world. This is where **fiṭrah**—the Islamic notion of an innate disposition to recognize the Divine—comes into play. Fiṭrah serves as a **natural cognitive bridge** between the empirical world and transcendent reality. The argument does not claim to *prove* the existence of God

deductively. However, it exposes a **deep explanatory tension within naturalism**: why do beings supposedly confined to the material world persistently and meaningfully reach beyond it?

The starting point is the **naturalist assumption**: if all reality is physical, then human cognition—being itself a product of physical processes—can only produce concepts grounded in the physical domain. Our perceptions, thoughts, and intuitions would reflect nothing more than the **closed system of natural causes**. In such a system, transcendent concepts like God should be as meaningless as trying to imagine a color one has never seen. Naturalism, in other words, predicts cognitive closure: everything we can meaningfully conceive must arise from within nature itself (Papineau, 2009; Kim, 1998).

However, what we actually find in **human experience** contradicts this prediction. Across cultures and historical contexts, people naturally develop **beliefs about a transcendent reality**—God, spiritual realms, the soul, and ultimate meaning (Barrett, 2004; Boyer, 2001). Even in societies that attempt to suppress religion, these intuitions persist, often re-emerging in alternative forms such as spirituality or moral realism. From an Islamic perspective, this tendency is not accidental: it is the manifestation of *fiṭrah*, a **built-in orientation toward the Divine** (Qur'an 30:30; 41:53).

If human cognition can generate **meaningful and coherent concepts of transcendence**, then this goes beyond what naturalism can adequately explain. One option is to claim these concepts are mere evolutionary accidents—but this does not account for their **pervasiveness**, their **coherence**, or the fact that they are often **experienced as knowledge-bearing** rather than as arbitrary mental events. Another option is to recognize that human beings possess a **cognitive faculty oriented beyond the material**—a faculty that can perceive or at least **intuit transcendent reality**. In Islamic thought, *fiṭrah* functions in precisely this way.

This reasoning parallels Alvin Plantinga's **Reformed epistemology**, which holds that belief in God can be "**properly basic**"—justified without inferential evidence—because it arises from a reliable cognitive faculty (Plantinga, 2000). Similarly, in the Qur'anic framework, *fiṭrah* is a natural and trustworthy faculty, unless distorted by external influences. Just as we trust our senses unless we have a defeater, we can trust *fiṭrah*'s deliverances in the absence of overriding evidence.

Thus, the persistent and meaningful presence of theological concepts in human cognition creates an **epistemic tension for naturalism**. If naturalism were true, such concepts would either not arise at all or be meaningless. However, they do arise—and they carry meaning, structure, and normative force. The most coherent explanation is that **human cognition is not fully enclosed within the physical**, and therefore, **naturalism is insufficient as a total worldview**. This does not establish theism deductively, but it **points to the plausibility of a transcendent source** of these cognitive capacities.

Integration of Classical and Empirical Insights

The findings indicate that the concept of *fiṭrah* coheres with empirical observations and epistemological theories. Classical sources describe *fiṭrah* as a natural awareness of God and moral truth that can be obscured but not destroyed. Cognitive science demonstrates that teleological and dualistic intuitions are pervasive and resilient across cultures. Modern epistemology acknowledges the legitimacy of properly fundamental beliefs formed by reliable cognitive faculties. These strands converge on the idea that humans possess an innate orientation toward the Divine, which is rational to trust unless defeaters arise. Moreover, the *fiṭrah* model situates belief within a holistic epistemic framework that

includes reason, revelation, and moral experience. It does not discount the value of arguments but locates them downstream of an initial awareness that motivates inquiry and supports conviction.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Scriptural and Cognitive Evidence

The intersection of scriptural teachings, classical theology, and empirical psychology yields a compelling picture. Qur'anic verses and Hadith emphasize that humans are created with an innate disposition to recognize God and discern moral truth. Classical scholars elaborate this disposition as an epistemic faculty that, while susceptible to corruption, provides immediate knowledge of the Divine. Empirical studies reveal that even in the absence of explicit religious instruction, children and adults default to teleological and dualistic explanations. These converging lines of evidence suggest that *fitrah* is more than a religious dogma; it reflects observable tendencies in human cognition. At the same time, the Fitri model benefits from philosophical refinement. By situating innate belief within a theory of properly fundamental beliefs and acknowledging the role of reason and moral awareness, the model avoids accusations of fideism.

Relationship Between Fitrah and Rational Arguments

One might ask why classical theologians like al- Ghazali and Fakhr al- Din al- Razi devoted attention to rational arguments if belief in God is innately known. The answer lies in the complementary roles of *fitrah* and reason. *Fitrah* provides the initial orientation and basic awareness. Reason articulates, defends, and deepens this awareness by offering arguments that satisfy intellectual curiosity and repel doubts. Islamic theology thus recognizes different audiences: some people's *fitrah* remains intact and suffices for faith, while others require rational discourse to remove misconceptions. Furthermore, rational arguments serve apologetic purposes by demonstrating the compatibility of theism with reason and by responding to critics who claim that religion is irrational. The presence of *fitrah* does not render arguments superfluous; instead, it ensures that arguments resonate with an underlying disposition and thereby become more persuasive.

Fitrah, Moral Knowledge, and Religious Practice

The concept of *fitrah* extends beyond theoretical knowledge of God; it encompasses moral knowledge and the capacity for religious practice. Qur'anic verses and Hadith emphasize that humans are endowed with a conscience that inclines them toward justice, compassion, and truthfulness. Shah Waliullah notes that *fitrah* guides humans to recognize rights and duties and to feel revulsion at injustice. Modern cognitive science echoes this through findings that even infants display preferences for fair and helpful behavior. In this regard, *fitrah* serves as the basis for moral responsibility: humans cannot plead ignorance of fundamental moral truths, as they are inscribed in the soul. At the same time, Fitri's moral knowledge must be nurtured through education, worship, and social interaction; without guidance, the moral sense may be suppressed.

Implications for Religious Pluralism and Atheism

If *fitrah* is universal, how do we explain religious diversity and atheism? Islamic theology answers that *fitrah* can be obscured by cultural, philosophical, and personal factors. Al- Ghazali likened knowledge to sunlight and hearts to polished mirrors; some mirrors are veiled by dust or turned away from the light. The presence of multiple religions reflects differing degrees of preservation or distortion of *fitrah* and revelation. Atheism, in this view, is not the natural state but a position acquired through socialization, skepticism, or personal choice. This does not mean that atheists are irrational; instead, it means that their

fitrah has been suppressed or misdirected. The role of reason, revelation, and community is to help restore and clarify the innate disposition. Interfaith dialogue can benefit from this perspective by recognizing a shared human orientation toward the Divine while acknowledging different responses to it.

Addressing Secular and Scientific Critiques

Secular critics might argue that acknowledging an innate tendency toward theism commits the genetic fallacy (confusing origin with justification). However, the *fitri* argument does not claim that belief is true because it is innate. Instead, it claims that God created humans with a capacity to know Him, and that this capacity is reliable. The epistemic justification rests on trusting a faculty designed by a truthful Creator. Evolutionary accounts of religious cognition can be accommodated within this theistic framework: God could have guided evolution to produce beings with faculties oriented toward Him. Scientific critiques also misrepresent the argument when they treat *fitri* belief as mere emotion or impulse; classical scholars emphasized cognitive and moral dimensions, not irrational feelings. Thus, *fitri* theism invites dialogue with science rather than conflict.

Practical Implications for Believers and Educators

Understanding *fitrah* has practical implications. Believers are encouraged to cultivate their innate disposition through remembrance of God, moral discipline, reflection on the signs of creation, and education. Recognizing that faith is grounded in the soul can inspire humility and gratitude, while acknowledging that reason supplements faith can motivate intellectual engagement. Educators should respect children's innate curiosity and spiritual inclination, fostering environments that nurture *fitrah* rather than suppress it. They should also be aware that moral formation and exposure to revelation help preserve and refine the natural disposition. For those struggling with doubt, the *fitri* model offers reassurance that faith need not rely solely on arguments; it invites introspection and re- engagement with the heart's innate awareness.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored *fitrah* as an innate, pre- discursive awareness of the Divine and assessed its implications for theistic belief. The study demonstrated that the concept of *fitrah*, firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, was developed by classical Islamic scholars to explain humans' natural orientation toward God. It functions as an epistemic faculty providing immediate knowledge of the Creator and moral truths, complementing reason and revelation. When compared with Alvin Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*, *fitrah* exhibits striking parallels, reinforcing the idea that belief in God can be properly fundamental. Empirical research in psychology and cognitive science corroborates the *fitri* claim by showing that humans naturally favor teleological and dualistic explanations. These findings undercut the objection that theism is purely a cultural construct or requires elaborate proofs.

The paper argues that *fitrah* yields rational and warranted belief when functioning correctly and in the absence of defeaters. While reasoned arguments have their place in apologetics and intellectual exploration, the initial awareness of God arises from the *fitri* faculty. The persistence of theistic and moral intuitions across cultures supports this conclusion. Objections from evidentialism, cultural diversity, and evolutionary psychology do not decisively undermine *fitri* belief; instead, they invite further exploration of how innate disposition, reason, and culture interact in shaping religious cognition. The study concludes that believers can trust their innate awareness while engaging critically with arguments and evidence. This integrated epistemology honors the Islamic heritage and

offers a robust framework for rational theism in the contemporary world.

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