In his presentation, Father Ryan elaborates on a very important theme, especially from a religious perspective, and that is imitation. Culturally, the idea of imitation seems weak and negative since it connotes the idea of repetition without enhancing value. However, as Father Ryan mentions, if the imitated is a person who is speaking on behalf of God, i.e., a prophet or messenger of God, that concept of imitation immediately rises to the pinnacle of religiosity and becomes a reality of great religious and spiritual value. This is why Muslims would ask God, in their daily prayers, to be on the right path; that is the path of the prophets and all other righteous people. As Father Ryan mentioned, “The paths trodden by the holy ones in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions of faith have led in various directions over the long and complicated histories of those religious families.” This is a key value for Muslims.

The reason why these pious personalities, such as prophets, are imitated, is that, as in the case of the Prophet of Islam, they are told by God to do some actions and then they are taught by angels how to do those wholesome actions. This is so clear in Islamic teachings. The Prophet of Islam, when he performed his prayer, said to his community that the angel Gabriel came to him and taught him that format of prayer. Thus, the Prophet said, “So pray as you see I am praying.” Here, the Prophet is specifically asking his community to imitate him. Similarly, the Qur’an presents the Prophet of Islam as a model saying: “Surely there is a beautiful example in the Messenger of God for you and for those who are hopeful about God and the Afterlife and
remember God frequently” (33:21). Father Ryan also speaks of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob. This lineage that he rightly mentioned is a lineage to be imitated in Islam. In fact, the Qur’an clearly speaks of the religious value in imitating this lineage. In this case, the Qur’an also speaks of Abraham as someone who stood up to his own people who were worshipping idols. The Qur’an says: “Surely for you there is a beautiful example in Abraham and in those who are with him” (60:4),

When Muslims are praying their daily prayers, prostrating, and bowing down, reciting verses from the Qur’an, observing their prayer at certain times, and saying some prayers on different occasions, this all derives from the idea of imitating the Prophet of Islam. By saying some prayers from the Qur’an that are the prayers of the earlier prophets, they are also imitating these earlier prophets. In my book, *Islamic Spirituality: Theology and Practice for the Modern World*, I included a section on the prayers of the prophets in the Qur’an. In all, there are more than sixty prophetic prayers mentioned in the Qur’an; each one is given as an example for believers to follow in a certain situation.

Father Ryan rightly says that Sunni Muslims follow the practice of the Prophet. It is accurate to the extent that even the word Sunni is derived from the Arabic word *sunnah*, which means path and is used to describe the path of the Prophet. There is a famous saying of the Prophet which says: “Anyone who starts a beautiful path, and people follow that path after him or her, the rewards will be written for that person as much as the person who follows and there is no decrease in the reward of them. And anyone who starts a bad path and people follow that path, punishment will be written for the ones who follow and the one who started.” (Muslim, *al-Sahih*, no. 1017) As an example there is another *hadith* in which the Prophet says: “No one is wrongly killed, but that the same amount of punishment will go to the son of Adam.” That is to
say, punishment for all unjust killings will be given both to the person who commits the killing and to Cain, since he was the one who began the pattern of unjust killing. Therefore, understood from this saying of the Prophet, models are not always good. Good models are the righteous people and bad models are those who oppose them. In the Qur’anic language, Moses is a good model and Pharaoh is a bad model. However, I think, due to the limited time, Father Ryan rightly focused on good models rather than on bad. Religiously speaking, though, we should also pay attention to the negative cases and try to avoid them.

Father Ryan does speak briefly on something called bid‘a, which can be translated as an innovation that is deemed to be a deviation from the path of the Prophet and he cites bad behavior as an example of this. Mainstream Sunni Muslims divide bid‘a actions into two. One are good innovations and the other are bad innovations. The quintessence of a good innovation is when the innovation serves a good end, but that action was not practiced by the Prophet. An example of this would be eating food with a spoon. In the time of the Prophet there were no spoons, but just because there were no spoons at that time does not mean one should refrain from using spoons when they help people to follow other aspects of the Prophet’s sunna. Therefore spoons are bid‘a hasana or a good innovation. Another example would be the minaret. There were no minarets during the time of the Prophet, but as they help people to know when it is time for the prayer, they are considered bid‘a hasana.

Father Ryan also briefly refers to the companions of the Prophet, al-ashab. In fact when the Prophet describes them he says “they are like stars. Whichever of them you follow, you will be guided to the right path.” The later generation of Muslims would consider the path of the Prophet as a model to follow. Tradition— which Father Ryan refers to as hadith and its narrators, muhaddithun—is completely dedicated to making efforts to find out the exact sayings of the
Prophet as well as the right information on his exact actions or confirmations. This brings us to the schools of Islamic law.

The schools of Islamic law, as Father Ryan listed them for us, are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i, and Hanbali. Among these, the Hanbali school is most concerned with the sayings of the Prophet and is more literal in its interpretation of them, but all four schools seek the original hadith. As it is said: “When the hadith is sound, that is my madhhab.” That is to say, if the hadith is accurate and the narrative elements are verified, the hadith is sound; when the hadith is sound, it is the path of the Prophet. Each of these legal scholars would say this is my path and the way to imitate the Prophet.

I liked Father Ryan’s use of sabil, a Qur’anic word which can be translated as path. The Qur’an frequently uses this word with the name of God as the path of God, sabil Allah. Additionally, this word is used by many of the prophets of God when they say: “This is my path.” For example, “Say [O Muhammad]: ‘This is my path. I am inviting people to God with clear proof. I and those who are following me [all are inviting to God]. God is Exalted. I am not among the idolaters’” (12:108).

Like sabil, shari‘a is also a path. Father Ryan quotes: “Then We have made you on a path from My command. Follow that path and do not follow the desires of those who do not know” (45:18). Father Ryan says that shari‘a is only mentioned once in the Qur’an, but it is also mentioned in the verbal form indicating the path of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. It is very interesting that these four prophets, along with the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) are known as the five greatest prophets of God and are given the term in Islam of Ulu‘l-‘azm or the Possessors of Steadfastness.
In his conclusion, Father Ryan discussed Enoch or Idris who according to most Muslim theologians is, like Jesus, still alive in Heaven. Interestingly, the commentator Abdullah ibn Abbas narrates the story of Idris’s ascension to heaven from the early Jewish convert to Islam, Ka‘b al-Ahbar. It is worth noting that in this connection between the earlier traditions and the tradition of Islam, early Muslims did not hesitate to ask a person with intimate knowledge of the earlier scriptures about an event that is mentioned in the Qur’an. The verse that Father Ryan quotes refers to this story and God asks the Prophet to remember this story “Make mention of the story of Idris in the Book. Surely he was righteous and a prophet.” According to at least one Muslim commentator, Idris was the grandfather of the father of Noah.

In conclusion, imitation has been an important element of religious traditions and particularly of Islam. The Prophet of Islam is known among Muslim mystics as al-insan al-kamil, the perfected human being. Therefore, to imitate him is to elevate human beings in the way of perfection. Further following the Prophet is the major reference for the love of God. He is a model and because he was taught by God; ideally every Muslim would like to be as close as possible to this model. The Qur’an says: “Say [O Muhammad]: ‘If you love God follow me, so that God will love you’” (3:31).