

Special Issue Reprint

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# The Future of Islamic Liberation Theology

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Edited by  
Shadaab Rahemtulla

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# **The Future of Islamic Liberation Theology**



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Editor

**Shadaab Rahemtulla**



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“Girl and a Soldier”, by the street artist Banksy, is painted on The Wall in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank

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# About the Editor

## Shadaab Rahemtulla

Shadaab Rahemtulla is Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. A Canadian Muslim of Indian heritage, Shadaab studied Islamic history and Arabic at Simon Fraser University (Vancouver) and the University of Toronto, and he was awarded his doctorate in contemporary Islamic thought by the University of Oxford. His primary interests lie in the relationship between religion, power, and resistance, exploring how religious texts can be (re)interpreted to challenge systems of social domination, including poverty, patriarchy, racism, and empire. His recent book, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2018), is a global comparative analysis of the ways in which contemporary Muslim theologians have expounded the Qur'an as a liberating scripture, speaking to their own lived realities of marginalisation. Alongside Islamic liberation theology, Shadaab has published on Muslim-Christian relations, religious pluralism, and the Friday Prayer (*salat al-jum'a*). Before joining the University of Edinburgh, he was an Assistant Professor at the University of Jordan's School of International Studies, Amman, where he taught for six years. In addition to his academic role at the University of Edinburgh, Shadaab serves as the Director of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) at the School of Divinity. In 2022, he received the Advancing Inclusion Award in recognition of his EDI work at the University of Edinburgh.





# The Future of Islamic Liberation Theology

Shadaab Rahemtulla

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This Special Issue is devoted to Islamic Liberation Theology (hitherto ILT).<sup>1</sup> As a working definition, I view ILT as a broad and diverse cluster of theologies that seek to reinterpret Islamic texts—including, but not limited to, the Qur’an, the hadith (the reported sayings of Prophet Muhammad), and the legal tradition—in the light of oppression and resistance to it. ILT is built on a deep-seated belief in the infinite justice of God (Allah), who is described in the Qur’an as a compassionate and loving deity in solidarity with the downtrodden (Q. 4:75; 28:5-6). Indeed, social justice is a major theme running through Muslim scripture (45:22; 49:9; 90:12-18; 107:1-7). Wrestling theological understanding away from the privileged centre of society, ILT shifts the interlocutor, the conversation partner of theology, to the neglected margins. This shift of the interlocutor lies at the very heart of liberation theology, irrespective of which faith tradition it is operating within. The Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez has argued that the atheist or “the non-believer” has become the primary conversation partner of Christian theology in the post-Enlightenment era (Gutiérrez 2007, p. 28). But, he asks which theologians are we talking about and where are they located? Stripping this conversation of its neutrality and qualifying it as a distinctively European conversation situated in the privileged North, Gutiérrez reframes the parameters of theological discussion within a truly global context:

...in a continent like Latin America and the Caribbean, the challenge comes not in the first instance from the non-believer, but from “the non-persons”, those who are not recognized as people by the existing social order: the poor, the exploited, those systematically and legally deprived of their status as human beings... (Gutiérrez 2007, p. 28)

This is what distinguishes discourses and practices of liberation from those of charity. In liberation theology, the oppressed (“the non-persons”) are not passive objects that are acted upon, such as through benevolent acts of assistance and philanthropy—basically, being given scraps from the table—but the oppressed are the resistive agents, the *subjects* of history, taking an equal seat at the table. And, taking an equal seat, as subjects, also means partaking fully in the process of knowledge production and meaning making. Thus, to shift the interlocutor of theology is to allow the marginalised to speak for themselves, drawing on their own lived experiences to produce theologies *for* the oppressed *by* the oppressed. This stands in sharp contrast to a well-intentioned “liberal” theology of the centre that attempts to speak on behalf of absentee others. This is not to imply that ally-ship and solidarity are not important. They are, and questions of complicity, as we will see in this Special Issue, are critical to grapple with. Let us not forget that positionalities are complex, at times even contradictory. Thinking intersectionally across categories of gender, sexuality, race, class, language, and citizenship, amongst others, we all occupy multiple subject positions simultaneously across the messy web of power relations. So, rather than setting up sweeping, static binaries of oppressed “versus” oppressor, especially when the latter is framed in terms of individuals rather than engrained social structures and institutions, liberation theology calls on progressive theologians who may not come from marginalised backgrounds to be part of the wider liberation struggle, entering a humble, constructive, but also critical conversation *with* the oppressed—including theologians from marginalised backgrounds—and learning from neglected perspectives, experiences, and histories.

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Let us return to the working definition of ILT that I provided. Notice how fluid and holistic the framing is: “a broad and diverse cluster of theologies that seek to reinterpret Islamic texts in the light of oppression and resistance to it”. I am not of the opinion that an individual or social movement needs to explicitly deploy the language, the formal grammar of liberation theology to be *doing* liberation theology, let alone having to cite a specific author or “canon” of liberationist texts. Doing so would turn very quickly into an exclusive and provincial discussion about ILT. Casting ILT instead as a cluster of theologies allows us to think (and to mobilise) more inclusively, more globally, and, therefore, more transformatively. What is important, for me, is an attempt to think from/with the margins; to be engaged in a progressive praxis of speaking truth to power; and to converse with Islamic texts and traditions in the thick of that praxis. This is not to say that Muslim scholars have not used the term liberation theology. They certainly have, and I, like most contributors to this Special Issue, proudly do. But, failing to have a fluid, holistic understanding of ILT can lead to exclusion and even erasure, with various thinkers and movements (anti-colonial? feminist? queer?) being ignored or categorised apart as dealing with fundamentally “different” issues and concerns, on the basis that they do not formally self-identify as liberation theologians or do not do *proper* liberation theology. Furthermore, thinking in terms of multi-faith perspectives and the constant slippage that seems to take place between liberation theology and Christianity—viewing liberation theology *as* Christian—by taking the name too seriously, we can also fall into a problematic narrative trap of portraying Islamic (or Hindu or Jewish or Buddhist) liberation theologies as derivative phenomena, as “exports” of Christian liberation theology, rather than having longer histories organically embedded within their own contextual milieus and sites of contestation.

Viewed through this more elastic frame, liberation theology is not a “newcomer” to Islam but actually has a long and illustrious legacy, especially over the past two centuries. During this turbulent period, Muslim-majority societies were occupied by competing European powers, including the British (South Asia and the Middle East), the French (North Africa and the Middle East), the Italians (North Africa), and the Dutch (Southeast Asia). Muslims never passively accepted foreign control of their lands and natural resources, of course, and have continuously mobilised anti-colonial resistance. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) is just one example of many. An Islamic scholar (*‘alim*; pl: *‘ulama*) originally from Iran,<sup>2</sup> Afghani famously travelled to different parts of the Middle East and South Asia preaching “pan-Islamic unity,” from India, where he supported Muslim opposition to the British Raj, to British-controlled Egypt, building an intellectual following amongst reformist *‘ulama* in Cairo (Keddie 1994, p. 11). The problem of the colonial West, then, has been a driving, global factor in shaping contemporary Islam. To put it another way: anti-colonial language and political praxis have not been at the edges, but at the very centre of modern Islamic thought, and recent articulations of ILT must be situated (read) within this longer genealogy of resistance while, at the same time, transitioning to different areas of social inequality. This is where, I think, the historical trajectory of ILT departs from Gutiérrez’s understanding of the liberationist turn in contemporary Christianity, with the interlocutor of theology shifting from the post-Enlightenment sceptic—the “non-believer”—to “the non-person”. According to Gutiérrez, this hermeneutical shift away from the European middle-class sceptic to the non-European poor is central to Latin American liberation theology and to Christian liberation theology in general. But, in terms of Islam and Muslim experience, the modern sceptic or atheist has never been the central, or, for that matter, even an influential interlocutor. Rather, I would argue, over the past two centuries, Western Empire has been the principal, contextual concern of Islamic theological discourse, alongside (and to a lesser extent) its main system of economic domination: capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, what we are witnessing in more current articulations of ILT are pivots and expansions towards other areas of human experience and suffering whilst also, as we will see in this Special Issue, revisiting the complex legacy of Western empire in fresh, decolonial ways.

Over the past several decades, a rich and sophisticated body of ILT literature has emerged that has hermeneutically grappled with a variety of categories, most notably

gender and pluralism.<sup>4</sup> Gender egalitarian readings of the Qur'an have made a significant and lasting intervention in the field. A number of pioneering women, such as the Pakistani scholars Riff'at Hassan and Asma Barlas and the African American scholar Amina Wadud (Hassan 1990; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002), have re-read the Qur'an with an eye to gendered issues, from the representation of woman in the Creation Story and the so-called Fall to questions of marriage, sex, divorce, domestic violence, inheritance, leadership, and religious authority. Critiquing the androcentrism of the Qur'anic commentarial tradition (*tafsir*), gender egalitarian readers have called for the entry of women into the exegetical circle, bringing their own lived experiences, problems, and perspectives to the Qur'anic text. Commenting on Wadud's hermeneutics, the Sudanese Islamic scholar Hibba Abugideiri writes:

It is not enough for modern Qur'anic commentators to simply 'add women and stir,' or integrate the subject of woman into the interpretive process while ignoring her agency. Wadud shows that a hermeneutical approach to interpreting woman in the Qur'an must include women as active agents. (Abugideiri 2001, p. 92).

Notwithstanding their manifestly different contexts, the parallels between Abugideiri's words on Islam and gender on the one hand and Guitérrez's words on Christianity and class on the other are striking. What unites them is a pointed departure in theology's interlocutor, from the privileged centre—(straight) men in the case of the former, the economically affluent in terms of the latter—to the ignored margins of society. Careful reflection on hermeneutical method, on how Islamic knowledge is produced and authorised, has been a core component of gender egalitarian exegesis; women's entry into the exegetical circle must also entail critical approaches to how scripture is "read". Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999) and Barlas' *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002) deployed innovative reading strategies to produce more inclusive understandings of Muslim scripture, most notably, historical criticism, contextualising the Qur'an in its seventh-century Arabian milieu, and holistic intra-textual analysis, exploring the distinctive semantics and overarching themes of the Qur'anic text (Rahemtulla 2018). While gender egalitarian reading strategies have been largely "academic" in character—historical criticism and intra-textual analysis, after all, require some level of scholarly training—it is important to note the praxis-based research of the South African scholar Sa'diyya Shaikh. In "A *Tafsir* of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Community" (Shaikh 2007), Shaikh undertook in-depth interviews with battered women in Cape Town to show how they theologically grappled with and resisted patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, in the light of their own lived experiences of abuse and without any background in Islamic studies.<sup>5</sup> Over the past two decades, gender egalitarian readers have shifted from Muslim scripture as the primary textual source to other Islamic texts and traditions, such as the *hadith* (Shaikh 2004; Abdul Kodir 2022), the Islamic legal tradition (Ali 2006; Mir-Hosseini et al. 2022),<sup>6</sup> and have also reread the Qur'an, hadith, and legal tradition in the light of homosexuality and queer experience (Kugle 2010). This willingness to revisit and constructively engage extra-Qur'anic texts and traditions is a recurring theme, as we will see, in this Special Issue.

Religious pluralism, more specifically the question of alterity (the Other), has been another driving theme, particularly in literature that explicitly identifies as "ILT", namely, the works of the late Asghar Ali Engineer (d. 2013) in India, Farid Esack in South Africa, and Hamid Dabashi in the US (Engineer 1990; Esack 1997; Dabashi 2008). As these three geographies suggest, alterity is a recurring theme perhaps because these scholars themselves are based in Muslim-minority contexts. For example, Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (1997) emerged in the midst of the South African anti-apartheid movement, which was characterised by interreligious solidarity (Esack 1997, p. 8). Esack was a leading Muslim voice in the movement, and this is the praxis, the political commitment that shaped his exegesis of the Qur'an. Indeed, integrating praxis as a method—as the first, self-conscious step in a liberating hermeneutic (Esack 1997, p. 257)—is a key contribution that he makes to Islamic

thought.<sup>7</sup> This book not only articulated a Qur'anic theology of liberation, but sought to carve out a pluralistic space within that theology, which acknowledges the intrinsic humanity of the non-Muslim Other. Alterity is also a prevailing concern in Dabashi's challenging text, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (2008). Dabashi argues that while there is a rich legacy of Islamic revolutionary movements against the colonial West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these have since transformed (in his opinion) into a dogmatic, insular, and absolutist Islamist ideology (Dabashi 2008). Moving beyond a restrictive, Islamist binary that sees the world in terms of "Islam" and "the West", Dabashi calls for a global and cosmopolitan Islamic liberation *theodicy* that is in solidarity with an ideological spectrum of anti-colonial movements, including secular worldviews—in effect, embracing its Others. Hence, Dabashi does not use theodicy in the conventional sense of the term. A liberation theodicy is not about "accounting for the existence of any "evil" in the world, but [acknowledging] the presence of diversity, alterity, shades and shadows of truth" (Dabashi 2008, p. 22)<sup>8</sup> within a shared political praxis of resisting empire.

And this brings us to this volume. The purpose of this Special Issue is to chart out new directions in ILT. What is the current state of the field? Hitherto, what are the principal contexts, problems, and thematic areas that ILT has focused on and why? How has the establishment of religion and its hierarchies of power and authority been deconstructed, and, in turn, how have liberationist re-readings of religious texts been produced? That is, how has ILT challenged dominant hermeneutical approaches and offered more inclusive reading methods? To what extent are these alternative methods themselves problematic, carrying contestable assumptions? Which areas of human experience have received less attention, or have even been ignored altogether? Looking toward the future, how can ILT begin to grapple with such thematic areas, unexplored intersectional realities, and changing global contexts and, speaking concretely, what exactly would critical theological scholarship in these new research areas look like? With regard to method, how can fresh interdisciplinary interpretive strategies be cultivated that can offer readings that are liberationist and transformative but also critically reflexive and unapologetic? Finally, in a field that has been deeply shaped by textual hermeneutics (however contextually sensitive), what is the place of social research methods, and of the social sciences in general, within ILT? A disclaimer is in order here: this is not meant to be an exhaustive listing of questions, and by no means do the rich array of articles in this Special Issue address all the questions listed above. If anything, by exploring new dimensions and approaches to ILT, they raise more questions for future research and analysis than provide definitive "final" answers.

Nor does this volume claim to be comprehensive or even representative: the contributions do not cover all themes, areas, and problems. An open Call for Papers (CFP) was advertised and circulated, and I, as the guest editor, received proposals on certain topics and not others. As is often the case with any edited project, some contributors (working on timely themes such as ecological justice and neurodiversity) had to pull out at the last minute due to other work and life commitments—such is the nature of our profession and indeed of *work* in general, as we all try to negotiate multiple demands on our labour and time. Over the course of the writing process, I was in a dialogical conversation with each contributor, offering a supportive but critical soundboard as their separate papers developed. The frequency of our Zoom meetings depended on the personal preferences of each contributor: some asked for regular editorial feedback, whereas others were happy to meet once or twice. The contributors to this Special Issue are based in, and/or come from, different parts of the world, including Egypt, Iran, South Africa, India, Canada, and the UK, and comprise scholars at diverse stages in their careers, including senior scholars, mid-career scholars, early career fellows, and PhD candidates. As the guest editor, I feel privileged to introduce their articles below, which, alongside our conversations, I have learnt from immensely. These articles creatively chart out future vistas for ILT, engaging a number of themes, from theological paradigms, social class, and incarceration to gender, queer sexualities, and decolonisation.

The first two articles are devoted to theological paradigms. In “The Tawhid Paradigm and an Inclusive Concept of Liberative Struggle,” Siavash Saffari explores how Muslim thinkers have recast *tawhid*—the central Islamic doctrine of the absolute unity of God—as a “distinctly Islamic framework for liberative praxis”. Focusing on the pioneering Iranian thinker Ali Shari’ati (d. 1977), Saffari examines the interplay between the universal and the particular in Shari’ati’s tawhidic writings. Saffari then draws hermeneutical linkages with contemporary exegetes of *tawhid*, namely, the African American scholar Amina Wadud and the Iranian American scholar Hamid Dabashi, the former focusing on gender equality and the latter on alterity and the non-Muslim Other. Central to Saffari’s argument is that the *tawhid* paradigm has always been in conversation with “non-Islamic liberative paradigms,” such as revolutionary Marxism and the Non-Aligned Movement of Shari’ati’s era, and this has not worked to undermine Islamic monotheism but, on the contrary, has made it more intersectional, inclusive, and socially robust. This suggests that the future of the *tawhid* paradigm lies in further syncretic dialogue and reflexive engagement with non-Islamic progressive discourses and traditions. The next article engages *qist*, which roughly translates as fairness and equity. In “The Egalitarian Principle of Qist as Lived Ethic: Towards a Liberational Tafsir”, Omaila Abou-Bakr undertakes a discourse analysis of this concept in the Qur’an. This itself is a contribution to ILT, as the focus is usually on *’adl* or *’adala* (literally “justice”). Highlighting *qist*’s core meaning in its verb form—to distribute (*qassata*)—she argues that this concept, in particular its grounded accent on the equal and rightful distribution of resources, “directs attention to the practical ways of applying the overarching, comprehensive value of *shari’ah*, *al-’adl* (justice)”. Alongside the Qur’an, she engages classical and contemporary commentary (*tafsir*). In ILT, particularly in early gender egalitarian scholarship on the Qur’an, the *tafsir* tradition has often been approached with suspicion, even dismissed altogether. That Abou-Bakr constructively dialogues with *tafsir* texts reflects a methodological tendency within later ILT literature to engage the Islamic tradition as a whole (Shaikh 2004; Ali 2006; Abdul Kodir 2022; Mir-Hosseini et al. 2022). This methodological tendency will, no doubt, continue into the future.

We then pivot to the role of praxis. In his article—“Towards a Theology of Class Struggle: A Critical Analysis of British Muslims’ Praxis against Class Inequality”—Sharaiz Chaudhry laments the lack of attention that class and economic exploitation have received in (contemporary) ILT and in the study of religion in general. As a case study, Chaudhry documents the anti-gentrification activism of Nijjor Manush—a Bengali organisation based in the London borough of Tower Hamlets—and how they deploy Islamic discourses as “a liberative tool to combat class oppression”. Departing from strictly textual and hermeneutical analysis, his methodology is based on qualitative social research, entailing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The future of ILT, therefore, should (re)centre questions of class but also, methodologically speaking, prioritise social research approaches in order to document praxis, i.e., concrete struggles on the ground waged by ordinary people. Shifting to the context of prisons and political incarceration, Walaa Quisay’s article—“Locating the ‘Praxis’ in Islamic Liberation Theology: God, Scripture, and the Problem of Suffering in Egyptian Prisons”—also employs qualitative social research methods. She undertakes in-depth interviews with former political prisoners who were jailed and tortured after the military coup of General ‘Abd al-Fattah Sisi in 2013. Quisay explores their religious lives in the prison context, their “devotional contemplation” (*tadabbur*) of the Qur’an, and how they grappled with unsettling questions of theodicy and human suffering. Quisay not only contributes to existing scholarship on Muslims in prisons and Islamic carceral theology but, like Chaudhry, offers a provocative challenge to more text-based, hermeneutically driven approaches to ILT and to liberation theology as a whole. For instead of exegetically “reading liberation into the Qur’an”, she argues that the Egyptian prisoners’ *tadabbur* was an ongoing, conflicted struggle that “allowed for emancipatory *embodiments* of scripture”.<sup>9</sup> Haroon Bashir also engages prison contexts but through a juristic discussion of slavery. In “Islam and the Emancipatory Ethic: Islamic Law, Liberation Theology, and Prison Abolition”, he catalogues the ways in which classical Muslim jurists, while not calling into



question the system of slavery itself, nonetheless tried to privilege *'itq* (emancipation) in various rulings between master and slave. Building on this “emancipatory spirit”, Bashir shows how the Egyptian reformist Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905)—who, I should add, was Afghani’s student in Cairo—made an Islamic case for abolitionism. But, does the discussion end there? Given that ‘Abduh’s anti-slavery position is now the norm amongst Muslims (it certainly was not during his own time), is slavery a resolved issue? Bashir argues that the theological problem of slavery is as relevant and pressing today due to the widespread presence of “slavery-adjacent conditions”, in particular the (highly racialised) prison–industrial complex. He concludes that supporting contemporary calls for prison abolition is not only an ethical imperative, but it is actually “more representative of the classical emancipatory ethos” that runs through the legal tradition than a rupture with that tradition.

The next two articles engage gender and sexuality. In “Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorising Islamic Feminism”, Sa’diyya Shaikh (re)casts Islamic feminism’s relationship to the Islamic tradition as a form of friendship (*walaya*) characterised by “radical, critical fidelity”. This entails “commitments and loyalties to tradition while simultaneously engaging critically with sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia”. While Abou-Bakr and Bashir explore the commentarial and legal tradition, respectively, Shaikh’s main interest is the mystical tradition (*tasawwuf*), which she has written on extensively. Central to her argument is the need for a more nuanced engagement with hierarchies as a “serious analytical category,” focusing on the shaykh–murid (guide–seeker) relationship. Instead of dismissing hierarchies categorically, she asks how more responsible, transparent, and accountable hierarchal practices can be cultivated through critical fidelity to the tradition. Her perceptive reading of hierarchies is significant not only for ethical approaches to Islamic mysticism but for progressive politics in general, which has often dismissed hierarchy as simply being a “problem” (as if all hierarchies are one and the same, and never volitional or reciprocal) rather than fluid social practices that can be remoulded in the interests of justice and accountability. The next essay by Mujahid Osman—entitled “Queering Jihad in South Africa: Islam, Queerness, and Liberative Praxis”—explores Muslim queer community in the context of Cape Town. Like Chaudhry and Quisay, Osman shifts from strictly textual hermeneutical analysis to qualitative social research methods, namely, an “auto-ethnographic” approach based on participant observation. Queer Muslims in Cape Town, he argues, “dis-identify” with multiple discourses of exclusion and estrangement, namely, heteronormativity embedded in the Islamic tradition; heteronormativity embedded in liberative traditions; and also homonormativity, i.e., “the regulatory nature of hegemonic forms of queerness which emerged in the Global North”, shaped by Western secularity and neoliberal market capitalism. Queer Muslim embodiments of *jihad* (“struggle and praxis”) thus seek to navigate these various discourses to arrive at an alternative space based on their own diverse sexualities and fluid gender identities, and in which “reimagining” the Islamic tradition, as people of faith, is a central component. This includes the Qur’an, early Islamic history, and a fascinating *hadith* text that privileges the estranged: “Islam started as a strange thing, and it will return to a strange thing. So, give glad tidings to the strangers (*al-ghuraba*)”.

As we have seen, the problem of empire has been a longstanding theme in ILT. The last set of essays revisit the complex legacy of empire in fresh, decolonial ways, thinking through two very different contexts. In “Islamic Liberation Theology and Decolonial Studies: The Case of Hindutva Extractivism”, Ashraf Kunnummal puts ILT in conversation with the field of decolonial studies, which was developed in radical Latin American and Caribbean Studies circles. As a Muslim liberation theologian, he aims “to locate the limits and potentials of decolonial studies”, emphasising that a genuine commitment to decolonisation entails not only a critique of the coloniality of knowledge—that is, the nexus between European empire and Eurocentric epistemology (“ideas”)—but also a materially driven “political praxis” for social justice. If this dual commitment is absent, Kunnummal warns, the decolonial project risks “becoming merely a decolonial option

(ideas without praxis) without a decolonial turn (praxis with ideas)". As a case study, he turns to his own home context of Hindu-dominated India. Focusing on the writings of Hindutva apologist J. Sai Deepak, Kunnummal scrutinises how Hindu nationalism has appropriated the language of decoloniality—"decolonial Hindutva"—to pursue its own ultra-nationalist objectives, to perpetuate Islamophobia, and to further marginalise India's Muslim minority. Finally, in the closing article of this volume—"Decolonising Islam: Indigenous Peoples, Muslim Communities, and the Canadian Context"—I place ILT in dialogue with settler colonial studies and indigenous rights. While empire has been a recurring trope in ILT, this engagement (however insightful) has assumed a specific colonial configuration in which Muslims are on the receiving "end" of power relations, being occupied and colonised by an external, non-Muslim entity. But, what about the presence of Islam, I ask, *within* settler colonies today? I argue that the case of Canada (and linkages can be drawn with the US and Australia, which also have established Muslim communities) challenges ILT to revisit the category of empire in a more nuanced, layered fashion. For in these contexts, Muslim migrant communities are complicit *as* settlers themselves in the continued disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples, lands, and cultures.<sup>10</sup> Centrally, I ask, how can we decolonise Islam within the settler colony? That is, how can Muslims address their own complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with native peoples and rereading their own faith tradition in the light of that solidarity?

As the above summaries demonstrate, the future of ILT is broad ranging and multifaceted; it cannot be reduced to a singular vision or programmatic "manifesto", and nor should it be. My article at the end of the volume gives a clear sense of where I personally think ILT should be heading, particularly within discussions of empire and its rather complex legacy. But, "the hats" of the contributor and the editor are very different, and, as an editor, I am wary of a single voice overshadowing a plurality of intersecting visions and approaches. I would like to close this introduction, therefore, by simply highlighting four general themes that surface in this Special Issue. Firstly, ILT is a *global* phenomenon that cannot be restricted to a specific geography or region, and its future trajectories will continue, even if grounded in local power relations, to be transnational in scope. The articles in this volume are embedded in national contexts spread across the Global South and Global North, including South Africa (Osman, Shaikh), India (Kunnummal), Egypt (Abou-Bakr, Quisay), Iran (Saffari), Canada (Rahemtulla), and the UK (Chaudhry, Bashir). Secondly, ILT is acutely *intersectional* in its approach to oppression, and the entanglement of power relations across gender, race, class, and other planes of lived experience will (and indeed should) remain on ILT's ethical and intellectual radar. While various scholars in this Special Issue have called for more attention to areas that have been ignored, they have endeavoured to think intersectionally and fluidly. For example, Chaudhry centres questions of class, focusing on the gentrification of Tower Hamlets in London and Nijjor Manush's resistance work. But, at the same time, Chaudhry foregrounds the structural racism of the gentrification process—Tower Hamlets, after all, is a predominantly Bengali borough—and how Nijjor Manush, as a Bengali organisation, is immersed as much in anti-racist praxis, as it is in anti-classist praxis. We also see intersectionality at work in Saffari's critiques of Shari'ati's *tawhidic* writings via Wadud (gender and race) and Dabashi (alterity and the non-Islamic Other).

Thirdly, ILT seeks to reclaim the *tradition*, i.e., the Islamic intellectual heritage. Earlier articulations of contemporary ILT focused on the Qur'an as the "Word of God" (*kalamallah*), offering perceptive and often pathbreaking analysis of Muslim scripture, but engagement with extra-Qur'anic texts was less rigorous, ranging between surface-level, selective readings to outright dismissal. Over the past two decades, ILT has shifted to a multidisciplinary conversation with the Islamic tradition in its entirety, and this hermeneutical trend will likely continue into the future. In this volume, we see constructive engagement with the Qur'an and the commentarial tradition (Abou-Bakr, Quisay, Rahemtulla), early Islamic history and hadith (Osman, Chaudhry), the legal tradition (Bashir), and the mystical tradition (Shaikh). Fourthly, ILT seems to be pivoting towards social *practice* as opposed to simply



rereading Islamic texts (even if based on lived experience). Paralleling Shaikh's earlier work on *tafsir* and praxis, there is an emergent, methodological turn from textual hermeneutics alone to social scientific research while acknowledging that the two cannot be neatly disentangled. This is evident in a number of articles, including Osman's "auto-ethnographic" study of queer Muslim community in Cape Town; Chaudhry's analysis of Nijjor Manush in London; and Quisay's harrowing interviews with former political prisoners in Sisi's Egypt. This last theme, I believe, is a fitting point to conclude on, for liberation theology is not interested primarily in ideas (as important as ideas are) but in concrete praxis and resistance, striving to transform oppressive realities on the ground. This is the spirit (*ruh*) of liberation theology, and, wherever ILT may venture in the future, it must stay true to its practical spirit of transformative politics.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While liberation theology is often associated with radical variants of Latin American Christianity (Gutiérrez [1971] 1973; Boff and Boff [1986] 1999) and, to a lesser extent, African American Christianity (Cone [1970] 2010; Hopkins and Antonio 2012), it is important to note that liberation theologies are not a Christian phenomenon. In addition to Islam, there are liberation theologies spread across a variety of faith traditions, including Hinduism (Rambachan 2015), Judaism (Ellis 1987), and Buddhism (Queen and King 1996).
- <sup>2</sup> Despite the name "Afghani", the historical records show that he was born and raised in what is modern-day Iran, attending the Shi'a Islamic seminaries in the shrine cities of Iraq. (Keddie 1994). He may have strategically adopted the name Afghani to hide his Shi'a background in order to gain more legitimacy within Sunni circles.
- <sup>3</sup> I thank Siavash Saffari for reminding me of the influence of 19th-century socialism and its critiques of capitalism on various Muslim thinkers, including Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) and Ubaidullah Sindhi (d. 1944) in South Asia and Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (d. 1940) in the former Soviet Union.
- <sup>4</sup> To clarify, gender and pluralism are not the *only* categories that recent liberationists have engaged with. The African American scholar Sherman Jackson, for instance, has written two seminal books on Islamic Black Theology (Jackson 2005, 2009). However, questions of race and ethnicity have largely been underexplored in the literature, which has focused on the aforementioned two categories.
- <sup>5</sup> Shaikh has also undertaken critical textual analysis of Islamic texts, especially premodern mystical texts (Shaikh 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> See the sections "Islamic Legal Theory and Ethics" and "Law and Practice" in (Mir-Hosseini et al. 2022) for a fascinating series of articles that grapple with *usul al-fiqh* (literally, the "roots of jurisprudence," referring to legal theory) and applied jurisprudence through a feminist lens.
- <sup>7</sup> To be sure, social context necessarily acts as the point of departure for *any* theological reflection, but liberation theology consciously draws on that context to produce practical, grounded, and ultimately liberating theological knowledge. It is telling that the first two chapters of Esack's book focus not on the Qur'an itself but the history of the Cape; the apartheid regime and resistance to it; the history and politics of the South African Muslim community; and Esack's own upbringing and formation within these multiple contexts.
- <sup>8</sup> My parentheses.
- <sup>9</sup> My italics.
- <sup>10</sup> The case of African Americans in the US, as the descendants of slaves forcibly shipped to the Americas, is more complex, as is the case of asylum seekers and refugees.

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Article

# Tawhid Paradigm and an Inclusive Concept of Liberative Struggle

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**Abstract:** Building on previous studies on a mid- and late-twentieth-century recasting of Islam's doctrine of monotheism, or *tawhid*, as a distinctly Islamic framework for liberative praxis, this article considers the interplay between the particular and the universal in the *tawhidic* paradigms of Iranian lay theologian Ali Shariati (1933–1977) and African-American pro-faith and pro-feminist theologian amina wadud (b. 1952). The article proposes that although it was developed in a distinctly Islamic register by means of Quranic exegesis and intrareligious conversations, the *tawhidic* paradigm has always been conversant with a range of non-Islamic liberative paradigms, and these conversations have been integral to the negotiation of a more inclusive concept of *tawhid*. To continue to recast *tawhid* in a more inclusive register, the article further argues, requires taking account of the non-Muslim 'other' as an equal moral agent in liberative struggles and embracing Islam's theological and ideological 'others' as equally significant repositories of liberative potential.

**Keywords:** Islamic liberation theology; *tawhid*; intersectionality; feminism; universalism; particularism; Shariati; wadud

## 1. Introduction

Islamic liberation theology emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in the context of the rise of liberation theologies and ideologies worldwide. The embeddedness of Muslim liberation theologians in their particular local contexts and religious traditions cannot, therefore, be considered in isolation from their simultaneous situatedness in a global setting shaped by Cold War geopolitics, postcolonial nation building, and a revolutionary zeitgeist manifested in leftist guerrilla insurgencies, feminist activism, and racial justice movements. To examine the interplay between the particular and the universal in this regard is to take concurrent account of that which distinguishes Islamic liberation theology from, as well as that which connects it to, other liberative theologies and ideologies. Probing this interplay is further helpful for seeing the ways in which Muslim liberation theologians have tried to reconcile their distinctly Islamic perspectives with an inclusive and universal concept of liberative struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Building on previous studies on a mid- and late-twentieth-century recasting of Islam's doctrine of monotheism, or *tawhid*, as a distinctly Islamic framework for liberative praxis (Adhan 2016; Rahemtulla 2017, 2019; Şengül 2015; Timani 2019; Völker 2021), the present article considers the interplay between the particular and the universal in the *tawhidic* paradigms of Iranian lay theologian Ali Shariati and African-American pro-faith and pro-feminist theologian amina wadud.<sup>2</sup> The article proposes that although it was developed in a distinctly Islamic register by means of Quranic exegesis and intrareligious conversations, the *tawhidic* paradigm has always been conversant with a range of non-Islamic liberative paradigms, and these conversations have been integral to the negotiation of a more inclusive concept of *tawhid*. To continue to recast *tawhid* in a more inclusive register, the article further argues, requires taking account of the non-Muslim 'other' as an equal moral agent in liberative struggles and embracing Islam's theological and ideological 'others' as equally

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significant repositories of liberative potential.<sup>3</sup> This two-pronged argument is expounded in four sections.

The first two sections examine Shariati's recasting of *tawhid* as a theological proposition that entails an active commitment to liberative struggles. A case is made that while Shariati's particular account was negotiated in conversation with alternative interpretations of *tawhid* in Iran and beyond, the intersectional turn in his *tawhidic* paradigm is also the result of his engagements with socialism and postcolonialism as two major non-Islamic liberative paradigms of his time. The third section probes wadud's recasting of the *tawhidic* paradigm in a gender-inclusive and non-heteronormative register. Foregrounding her intersectional frame of analysis and her diverse engagements with a range of Muslim and non-Muslim interlocutors, the section further considers the capacities of wadud's liberation theology for cultivating an inclusive and universal concept of liberative struggle. In the fourth section, the emphasis on Islamic distinctiveness in the *tawhidic* paradigms of Shariati and wadud is contrasted with the more universalist horizon of Hamid Dabashi's (2008) proposal for a new Islamic liberation theology—he calls it an “Islamic theodicy” (p. 18)—that embraces its theological and ideological ‘others’.

## 2. Shariati: A Liberative Recasting of *Tawhid*

Ali Shariati has been described as “a chief exponent of the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid*” (Rahemtulla 2017, p. 28). Born on 23 November 1933 into a lower-middle-class religious family, Shariati spent his early years in the northeastern Iranian city of Mashhad.<sup>4</sup> His father, Mohammad-Taghi, was a reformist Islamic preacher who ran an educational institute known as the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth. It was here that the young Shariati received his early schooling in Arabic, Islamic history, and Quranic interpretation. Upon completing a degree in Persian Literature at the University of Mashhad, Shariati won a government scholarship to pursue his studies abroad. Between 1959 and 1963, he was in Paris, where he earned a doctorate degree in the History of Medieval Islam from Sorbonne University. All the while, in addition to collaborating with other diasporic Iranian dissidents, Shariati developed an abiding interest in Third World revolutionary movements, and he immersed himself in the radical intellectual debates taking place in Paris at the time. He returned to Iran in 1964, and was appointed two years later as a history professor at the University of Mashhad.

The publication in 1969 of *Eslamshenasi (Islamology)*, which was a collection of his lessons on the history of Islam, gave Shariati a national profile. Between 1968 and 1972, he was a regular speaker at the Hosseiniyeh Ershad, a religious center in Tehran, whose aim it was to engage the young educated urban classes in debates about Islamic theology and history. In his lectures, which attracted large audiences and whose tapes and transcripts were circulated widely around the country, Shariati criticized the politically quietist and pro-status quo Shia clerical establishment and offered new readings of the major Islamic and Shia doctrines and historical events. The popularity of these lectures aroused the ire both of the state's secret police, or the SAVAK, which saw Shariati's anti-oppression interpretation of Islam as a thinly veiled criticism of the Iranian monarchy, and of the conservative religious establishment, who accused Shariati of heresy. The SAVAK's forced closure of the Hosseiniyeh Ershad in November 1972 brought an end to the most prolific phase of Shariati's intellectual life. He was arrested, held in solitary confinement for eighteen months, and placed under effective house arrest thereafter. In May 1977, despite a government-imposed travel ban against him, he managed to leave Iran, arriving first in Brussels and then in Southampton, England, where three weeks after his arrival, he died of a heart attack. Some months later, in the winter of 1978–79, when scores of Iranians marched the streets demanding the downfall of the monarchy, banners with Shariati's pictures and quotes were ubiquitous. His politically charged religious lexicon, including his concept of an egalitarian *tawhidic* society, scholars of modern Iran have noted, were instrumental in fashioning the revolutionary consciousness of that period (Abrahamian 1982; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004).

But Shariati was neither the first nor the only twentieth-century Iranian intellectual to engage in a reinterpretation of *tawhid*. Shariat Sangelaji, in *Tawhid-e Ebadat (Monotheism of Worship)* (1940) (Sangelaji [1940] 2014), defined the Islamic doctrine of divine unity as the refusal to deify anyone or anything other than or along with Allah, and he considered such popular Shia beliefs and practices as expecting the intercession of the Prophet and imams on the Day of Judgment, seeking blessings from purportedly sacred objects, and the worship of graves and shrines to be tantamount to a new form of polytheism, or *shirk* (p. 204). Although his was not a manifestly political rendition of reformist Islam, Sangelaji's conception of *tawhid* was not completely devoid of sociopolitical implications. As noted by Ali Rahnama (2015), Sangelaji's understanding of *tawhid* as precluding the possibility of any persons or institutions claiming a monopoly over speaking for God or intuiting God's will defied the socioreligious status of the Shia clerical order (p. 8).

Another interpretation of *tawhid* in mid-twentieth-century Iran came from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who, in *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968) (Nasr [1968] 2001), described Islam's primary pillar of faith as a doctrine of unity in multiplicity (p. 146). Distinguishing between the theological and cosmological dimensions of *tawhid*, Nasr proposed that at the theological level, *tawhid* was a denial of polytheism through "an affirmation of the Unity of God", and at the cosmological level, it was an expression of "the unicity of all things" (p. 341). This cosmological interpretation was a central feature of Nasr's attempt to develop an epistemological critique of modern Western science on the basis of Islamic metaphysics. As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi (1996) has previously argued, Nasr saw *tawhid* as the doctrine that furnishes Islam with "an essentially different set of epistemological assumptions" than those of Western modernity. Whereas the latter entails the notion that science can free humans from the capricious forces of nature, the former is based on the "unity of humankind and God, and the unity of humankind and nature" (p. 322).

To be sure, Shariati's interpretation of *tawhid* overlaps with those of Sangelaji and Nasr in a number of ways. Describing *tawhid* as the foundation of all other Islamic teachings, Shariati takes issue with the conventional Twelver Shia belief in the "five pillars of faith", consisting of *tawhid*, *adl* (justice), *nubuwwah* (prophethood), *imamah* (leadership), and *ma'ad* (resurrection). According to Shariati (1982a), Islam has but "one pillar", and that is *tawhid*, of which all other principles are subsidiaries and extensions. (p. 109). Shariati shares Sangelaji's critical disposition toward the Shia clergy, as well as the latter's conviction that Muslims have strayed away from the path of *tawhid*. He also shares Nasr's contention that, as a cosmological proposition, *tawhid* challenges and offers an alternative to the ontological and epistemological tenets of modern Western thought. Nevertheless, Shariati's articulation of *tawhid* as a doctrine with explicitly social, political, and economic implications constitutes a clear departure from the conceptions of Sangelaji and Nasr.

For Shariati ([1970] 1988), the Quranic juxtaposition between *tawhid* and *shirk* speaks to the distinction not only between monotheism and polytheism as two mutually exclusive theological and cosmological positions, but also between freedom and oppression as two opposing orientations in worldly affairs. This, according to him, is because the absolute oneness of the divine creator means that no human can lord over another human or claim mastery and supremacy over others. *Tawhid*, hence understood, is a rebellion against submission to anyone other than or along with the undivided God. *Shirk*, on the other hand, is a theology of enslavement, which justifies division and stratification in human societies and demands submission and servitude to forces other than or along with Allah (p. 30).

Shariati's contention that to submit to Allah is to rebel against worldly powers who demand servitude has the unmistakable echo of Muhammad Iqbal's interpretation of *tawhid*. Iqbal, in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930), argued that Islam's doctrine of absolute divine unity lends itself not only to a vision of "world-unity", but also to the requirement that "loyalty" is owed to God alone, "not to thrones." And "since God is the ultimate spiritual basis of all life", it follows for Iqbal that "loyalty to God virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal nature" (p. 117). For this reason, Iqbal argues, *tawhid*, at its

essence, entails a vision of social organization based on the “ideal principles” of “equality, solidarity, and freedom” (p. 122). Evoking Hegel’s dialectic of the spirit, Iqbal further posits that the human endeavor to realize *tawhid* through social and political formations is part of “the self-realization of spirit” in the world (p. 123).

Shariati’s reinterpretation of the Quranic story of Abel and Cain (5:27–31) expands on Iqbal’s Hegelian conception of history as the course of the dialectical self-realization of the ultimate spirit. Abel represents a *tawhidic* state of nature—a primitive era of communal ownership and socioeconomic equality that preceded hierarchical social formations. Cain, on the other hand, represents a deviation that is *shirk*—a subsequent historical era characterized by the advent of private ownership and the unequal division of wealth and labor. That God accepts Abel’s offering rather than Cain’s is indication that God favors the social formation represented by the former (Shariati 1980a, p. 75). And yet, the primordial fratricide of Abel at the hands of Cain sets in motion a perpetual clash in the course of human history between a Cainian clan, who has ruled the earth by means of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, and an Abelian clan, who has fought for an egalitarian and emancipatory order. This clash—and its resultant material and philosophical contradictions—will come to an end with the complete self-realization of the spirit of *tawhid* and the triumph of the descendants of Abel over those of Cain (pp. 287–312). The teleological inevitability of this triumph, Shariati believes, is foretold by the Quran’s promise that *haq* (truth) will prevail over *batil* (falsehood) and that *al-mustadafin* (the oppressed) will inherit the earth (pp. 90, 316).

Shariati’s spelling out of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic dimensions of *tawhid* and *shirk* is inextricably tied to his anti-oppressive Quranic exegesis. Thus, in explicating *shirk*, he draws on Quranic passages, in which those who call on people to worship false gods (*taghut*), and those who claim to be lords (*rabb*) over other people are castigated and condemned. The term *taghut*, which appears in the Quran often in relation to pagan deities in pre-Islamic Arabia, was reinterpreted by Shariati ([1970] 1988) as the symbol of an unjust non-*tawhidic* order, in which people are held captive by and forced to submit to the will of their powerful and wealthy rulers (pp. 39–40). Also a Quranic term, *rabb* appears in the Islamic scripture primarily in reference to Allah. Shariati’s use of the term, however, is informed by a passage in Surah Al-Nazi’at that narrates the story of Moses and Pharaoh. After dismissing Moses, the Pharaoh summons his people, declaring: “I am your lord, the most exalted!” (*ana rabbukum al-’ala*) (79:24). According to Shariati, the Pharaoh is well aware that he is not the divine creator, and yet, by declaring himself a *rabb* over others, he assigns partnership to God’s sovereign authority (p. 48).

Likewise, to illustrate the sociopolitical and socioeconomic implications of *tawhid*, Shariati draws on two Quranic terms: *al-mustadafin* and *al-nas*. The former is understood by Shariati to mean the historically oppressed masses, to whom the Quran (28:5–6) promises redemption and final victory. Whereas Muslim theologians had previously taken the term to mean the powerless and meek victims of injustice (Abrahamian 1993, p. 47), in Shariati’s exegesis, *al-mustadafin* is reconceived as victims of oppression who are engaged in “a perpetual war to avenge the blood of Abel . . . and to restore equality, freedom, and true faith” (Shariati 1980a, p. 89). Rather than passive victimhood, Shariati’s use of the term connotes indignant agency. Importantly, for Shariati, the historical inevitability of the triumph of *tawhid* over *shirk*, and the emancipation thereby of *al-mustadafin*, does not abrogate the agency of the victims of injustice and the moral responsibility of all Muslims to fight against oppression. This, he argues, is because “even though history moves forward on the basis of divine determinism, . . . I, as an individual, must choose either to move in the direction of history . . . or to oppose it ignorantly, egotistically, and from the position of my vested class interest” (p. 90).

The latter, *al-nas*, is understood by Shariati to mean the masses of the people as distinct from elites and rulers. Whereas social *shirk* is realized through the subjugation of *al-nas* at the hands of the *taghut*, social *tawhid* is the empowerment of *al-nas* through the eradication of all social, political, and economic structures that allow the *taghut* to lord over



others. According to Shariati ([1970] 1988), not only does the Quran explicitly proclaim Allah's support for *al-nas* and disdain for the *taghut*, but also the terms Allah and *al-nas* are interchangeable in Quranic social commands. Thus, when Quran 24:33 speaks of God's property (*mal Allah*), the implication is that what belongs to God belongs to the people (*mal al-nas*) (p. 47), and when Quran 64:17 calls for lending a fair loan to Allah (*tuqridul llah*), it is indeed a command to give to the people in need (*tuqridul nas*), "otherwise it is obvious that God does not need our good loan" (Shariati 1980a, p. 98). Likewise, when Quran 6:57 or 13:41 declare that all authority belongs to God (*hukm Allah*), or when Quran 8:39 states that religion in its entirety belongs to God (*wa yakun al-din kulluhu li-'llah*), the connotation is that political and religious authority lies with *al-nas*, and no single person or group may monopolize political or religious authority (p. 99).

### 3. An Intersectional Turn

Even as he was articulating his Islamic liberation theology by the method of Quranic exegesis and intrareligious conversations, Shariati was aware of and conversant with some of the non-Islamic liberation theologies of his time. During his Paris years, he had met and come under the influence of Louis Massignon, a leading French scholar of Islam and a Catholic priest of the Melkite Order, who contributed to the reformist discourse that culminated in the Second Vatican Council. In the same period, Shariati had learned about the Catholic left in France through *Esprit* magazine and the writings of its founder Emmanuel Mounier. It was in Paris, too, that he first read Nikos Kazantzakis's 1948 novel, *Christ Recrucified*, a work that, according to Shariati (1980a), revives the liberative spirit of "true Christianity" (p. 261). Moreover, Shariati saw Rabindranath Tagore, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi, as pioneers of an effort to articulate liberative renditions of Hindu theology (pp. 293–96). Shariati's spiritual writings, to which he collectively referred as *Kaviriyyat* (*Desert Musings*), contains frequent references to these Christian and Hindu reformists.<sup>5</sup>

Equally important to the articulation of his *tawhidic* paradigm and the cultivation of an intersectional concept of liberative struggle in his Islamic liberation theology are Shariati's extrareligious engagements.<sup>6</sup> Shariati's use of analytical tools, such as class analysis and historical dialectics, has been attributed by a number of scholars to the influence of European socialism.<sup>7</sup> Less attention has been paid to the ways in which Shariati, in conversation with postcolonial and Black Consciousness thinkers, such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, invokes race as a distinct category of analysis, as well as a site of liberative struggles.<sup>8</sup>

In his discussions on *tawhid* and *shirk*, Shariati frequently invokes race in conjunction with other identity markers, including class, nationality, ethnicity, tribe, and family lineage—although, glaringly, not gender. In one instance, he lists "racial *shirk*" (*shirk-e nezhadī*), along with "class *shirk*" (*shirk-e tabaghati*) and "familial *shirk*" (*shirk-e khanevadegi*), as three distinct manifestations of social *shirk* that work to normalize existing inequalities by attributing them to the hierarchical standing of the deities that represent different races, classes, and families (Shariati 1980a, p. 185). A recognition of the intersection of class and race in the formation of the modern world-system also animates Shariati's criticism of European socialists for focusing exclusively on class, while neglecting the racial and colonial dynamics of capitalist exploitation. His assertion that capital accumulation in Europe was less a consequence of the exploited labor of "the European proletariat" than of the "theft of the lives and resources of yellow and black people, of Muslims and of Hindus" (Shariati 1971b) is reminiscent of Fanon's declaration that "the wealth which smothers [Europe] is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples" in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Fanon [1961] 1963, p. 102).

Although his simultaneous invocation of race, class, nationality, etc., signals an intersectional turn, albeit incomplete, in Shariati's Islamic liberation theology, his less-than-adequate attention to the imperative of gender equality as a necessary measure of a non-oppressive social order points to the limitations of his particular rendition of *tawhid*. As one



critic points out, even though Shariati's revolutionary Islam encouraged women's active participation in social and political life, "there was no place in his ideology for a concept of women's liberation that involved a radical change in traditional gender roles and sexual emancipation" (Afary 1996, p. 42). Some of his feminist critics have faulted Shariati for espousing a "patriarchal and traditional conception of women" (Moghissi 1996, p. 70), and it is argued that his neglect to critically consider women's position in Islamic law betrays an ambivalent position "on the issue of women's rights" (Mir-Hosseini 2002, p. 79). That, in his discussions on *tawhid* and *shirk*, gender is rarely considered as a distinct category is perhaps indicative of the same ambivalence.<sup>9</sup>

An exception occurs in Shariati's rendition of the story of Hagar (Hajar), where Hagar's gender is recognized as a site of her oppression. The story appears in connection with the drama of Abraham's prophethood. It begins with an aged Abraham and his wish to have an offspring to inherit and continue his *tawhidic* struggle. Unable to produce a child, Sarah, Abraham's wife, whom Shariati [1978] (1993) describes as a "barren" woman and a "fanatical aristocrat" (p. 87), permits her husband to have a child with her Abyssinian slave, Hagar. When Hagar gives birth to Ishmael (Ismail), however, Sarah becomes increasingly jealous and intolerant, ultimately demanding that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled from the house. Abraham takes the two to a "dry and lonely valley" near Mecca (p. 49), where he leaves them in God's hands. Although she submits to God's will, Hagar's is not a passive submission. As if personifying all of history's *al-mustadafin*, determined and agential, she endures much pain running back and forth between the two foothills of Safa and Marwa in search of water. Having failed in her pursuit, she returns to Ishmael. And then, a miracle. Suddenly, from underneath Ishmael's heels, water begins to flow; "It is Zamzam, a sweet and life-giving fountain of water flowing from stone!" (p. 50). Some years later, upon Hagar's death, God tasks Abraham and Ishmael with building a symbolic house of God next to the site of Hagar's burial. According to Shariati, Hijr Ismail, the semi-circular low wall opposite the northwest wall of Kaaba, symbolizes Hagar's lap, on which Ishmael laid as a child (p. 32).

That Kaaba extends toward Hagar's grave, and that Hagar, among the entire human race, is chosen to be God's neighbor, is seen by Shariati as a permanent reminder of a divine creator who is on the side of the oppressed. Invoking an intersectional understanding of oppression, Shariati [1978] (1993) locates Hagar at the intersection of various inequalities: "From among all humanity [God chooses] a woman, from among all women a slave, and from among all slaves a black maid!" (p. 32). Whereas Hagar's victimization at the intersection of class, race, and gender is the result of a system of social *shirk* that divides people into rich and poor, master and slave, white and black, and man and woman, all such divisions disappear before the God of *tawhid*, who grants protection to Hagar and her young child (p. 46). And this spirit of *tawhid* is memorialized in the ritual of hajj, during which pilgrims are called upon to take on the role of Hagar and to retrace her steps in the distance between Safa and Marwa (p. 33).

The story of Hagar signals a recognition by Shariati of gender as a category of oppression. This, however, is a fleeting recognition, and one would search in vain for a nuanced gender analysis or a *tawhidic* critique of patriarchy in Shariati's oeuvre. Indeed, Shariati's very narrative of Hagar reads as an appendix to the drama of Abraham, who is depicted as the undisputed hero in the primordial struggle between *tawhid* and *shirk*. It is he who breaks the idols of wood and stone with his axe; faces Nimrod's furnace; defeats the temptations of Satan; submits to God's will, even when he is asked to sacrifice his son; and builds the Kaaba as a symbol of *tawhid* (Shariati [1978] 1993, p. 146). Abraham, thus, becomes a transhistorical protagonist, who stands outside of the prevailing class, race, and gender structures of his time. That he fathers a son with his wife's slave does not indicate a patriarchal desire to ensure, through polygamy, the continuity of his lineage; instead, it is motivated by a selfless commitment to a *tawhidic* struggle, which must continue after his death. Shariati does not use this as an opportunity to comment on polygamy in Islamic

law, and he refuses to acknowledge Abraham's role in Hagar's fate, instead placing the blame squarely on Sarah and her jealousy.

#### 4. Wadud: *Tawhid* and Islamic Intersectional Feminism

Whereas Shariati neglects—barring fleeting moments—to take account of gender equality and inequality as measures of *tawhid* and *shirk*, a number of contemporary Muslim liberation theologians have advanced their own renditions of the *tawhidic* paradigm, precisely by foregrounding gender.<sup>10</sup> Among them is amina wadud, for whom *tawhid* is central to the struggle against patriarchy in Islam. Echoing Shariati, she proposes that *tawhid*, in addition to being a theological proposition affirming God's oneness (wadud uses the term "unicity"), is also the basis of a "non-discrimination" worldview with social and political implications (Wadud 2008, p. 437). This, she argues, is because, as the operating principle of cosmic harmony, *tawhid* requires an ethical commitment to "the unity of all human creatures beneath one Creator" (Wadud 2006, p. 28). If God alone stands above and unites all things, "then no person can be greater than another person, especially for mere reasons of gender, race, class, nationality, etc." (Wadud 2008, p. 437).

Wadud was born as Mary Teasley on 25 September 1952 to an African-American family in Bethesda, Maryland.<sup>11</sup> Her father was a Methodist minister and her mother a member of the Baptist church. Her family's perpetual struggle with poverty, including an episode of homelessness, marred wadud's early years. Another event that loomed large was the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. When she was eleven years old, wadud's father took her to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech. After completing high school, she attended the University of Pennsylvania and graduated in 1975 with a bachelor's degree in education. While attending university, she became a practicing Buddhist, before being attracted to Islam. Her conversion came on Thanksgiving Day in 1972, when she proclaimed the *shahadatain* (declarations of faith in Allah's oneness and Muhammad's prophethood) at a Washington, D.C., mosque. According to Wadud (2006), despite knowing relatively little about the religion at the time of her conversion, Islam's egalitarian message resonated with her conviction that "divine justice could be achieved on the planet and throughout the universe" (p. 2).

Seeking to learn more, and cognizant of a tension between what she perceived as Islam's message of equality and a lived reality of patriarchal practices and norms in many Muslim communities, she began to systematically study her newly embraced faith tradition. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic Studies, she moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1989, where she taught at Malaysia's International Islamic University. In Malaysia, she was among the founding members of Sisters in Islam, a civil society organization that promotes equal women's rights within the frameworks of Islam and universal human rights. It was also in Malaysia that she published her first book, *Qur'an and Woman* (1992). This short, but widely influential, book challenges the depictions of women in classical Quranic exegesis and proposes an alternative a female-inclusive approach. In a Preface to a 1999 reprint of the book, wadud referred to her alternative approach as "a hermeneutics of *tawhid*." Contrary to "the atomistic approach" of traditional exegesis, in which each verse is interpreted individually and independently of the scripture's overall ethos, a hermeneutics of *tawhid* reveals "how the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts." Such an approach, she argues, is necessary for considering the dynamics between Islam's universal moral outlook and the concrete form and content of Islamic revelation within a particular historical context (Wadud [1992] 1999, p. xii).

Although she returned to the United States in 1992 to take up a position as a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she remained until her retirement in 2008, wadud has continued her work with Muslim organizations and communities around the world. In 1994, at a landmark event defying the dominant practice of a male *imam* (prayer leader) delivering the Friday *khutbah* (sermon), wadud gave a *khutbah* at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. Nearly a decade later,

she led a mixed prayer in the Synod House in New York City. These events, although they were met with disapproval from conservative corners, helped to initiate new discussions on Islam and the imperative of gender equality. wadud's second book, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), brings her hermeneutics of *tawhid* together with her lived experiences as a scholar and activist. Although she considers the struggle for gender equality to be indispensable to the objective of organizing human relations on the basis of *tawhid*, wadud is nevertheless emphatic that to live in accordance with Islam's *tawhidic* worldview is to strive to eliminate all manners of inequality "for reasons of race, class, gender, religious tradition, national origin, sexual orientation or other arbitrary, voluntary, and involuntary aspects of human distinction" (Wadud 2006, p. 28).

In advancing her particular rendition of the *tawhidic* paradigm, wadud is conversant with a range of Muslim interlocutors, including Shariati, Fazlur Rahman, and Malcolm X. Citing an English translation of a 1962 lecture by Shariati titled "*Jahanbini-e tawhid*" ("The Worldview of Tawhid"), Wadud (2006) takes Shariati's anti-oppression rendition of *tawhid* and recasts it in a consciously and persistently gender-inclusive register (p. 28). She shares Shariati's understanding of *tawhid* as a distinctly Islamic worldview as well as a framework for moral praxis, and her emphasis on exercising subjectivity while surrendering to Allah's just will—what she calls "engaged surrender" (Wadud 2006, p. 23)—is reminiscent of Shariati's idea of agential submission. Rahman's influence is most evident in wadud's exegetical method. As Rahemtulla (2017) has previously argued, wadud's hermeneutics of *tawhid* builds on Rahman's "double movement theory", according to which in interpreting the Quran, one must endeavor first to understand the specific manner and the particular historical context of Quranic revelation, and then to decipher the universal message of the scripture and apply it to present circumstances (p. 106). No less significant than Shariati's or Rahman's, Malcolm X's influence on wadud goes beyond his larger-than-life presence as a leading figure of the Civil Rights Movement and one of the most prominent Muslim Americans during wadud's formative early years. His interpretation of *tawhid* as a principle of racial equality and an egalitarian doctrine of "the Oneness of Man under One God" (Malcolm X and Haley [1965] 2001, p. 443) set the stage for wadud's intersectional concept of *tawhidic* liberation.

But wadud's *tawhidic* paradigm is also the result of her engagements with a range of non-Muslim interlocutors, including the Jewish existentialist philosopher Martin Buber. Buber's influence can be seen in the way in which wadud challenges the image, prevalent in classical Islamic ethical and jurisprudential discourse, of a hierarchical model with "Allah at the top, male in the middle, female at the bottom" (Wadud 2021, p. 5). Such a formula, grounded as it is on the assumption of an asymmetrical relationship between the male and the female and a "separation between Allah and the female", stands in stark contrast to the *tawhidic* premise of Islamic theology (p. 6). Using Buber's I-Thou ethical formula as a point of reference "for understanding the sacred union between self and other" (Wadud 2006, p. 32), wadud re-envisioned "Islamic ethics according to a reciprocal model", in which Allah remains "on the top, as the highest metaphysical reality", but the male and the female are imagined as two symmetrical points "on a line of horizontal reciprocity." This reformulation, she argues, enables the faithful to "operate in such a way that the divine reality of One is expressed in all human to human relationship only with reciprocity and equality" (Wadud 2021, p. 6).

Wadud's other non-Muslim interlocutors include a range of Christian theologians, particularly African-American, whose influence, even when it is not explicitly referenced by wadud, seems to be ever present in the background. Recalling her early exposure to a justice-centric Christian theology that was championed by King Jr., and preached by her own father, wadud comments that she was raised "not only to link conceptions of the divine with justice, but also to link notions of justice with the divine" (Wadud 2006, p. 4). She also acknowledges that the rise of the Civil Rights Movement saw the concurrent emergence of an effort by African-American Christians to "draw from their religiosity to resist racial injustices" (p. 103). Among the leading figures in this effort were James Cone,

whose interventions throughout the 1970s and 1980s were integral to the development of Black liberation theology,<sup>12</sup> and Delores S. Williams (1987), who, building on Alice Walker's (1983) concept of womanism, advocated for a womanist theology based on the particular experiences of African-American women. wadud credits womanist theology with simultaneously challenging white privilege and male privilege, and she shares Williams' commitment to reading the scripture from the vantage point of othered women. This shared commitment, as Lara Dotson-Renta (2022) has noted, is on display in the manners in which Williams and wadud interpret the story of Hagar/Hajar.

Although Wadud (2006) develops her "Hajar paradigm" (p. 120) within a distinctly *tawhidic* frame, her female-inclusive account finds more in common with Williams' (1993) rendering of the story than with Shariati's. Whereas Shariati's acknowledgement of Hagar's gender as a site of her oppression does not rise to the level of a critique of patriarchy, wadud's "Hajar paradigm" is advanced precisely by stripping away the patriarchal coating of the story and by foregrounding the lived reality of Hagar-like single-mother heads of household, including many African-American women, "whose legal category in *shari'ah* deviates from the patriarchal, man-centered norm" (p. 150). Her particular attention to the lived experiences of African-American single mothers is reminiscent of Williams' centering of similar lived experiences in her interpretation of Hagar's story in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, wadud's critical depiction of Abraham as a "dead beat dad" (Wadud 2013a) finds more in common with Williams' (1993) account, in which Abraham and Sarah are both recognized as Hagar's "slave holders" (p. 97), than with Shariati's, in which Abraham stands outside of the prevailing gendered and racial norms of his time. Relatedly, whereas Shariati suggests that Abraham's marriage to Hagar was facilitated by Sarah, who gave her explicit permission, and that it was Sarah's jealousy that resulted in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to the desert, Wadud (2013a) identifies patriarchy as the structure in which Sarah and Hagar are rendered as equally invisible reproductive vessels, and by which Hagar is abandoned upon losing her status in Abraham's household.

Wadud's observation that the story of Hagar is "the ultimate expression of the intersectionality of race, class and gender" (Wadud 2013a) betrays an unmistakable affinity between her work and intersectional Black feminism. Noting this affinity, Farid Esack (2015) has commented that although wadud's discourse is firmly anchored in Islam, her *tawhidic* paradigm resonates with the interventions of such African-American feminists as Patricia Hill Collins and Bell Hooks (p. 37). The former's work on the intersection of race, class, and gender as "the three axes of oppression" that shape the lived experiences of African-American women (Collins 2000, p. 248), and the latter's formulation of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1995, p. 17)—subsequently to be reformulated as "imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 2000, p. xiv)—as a matrix of intersecting systems of oppression, have greatly contributed to the emergence of an intersectional black feminist theory, with which wadud is fully conversant.<sup>14</sup> Wadud's (2021) effort to account for "sexual diversity and nonbinary gender identity" (p. 9) in her *tawhidic* conception of a non-oppressive social order also resonates with similar efforts in intersectional black feminism.

Wadud's recasting of the *tawhid* paradigm in a gender-inclusive and non-heteronormative intersectional register is regarded by some commentators (Ali 2019; Ayubi 2012; Khaki 2012) as a key intervention in negotiating a more inclusive and universal concept of *tawhidic* liberation. Helpful as these observations may be for highlighting the novelty of wadud's intersectional theology, they neglect to consider the way in which wadud's move toward an inclusive universalism is hampered by her overemphasis on Islamic monotheism as a uniquely liberative theological and ideological proposition. This overemphasis is at play when wadud suggests that *tawhid* entails a more comprehensive account of liberation than the Christian doctrine of trinity (Wadud 2006, p. 69), and when she proposes that, compared to Christianity, "the relationship between God and justice is more articulated in Islam" (Wadud 2013b). This overemphasis on the singularity of *tawhid*, I will propose in the following section, ultimately prevents wadud both from sufficiently recognizing the non-

Muslim ‘other’ as an equal moral agent in liberative struggles, and from embracing Islam’s theological and ideological alternatives as equally significant repositories of liberative potential. Moreover, while Buber’s formula is central to wadud’s reimagining of the status of the male and the female before Allah, there is little indication that she has considered the implications of this formula for the relationship between the Muslim self and the non-Muslim ‘other’ and for critiquing the unequal status of the latter in traditional Islamic jurisprudence.

### 5. Accounting for Non-Muslim and Non-Islamic ‘Other’

In *Islamic Liberation Theology* (2008), Hamid Dabashi makes a case that for Islam to find its proper place in the worldwide resistance against American imperialism and global capitalism, Muslims must shed all identitarian proclivities and recognize that no singular ideology of resistance—religious or otherwise—“is capable of mobilizing and sustaining enough revolutionary synergy” to undo a globalized empire (p. 14). In Dabashi’s account, throughout the previous century, Islamic liberation theology’s combative conversations with an abstracted and essentialized Western colonial ‘other’ resulted in Islam’s gradual transmutation into “a singular site of ideological resistance to foreign domination” (p. 60). This transmutation, critical as it was for mobilizing popular anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance, distorted Islam’s worldly disposition and gave rise to fanatical tendencies, which rejected the universal notions of gender equality and equal civil rights (p. 44). Undermining the latter development, however, the ongoing decentering of the empire and the correspondent globalization of Islam through massive labor migration has created a condition whereby Muslims are able to rediscover their worldly cosmopolitanism (p. 160). The urgent task before Muslims is to articulate a new “Islamic liberation theodicy” that can speak to the collective predicament not only of Muslims, but of all the historically disenfranchised peoples around the globe (p. 235). Such a liberation theodicy must necessarily be in coalition, rather than combative rivalry, with its own alternatives. It must be conversant with non-Islamic ideologies of resistance while remaining decidedly Muslim, and it must “speak a universal language, from the bosom of its particularity” (p. 255).

Whereas wadud draws on Buber’s I-Thou formulation to negotiate a gender-inclusive conception of *tawhid*, Dabashi’s proposal for an Islamic liberation theodicy that accommodates the inclusion of the non-Muslim ‘other’ and accepts Islam’s theological and ideological ‘other’ is modeled after Emmanuel Levinas’s (1961) conception of the ‘other’ as the locus of ethical responsibility. A liberation theodicy predicated on Levinas’s ‘other’-based ethics is one that “embraces its own otherwise” (Dabashi 2008, p. 14) and learns the logic of its own “inauthenticity, syncretism, pluralisms, and alterities” (p. 16). To move in this direction, Dabashi suggests, would require a rethinking not only of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Islam or the binary construction of Islam and the West (p. 208), but also of a doctrinal bifurcation, fundamental to Islam’s very constitution, between monotheism and polytheism. Drawing on the medieval Islamic doctrine of “Unity in Diversity”, he makes a case that for an Islamic liberation theodicy of the future to reconcile diversity in creation with the singularity of the divine, it “will have to posit a polytheist vision of the world at the root of its monotheist theology” (p. 258).

Although he acknowledges Shariati as a Muslim revolutionary who took steps in the direction of “cosmopolitan and transnational solidarities” (Dabashi 2008, p. 115), Dabashi nevertheless argues the liberative potential of Shariati’s Islamic theology was severed and exhausted by his gravitation toward Islamist identitarianism (p. 111). Diverging from Dabashi’s reading of Shariati, elsewhere, I have argued that despite the latter’s emphasis on his Iranian, Islamic, and Shia identity, a perpetual oscillation in his thought between particular attachments and a decidedly cosmopolitan intellectual horizon ultimately allows him to transcend identitarian pigeonholes (Saffari 2019). His vision of a *tawhidic* society, as we have seen here, entails the emancipation not only of the oppressed among the Muslim ummah, but of all the human masses (*al-nas*) (Shariati 1980a, p. 100). Furthermore, despite his emphasis on the theological capacities of Shi’ism for sustaining a liberative struggle,



Shariati (1971a) explicitly opposes those who perpetuate an identitarian antagonism between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and he calls for unity between Muhammadan Sunnism (*tasannon-e Muhammadi*) and Alid Shi'ism (*tashayyo-e Alavi*) against the encroachment of imperialism and Zionism (pp. 300–12).<sup>15</sup>

Be that as it may, the inclination to treat Islam as the singular site of liberative ideological production is present in Shariati's conception of Islamic monotheism as a singularly valid theological proposition and the sole ideological standpoint capable of sustaining a struggle for total human emancipation. Even though he acknowledges the existence of emancipatory elements in religions other than Islam, Shariati considers these religions emancipatory only to the extent that their fundamental theological propositions resemble the doctrine of *tawhid*.<sup>16</sup> The latter, thus, becomes the universal measure of a religion's liberative potential, and Shariati's acknowledgment of Islam's theological and ideological 'other' serves only to authenticate Islam's basic truth claims. This is at play when Shariati (1980a) praises Gandhi, Tagore, and Radhakrishnan for rediscovering and reviving Hinduism's monotheistic origins (pp. 293–96).<sup>17</sup> Implicit here are the assumptions that polytheistic theology is devoid of emancipatory potential and that only a monotheistic cosmology can inspire liberative praxis.

At least three bifurcations in Shariati's thought further perpetuate the view of Islam as having a singularly authentic claim to liberation. The first is between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions. Whereas Abrahamic religions emerged in defiance of the status quo and were represented by "shepherd prophets" and "worker prophets", who understood the suffering of the poor and the oppressed (Shariati [1970] 1988, p. 53), non-Abrahamic religions accommodated the prevailing relations of domination, and their prophets and patrons either hailed from or dedicated themselves to the service of the society's ruling elites (p. 61). The second bifurcation is between Islam and other Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity. Whereas Christianity is a religion of mercy and compassion, whose prophet was crucified by the Roman Empire, Islam is a religion of social struggle, whose prophet declared a war on the dominant powers of his time (Shariati 1980a, p. 261). Furthermore, the doctrine of trinity, which, according to Shariati (1982a), is a form of *shirk* that was invented by the Roman Empire to justify socioeconomic stratification, stands in sharp contrast to Islam's strict adherence to the principle of divine unity (p. 35). The third bifurcation is between Islam and non-religious ideologies. Although he acknowledges the liberatory disposition of humanism, socialism, and non-theistic existentialism, Shariati insists that removing God from human affairs and severing the link between the physical and the metaphysical results in nihilistic despair and moral relativism (Shariati 1980a, p. 132). His contention that the universal ideals of equality and freedom, which have inspired the struggles for socialism and democracy in the modern world, will foster genuine liberation only when they are brought together in a *tawhidic* framework of perfect harmony between humans, God, and nature (Shariati 1976), renders Islamic monotheism as the sum of all other liberative paradigms.

Shariati's theological and ideological privileging of Islamic monotheism finds parallels in wadud's rendition of the *tawhidic* paradigm. Wadud's (2006) contention that Hinduism ultimately adheres to a "*tawhidic*" conception of the sacred (p. 194), for instance, recognizes Hinduism only through its proximity to Islamic monotheism, thus reaffirming the latter's singular authenticity. This perpetuation of Islamic singularity is inseparable from what Rahemtulla identifies as a shortcoming in wadud's Islamic liberation theology to adequately account for the religious 'other'. According to Rahemtulla (2017), the tendency to explain away theological polytheism as a misunderstood or mispracticed form of monotheism does not do "justice to the religious Other and the Hindu Other in particular" (p. 80).<sup>18</sup> Rahemtulla further observes that despite wadud's own lived experiences in three religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam), as well as her expressed position "underscoring the chosen-ness of all people as opposed to solely Muslims", her interest in interreligious engagements is secondary to her commitment to intrareligious conversations,

and her views on religious pluralism fall short of adequately accounting for and embracing religious difference (pp. 145–47).<sup>19</sup>

Rahemtulla's latter point concerns a passage in wadud's *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), where she proposes the Quranic condemnations of *shirk* do not amount to a rejection of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and a range of other traditional polytheistic and animistic religions in Africa, Australia, and the Americas, because none of these religious traditions are directly mentioned in the Quran (pp. 194–95). wadud's reluctance to acknowledge the tension between the Quran's explicit prohibition of associating partners with God and the polytheistic and animistic principles of the religions to which she refers stands in contrast to her explicit position regarding the fundamental irreconcilability between *tawhid* and the Christian doctrine of trinity (p. 69). Furthermore, her seemingly pluralistic gesture toward the recognition of the non-Muslim (Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, etc.) 'other' in the light of the Quran's silences works yet again through her privileging the Muslim self. Recalling wadud's own reformulation of Buber's I-Thou ethical standard, one might consider the implications of recasting the relationship between the Muslim self and the non-Muslim 'other' in a Buberian register. It is true that in wadud's account, the I-Thou proposal is maintained by "the presence of Allah" (p. 30). Still, wadud does not seem to suggest that entering into ethical and equal relations ought to be contingent on the affirmation by the 'other' of Allah's presence and oneness. Rather, her key insight is the ethical imperative of creating horizontal relationships of reciprocity based on the recognition of the "equal significance" and mutual codependence of the self and its others (p. 168). The presumption of Islamic singularity seems to be at odds with this paramount insight.

## 6. Conclusions

While recognizing their distinctly Islamic framings, the present article has identified a move in the *tawhidic* paradigms of Shariati and wadud toward an inclusive concept of liberation. This move, it was shown, has been advanced through a recognition of the intersectionality of liberative struggles, and it has been negotiated in conversation with a range of non-Islamic liberative paradigms. To further move Islamic liberation theology in a more inclusive direction requires, among other steps, a genuine embrace of the non-Muslim 'other' as a subject of and an equal moral agent in liberative struggles. This begins with taking account of the particular condition of the oppressed non-Muslim 'other' in Muslim-majority contexts—be it Bahais in Iran, or Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan—and cultivating intersectional solidarities in a world where the structures of oppression are increasingly globalized.<sup>20</sup> And yet, as F. Tormos (2017) reminds us, intersectional solidarity is not merely a strategic decision, but one born out of "love for the other" (p. 713).<sup>21</sup> Dabashi's mediation of identity through alterity offers one possible path for a loving embrace of the 'other' within a liberative Islamic framework. His vision of an Islamic liberation theodicy that "embraces its ideological rivals and theological alternatives" (Dabashi 2008, p. 15) is predicated on a conception of Islam's theological and ideological 'others' as equally significant repositories of liberative potential. A similar epistemic humility is present in Rahemtulla's (2019) call for a "humble acceptance of the rich plurality of ways in which to respond to the Transcendent" (p. 39).

Somewhere between the desire for particularism and the proclivity toward universalism lies the main challenge ahead of Islamic liberation theology. Shariati's and wadud's attention to the distinctiveness of *tawhid* as a uniquely Islamic theological and ideological position ought to be reconciled with Dabashi's (2008) emphasis on the need to transcend "denominational divides and speak a metaphysics of liberation beyond the theology of one or another divisive claim on God" (p. 255). Shariati's occasional references to *tawhid* as a non-denominational theological proposition have important implications for reconciling Islamic particularity with the universality of liberative struggles, as does Wadud's (2021) attention to the Quranic prohibition of "thinking of oneself as better than another" (p. 6). Despite these pluralistic gestures, the turn toward the 'other' in the liberation theologies of Shariati and wadud is often thwarted by the tendency either to privilege the

Muslim/Islamic self at the expense of dismissing the liberative agency and potential of the non-Muslim/Islamic ‘other’, or to explain away difference. A similar explaining away of difference appears to occur in Dabashi’s search for a genuinely universal concept of liberation. Moreover, the tension, in his account, between speaking from a distinctly Islamic perspective and moving toward a syncretic non-denominational theodicy is underexplored and ultimately unresolved.

Their tensions and limitations notwithstanding, the interventions of Shariati, wadud, and Dabashi have helped to chart a path in Islamic theology toward a more intersectional and inclusive concept of human liberation. Their contributions are matched by those of other Muslim liberation theologians, including the anti-capitalist Turkish exegetist İhsan Eliaçık, whose intersectional understanding of *tawhid* and rejection of the bifurcation between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions opens new vistas for recasting the *tawhid* paradigm in a more inclusive register.<sup>22</sup> This recasting, as I have suggested here, must take simultaneous account of the Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of liberative praxis, and it must entail the embrace of Islam’s theological and ideological alternatives. For a paradigm that is firmly anchored in an absolutist claim regarding the oneness of the divine and the bifurcation between monotheism and polytheism, regarding the non-monotheistic and non-theistic ‘other’ as equally significant repositories of liberative potential has thus far proven to be difficult.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the term liberative struggle in a broad sense to refer to all manners of social mobilization and discursive production that aim to bring about human liberation from various (class-based, racial, gendered, etc.) forms of subordination. This understanding of liberation and liberative struggle is informed by the interventions of a range of critical intellectuals (socialist, anti-racist, feminist, etc.) who have drawn attention to the multiplicity of the ways in which hierarchical socioeconomic and sociopolitical systems inform and reinforce differential manners of subordination.
- <sup>2</sup> Wadud (2006) maintains that while her gender-inclusive theological approach draws on feminist analysis, she identifies neither as feminist nor as Muslim feminist, but rather as “pro-faith, pro-feminist.” This, she further explains, is “because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies” (p. 79).
- <sup>3</sup> In this article, I use the term non-Muslim ‘other’ in a broad sense to refer to a wide range of individuals and groups (including those who identify as ex-Muslims, those who adhere to religions other than Islam, agnostics, atheists, etc.) who do not self-identify as Muslim. While my usage of the term is more-or-less consistent with the way in which the term is used in the relevant literature, by placing ‘other’ in quotation marks, I intend to acknowledge the problematic connotations of the term and to question a manner of binary construction that always/already privileges Muslim identity (i.e., the Muslim ‘self’) vis-à-vis a range of alternative (religious and otherwise) identities. The article also uses the term non-Islamic ‘other’ in a way that is distinct from non-Muslim ‘other’. The former, in its broadest sense, might refer to Islam’s theological and ideological alternatives and rivals, including a range of religious traditions, as well as modern (religious and secular) ideologies. For the purpose of this article, however, I use the term specifically to refer to modes of theological and ideological production (other than Islamic liberation theology) that are concerned with the question of human liberation from the colonially and imperially globalized capitalist, racist, and patriarchal relations and structures of domination. These may include, but are not limited to, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, etc. liberation theologies, as well as socialist, feminist, anti-racist, and other anti-domination ideologies. I make a case that a genuinely inclusive liberation theology is one that opens itself up to alternative modes of anti-domination theological and ideological production, and that recognizes its ‘others’ as equal subjects and agents of liberation (i.e., equally deserving of liberation and equally capable of contributing to liberative struggles).



4 For a detailed biography, see (Rahnema 2000).

5 In *Kaviriyyat*, we find the clearest manifestation of Shariati's pluralistic belongings and his cosmopolitan horizons. His creative and open-ended synthesis of Quranic notions with pre-Islamic Iranian, Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu mythologies, as well as insights from various European literary and intellectual traditions, takes on a post-theological character. For a discussion on the cosmopolitan horizon of Shariati's *Kaviriyyat*, see (Saffari 2019).

6 Intersectionality is a framework for analysis and praxis that draws attention to the multiple experiences of subordination and disadvantage that are produced by interacting (class-based, racial, gendered, etc.) systems of oppression. My contention that Shariati's simultaneous attention to multiple and interacting systems and experiences of oppression signals a turn toward intersectionality is consistent with Tormos's (2017) argument that, although intersectionality is a relatively new term and its current popularity is due primarily to the interventions of feminists of color, activists and intellectuals in the Global South have long "used intersectionality without naming it as such" (p. 710). For a concise review of the literature on intersectionality, see (Tormos 2017). For discussions on intersectionality and Islam/Muslim identity, see (Rahman 2010; Siddiqui 2020; Dorroll 2017).

7 Although Shariati denounced Soviet-style Marxism–Leninism and Stalinism, he remained deeply sympathetic to socialism, as evidenced by his self-identification as a God-worshipping socialist and his frequent use of socialist concepts and analytical tools. For a detailed account of Shariati's engagement with Marxism and socialism, see (Bayat 1990). For other works that address Shariati's engagement with the socialist tradition, see (Abrahamian 1982; Matin 2010; Akhavi 2018; Kanaaneh 2021; Fadaee 2022).

8 For a discussion on Shariati's engagements with mid-twentieth-century postcolonial thought, see (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2022). For an examination of Shariati's invocation of race in conversation with Fanon, see (Miri 2019).

9 It should go without saying that a more comprehensive account of Shariati's thought, particularly when it is read in conversation with the interventions of those who came after him, ought to attend to contextual particularities and differences. I readily admit that my reading of Shariati's text is inevitably informed by sensibilities that are products of my own, but not necessarily Shariati's, context. The limited scope (and word count) of the present article does not allow me to adequately address these contextual determinants. Moreover, to argue, as I do in this article, that Shariati neglects to consistently and systematically consider the gendered implications of *tawhid* is not to suggest that he is wholly inattentive to the question of gender and the place of women in liberative struggles. Indeed, Shariati is emphatic that human liberation from relations of domination is inconceivable without the active participation of women. He criticizes Muslim traditionalists who seek to restrict women to the domestic sphere, and in his rereading of the early history of Islam, he depicts Khadijah, Fatima al-Zahra, and Zaynab bint Ali as exemplary women who played an integral role in the social and political affairs of their time. He is also critical of what he considers to be the sexual objectification of women in modern capitalist societies, and he lambasts the Pahlavi state and Eurocentric Iranian elites for equating liberation of women with consumerism and sexual commodification. Rather than following the examples of Western beauty pageants and fashion models, Shariati tells his female audiences they must learn about the lives and accomplishments of those Western women who refuse to be rendered mere consumers and sexual commodities, and who contribute instead to the scientific and social developments of their societies (Shariati 1980b, 1982b). Furthermore, even though Shariati does not directly address the issue of gender inequality in Islamic law, given his critical approach toward traditional Islamic jurisprudence, one may plausibly assume that he would be opposed to patriarchal readings of the *shari'ah*. My contention here, that Shariati considers the question of women without consistently and systematically considering the gendered implications of *tawhid*, builds on the assessments of a number of other Shariati scholars. Among them, Mina Khanlarzadeh (2020), while noting Shariati's simultaneous critique of the objectification of women under traditionalist and capitalist structures, concludes that Shariati's theory of alienation does not account for the particular experiences of alienation informed by gendered identities, norms, and practices. Khanlarzadeh further argues that although Shariati depicts Zaynab bint Ali as an archetype of a liberated woman who achieves her full human potential by attaining social awareness and exercising political responsibility, his conception of emancipation presumes that "obtaining political consciousness and taking sociopolitical responsibility" will automatically pave the path to human salvation, regardless of gender difference. Likewise, Soussan Mazinani Shariati (2007) observes that Shariati discusses the question of women not as a distinct and independent matter, but rather as part of the broader issue of attaining emancipatory social consciousness and political agency in each society. As a result, she suggests, Shariati's discourse addresses the general question of the emancipation of women without engaging with concrete concerns, such as women's rights in the family, in marriage and divorce, and in the workplace.

10 For a detailed discussion on this, see (Rahemtulla 2017).

11 For more detailed biographies, see (Wadud-Muhsin 1995; Barlas 2006; Rahemtulla 2017).

12 See (Cone 1969, 1970, 1975). It bears mentioning that Cone's Black liberation theology, conversant as it was with the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, was more radical in its understanding of liberative struggle than the justice-centric theologies of Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent Christian theologians in the Civil Rights Movement.

13 For a comparative analysis of Williams and wadud in relation to the story of Hagar/Hajar, see (Dotson-Renta 2022).

14 Even though wadud frequently evokes class, race, and gender as three major categories of analysis, there is no doubt that her particular rendition of Islamic liberation theology gives primacy to gender inclusiveness. This uneven attention, one may argue, is necessary to compensate for a general neglect of gender inclusiveness in the works of other (primarily male) reformist and progressive Muslim intellectuals. However, that class is sometimes treated by wadud as a secondary or tertiary category is

also consistent with a broader paradigm shift since the end of the twentieth century that has seen an increasing neglect of class analysis.

- 15 According to Shariati ([1970] 1988), the historical clash between the spirit of freedom and the structures of oppression has produced a corresponding clash between an emancipatory religion of *tawhid* and an oppressive religion of *shirk* (pp. 49–50). This war of religion against religion, he argues, finds a Quranic expression (21:51–70) in the story of Abraham and his monotheistic revolt in ancient Mesopotamia (pp. 38–39). After Abraham, the banner of *tawhid* was carried forth by Abrahamic prophets, including Moses and Jesus (Shariati 1981a, p. 62). Following their original revolutionary outbreaks, however, the transmutation of these religions from movement (*nihzat*) to institution (*nizam*) depleted these religions of their liberatory capacity and resulted in their cooptation into the apparatus of oppression (Shariati 1971a, p. 37). This cooptation, in turn, prompted the return of *shirk*, albeit masqueraded as *tawhid*. As the last of the Abrahamic religions, Islam came with the declared objective of “realizing the promise of *tawhid* in all spheres of life” (Shariati 1981a, pp. 147–8). However, the gradual institutionalization of Islam in the post-Muhammad caliphate system set the stage for a new form of *shirk* masquerading as *tawhid*. Led by Ali, Shi’ism, which Shariati defines as “Islam minus the [institution of] caliphate” (Shariati 1980a, p. 119), emerged as a revolt against this deviation. The assassination of Ali in 661 CE and the establishment in the same year of the Umayyad dynasty consolidated a split between an emancipatory Muhammadan Sunnism (*tasannon-e Muhammadi*) and an oppressive Umayyad Sunnism (*tasannon-e Omavi*) (Shariati 1971a, p. 301). This consolidation also set the stage for an all-out confrontation in the Battle of Karbala between Hussein ibn Ali and Yazid ibn Mu’awiya. Shariati’s declaration that “every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala” (Shariati 1981a, p. 453)—which is now a staple slogan in Shia communities throughout the world, especially during Muharram *majalis* (gatherings)—renders the Battle of Karbala as another reenactment of the primordial battle of *tawhid* and *shirk* (p. 27). And yet, with its institutionalization under Safavid rule, Shi’ism was coopted into the prevailing power structures. Henceforth, the history of Shi’ism too has been a history of a battle of religion against religion, between a revolutionary Alid Shi’ism (*tashayyo-e Alawi*) and a counterrevolutionary Safavid Shi’ism (*tashayyo-e Safavi*) (Shariati 1971a, pp. 47–48). Shariati’s call for unity between Muhammadan Sunnism and Alid Shi’ism is aimed at reviving Islam’s original *tawhidic* spirit.
- 16 A simultaneous theological and ideological privileging of monotheism is also evident in Shariati’s postulation that, by bringing together the liberative elements of all other religions, Islam presents the only genuine path to human emancipation. In Islam, he claims, the Buddhist pursuit of enlightenment; the Zoroastrian doctrine of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds; and the Christian ethics of compassion and altruism find meaning and direction in a *tawhidic* frame of reference (see Shariati 1981b). Although he recognizes Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity as potential sources of liberative insight, this recognition is at once predicated on and serves to reinforce the privileging of theological monotheism over theological polytheism, and of Islam over other religions. In much the same way, Shariati’s (1977) provocative contention that the Hindu Gandhi, the Jewish and communist Georges Gurvitch, and the Sunni Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Abu Hanifa are closer to the spirit of Shi’ism than Shia clerics who serve the establishment (pp. 12–13) works to authenticate the Shia self, rather than to embrace the Hindu, Jewish, communist, or Sunni ‘other’.
- 17 Shariati (1980a) claims that even though in Upanishads, Vedas, and Rigveda, Krishna is conceived of as a singular God, in the course of time, Hindu theology moved toward polytheism (p. 295).
- 18 Although Rahemtulla makes this observation in reference to a similar hermeneutic move by the late Indian Muslim liberation theologian Asghar Ali Engineer, for whom Hinduism is, beyond its evidently polytheistic layers, an essentially monotheistic faith, Rahemtulla’s conclusion is equally applicable to wadud’s engagement with Hinduism.
- 19 The subject of interreligious engagement and solidarity has been considered by some of the scholars and advocates of Islamic liberation theology. Among them, the prominent South African Muslim liberation theologian Farid Esack has, in a number of works, including *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (1997), sought to advance a vision of interreligious solidarity in liberative struggles. While the *tawhid* paradigm is undoubtedly important to Esack’s rendition of Islamic liberation theology, Rahemtulla’s (2019) observation that Esack’s particular account of interreligious solidarity relies more heavily on the paradigm of Exodus, rather than that of *tawhid* (p. 32), may be indicative of the possible limitations of the hitherto renditions of the *tawhid* paradigm to meaningfully account for the non-Muslim ‘other’.
- 20 Intersectional solidarity, according to Tormos (2017), is an approach to solidarity “which consists of an ongoing process of creating ties and coalitions across social group differences by negotiating power asymmetries” (p. 712). Tormos’s observation that, while it requires the recognition of difference, intersectional solidarity is at odds with and undermined by the tendency toward essentialism (p. 708), ought to be taken seriously by the scholars and advocates of Islamic liberation theology as they engage in a rethinking of the binary construction of the Muslim ‘self’ and the non-Muslim ‘other’.
- 21 What Tormos refers to as “love for the other” is certainly present in the liberation theologies of Shariati and wadud, both of whom, as I have already remarked, seek to cultivate solidarity with the non-Muslim ‘other’. My intention in this article is not to dismiss the existing capacities in Shariati and wadud to embrace the ‘other’, but rather to reflect on the possible “unthoughts”—to borrow from François Jullien (2014)—of their thoughts in relation to the imperative of inclusiveness. Put differently, I draw on the emancipatory and inclusive spirit that informs the liberation theologies of Shariati and wadud in order to consider their contemporary and future relevance to liberative struggles in Islamicate contexts and beyond.
- 22 For Eliaçık’s critique of the bifurcation between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions, see (Eliaçık 2012). For an assessment of Eliaçık’s rendition of the *tawhidic* paradigm, see (Saffari 2023).

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Article

# The Egalitarian Principle of “Qist” as Lived Ethic: Towards a Liberational Tafsir

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**Abstract:** The Qur’anic term and principle of “qist”—generally defined as fairness, equity, and giving each his/her due share—occurs twenty-two times and forms a particular intentional discourse against social and economic privilege and against power in its various dimensions. These occurrences, their contexts, and fields of meaning demonstrate its distinctive place within the Qur’anic moral worldview, at the nexus between private virtue ethics and collective praxis. Qist is presented not merely as an abstract ideal, but as a specific, concrete social and economic goal for the marginalized and disempowered of any community. Especially in the domains of gender relations, poverty conditions, and authorial power, the divine injunction for applying equality in lived contexts becomes a call for liberation from “zulm” (injustice) and “taghut” (false deities). Can the examination of this concept and its affiliates form the basis for a scriptural theorization on an Islamic theology of social and economic justice, of resistance to tyranny and unjust constructions of privilege and superiority? Towards an answer to this inquiry, one can argue that qist directs attention to the practical ways of applying the overarching, comprehensive value of shari’ah, al-’adl (justice), as well as to its defining features of collectivity and distributiveness.

**Keywords:** equality; social justice; economic justice; liberational hermeneutics; tafsir; Qur’anic discourse; discourse analysis; socially marginalized

## 1. Introduction

Any call that makes people like poverty, or be content with low living conditions, or convince them of humiliation in life, or of patience and acceptance of what’s less than due right and of the minimum is an indecent/immoral call, intended to enable social injustice and drain the struggling masses in the service of one or a few individuals. And before all that, it is a lie imposed upon Islam and a slander against God. —Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917–1996), *Al-Islam al-muftara ‘alayhi* (Al-Ghazali [1950] 2005, p. 55)

The Qur’anic term and principle of *qist*—generally defined as fairness, equity, and giving each his/her due share—occurs twenty-two times and forms a particular intentional discourse against social and economic privilege and against power in its various dimensions. These occurrences, their contexts, and fields of meaning demonstrate its distinctive place, within the Qur’anic moral worldview, at the nexus between private virtue ethics and collective praxis. *Qist* is presented not merely as an abstract ideal, but as a specific, concrete social and economic goal for the marginalized and disempowered of any community. Especially in the domains of gender relations, poverty conditions, and authorial power, the divine injunction for applying equality in lived contexts becomes a call for liberation from *zulm* (injustice) and *taghut* (false deities). Can the examination of this concept and its affiliates form the basis for a scriptural theorization on an Islamic theology of social and economic justice, of resistance to tyranny and unjust constructions of privilege and superiority? Towards an answer to this inquiry, one can argue that *qist* directs attention to the practical ways of applying the overarching, comprehensive value of *shari’ah*, *al-’adl* (justice), as well as to its defining features of collectivity and distributiveness.

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This paper intends to conduct a discourse analysis of this matrix of associated Qur'anic themes—for example, the *mizan* (scale, balance), *taṭfīf* (restricting due rights), *istikbār* (the practice of power), and *istid'āf* (disempowerment)—and to examine sample classical and modern *tafsir* literature to gauge the extent of the understanding of *qist* as a public ethos, directly related to lived realities of inequalities and oppression. The paper will mostly employ the interpretive method of a 'close reading' of various relevant Qur'anic verses to illustrate articulations of a proposed 'liberational' *tafsir*, which can go beyond the limited domain of private, individual virtues and morality. Will new emphasis, the construction of a new interpretive discourse, and the "reformulation of better questions" of the Revelation, in the words of Abdulaziz Sachedina, which are more relevant to our living community in the present help in solidifying the field of Islamic liberation theology? (Sachedina 2005)

The focus on *qist* is bound to have a significant hermeneutical value for ILT as the usual concentration on the concept of '*adl* (justice) tends to steer studies more towards the philosophical, metaphysical, and juridical domains. While this kind of scholarly inquiry is definitely valuable, it may not be sufficient in illustrating the simple down-to-earth principle of the equal and rightful distribution of resources and opportunities. Worthy of notice is the fact that the primary meaning of its verb form *qassata* is 'to distribute', which even on the direct linguistic level links it to action. Majid Khaddury, for instance, in his *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (1984), has presented an extensive history of the well-known Mu'tazalite–Ash'arite complex ethical debate in addition to its political contextualizing. Justice has always been considered an objective value and central purpose of *shari'ah* and studied as a category of analysis in the thought of modern and contemporary Muslim thinkers (Johnston 2010). Yet, a text-based analysis of the *qist* discourse, whether in the main source text of the Qur'an or in the *tafsir* literature, can direct attention to the role of Muslim interpretive communities seeking relevance and connection to their lives through a purposive hermeneutic. The late Egyptian reformist thinker and liberationist Gamal al-Banna (1920–2013) broached the subject of justice through a comparative reading of Western and Islamic thought and maintained that uniquely in Islam justice is clearly a central concept, as God made it "the virtue of all virtues" (Al-Banna 1995, p. 77). He points to the numerous Qur'anic references to the idea and commandment to justice but does not distinguish between '*adl* and *qist*, conflating both and equating '*adl* with *haqq* (truth): "According to the noble Qur'an, justice is truth applied, and truth is justice in the abstract. . . Both are among God's beautiful names" (p. 98). Interestingly, al-Banna's criticism of the Mu'tazalites is based on the fact that despite their obsession with justice and the contemporaneous need for praxis, "they did not transfer their belief and theory to lived reality and work", and "similar to the Greeks, engaged in philosophy for its own sake, without descending with it to the level of reality and practical life" (p. 103). That is why a close semantic and discursive analysis of *qist* in particular can contribute to enriching the hermeneutical discussion and application of ILT.

Engaging the existing *tafsir* tradition is one aspect of this process that allows us to assess and learn about past understandings and perspectives, then generate more articulations of the issue. Despite the gaps, silences, or possible contradictions in certain areas, *tafsir* views and insights remain beneficial and are a necessary starting point in any inquiry. Abdelaziz Sachedina explains aptly the significance of this interactive intellectual and hermeneutical endeavor vis-a-vis the exegetical tradition:

It is important. . . to recognize the evolving intellectual process in understanding the revelation that would enable the commentator to search for the real intention and contextual significance of the recontextualized exegesis of the past commentators. Such recognition in the evolving clarity of meanings also equips the commentator to engage in his own hermeneutics without discarding some variant readings and ensuing interpretations, which are critically and painstakingly surveyed for their historical value in as much as they reveal the true meaning of the text. (Sachedina 2005)

Hence, reflecting and building on past exegetical views is an added value for the contemporary Muslim reader/commentator and for expanding the horizons of specific fields within Islamic studies.

For this specific presentation of understandings and explanations of *qist* verses, I looked at Abu Ja'far Muhammad al-Tabari's (839–923) beginning formulations, as his is the earliest documented and full *tafsir* work, the style simple and straightforward, and the explanation usually aims at the most apparent of meanings, linguistically and historically. Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi (1999, d. 1209) complements this initial step by providing multiple facets or interpretive dimensions (he uses the word *wujuh*), digging deeper into philosophical, theological, or spiritual levels. Abu al-Qasim Mahumud bin Umar Al-Zamakhshari's (1986, d. 1144) commentaries, however, are more concise and to the point, mostly a distillation of both Tabari's and Razi's views. For the purpose of this paper, these three exegetes (together or any of them) represent the pre-modern perspective, method, and style, while Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn 'Ashour (1879–1973) and A'isha Abd al-Rahman (1913–1998) illustrate a modern interpretation, as both self-professed reformists shared a special interest in Qur'anic linguistic and rhetorical aspects and adopted a critical perspective towards the classical exegetes. Furthermore, the fact that Abd al-Rahman was a serious woman *mufasssirah* contributing to a centuries-old male tradition of hermeneutics is important to flag here.

It will be noticed, though, that while the exegetes' praise of justice as an unquestionable, ultimate value already exists, they don't always distinguish in their explanations between *adl* and *qist*, except linguistically. That conflation or vagueness needs to be unpacked and leads one to pose a question about why the Qur'an has two different terms for this principle or notion. Their comments on the subject are significant insights that demonstrate their acute awareness of justice as fundamental, and so can act as starting points for added nuances and levels of meaning. In this sense, the validity of engaging *tafsir* and its conceptual intricacies affirms its role not just in the Islamic intellectual history and tradition, but also in the formation of communal consciousness: "In the traditional Islamic world, the Quran was and is understood through the language of *tafsir*, and much of what Muslims believe the Quran is stating is actually what *tafsir* says it is", and so it "still plays a central role in defining the religious outlook of many Muslims" (Saleh 2015, p. 1657).

However, before going into the subject of *qist* in the Qur'an and its commentaries, it may be worthwhile to take a quick look at previous landmark studies and foundational ideas as background and context in the following three segments.

## 2. Overview of Scholarship in the Field

What is the source or interpretive rationale for conceiving an Islamic paradigm of liberation theology? If liberation theology has been defined broadly as "thinking the faith in the face of oppression" (Boff and Boff 1989, p. 14), meaning seeing the oppression/liberation process in the light of faith, and has been strongly associated with a Christian framework and inception (1971, 1983), how do we identify specific Islamic ideas that can be presented as a project or trajectory pushing for emancipation from oppression and towards social justice? A number of renowned Islamic scholars, such as Asghar Ali Engineer (1990), Farid Esack (1997), and Hamid Dabashi (2008), also the early scholars, Hasan Hanafi (1935–2021) and Shabbir Akhtar (1960–2023), have offered foundational and pioneering studies of the phenomenon and addressed it directly, yet more specific and diversified research should continue to be produced in order to reach the kind of cumulative knowledge needed within Islamic studies. Additional dynamic scholarship, such as that of Shadaab Rahemtulla's *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Rahemtulla 2017) and Abdennur Prado (2012), has also broached the subject with new perspectives and analyses posing Islamic liberation theology as a different way of thinking about the active role of Islam in people's lives. In general, it could be said that the field of Islamic liberation theology is a multi-faceted work in progress that is still open and in the process of building a more cumulative tradition, unlike—maybe—the Latin American well-defined and self-conscious school.



More recently, a study of the role of historical and modern figures in Islam in fighting for the cause of justice has appeared (Baker 2022). It especially highlights two important revolutionary figures marking a historical moment of inception and another of maturation in the twentieth century, namely the Companion Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (d. 654) and the Iranian intellectual ‘Ali Shari’ati. Interestingly and significantly, the latter has written on the first as his inspiration and model for constructing an Islamic theology based on solidarity with the poor and disempowered masses. In another thematic and comprehensive study of the various forms of Qur’anic justice within their socio-historical contexts, *The Qur’an and the Just Society* (Harvey 2018), Ramon Harvey mainly intends to show that Islam’s major source text still provides an applicable vision and is relevant to modern life. Hence, a goal for more research in this area would be to inspire a future-looking trend that emphasizes applications and activations on the ground—that is, from theory and scholarship to movement.

### 3. The Difficult Role of Liberational Hermeneutics

Rooted in praxis, solidarity with the poor, socio-economic contexts, and radical change in history, liberational scriptural hermeneutics discovers the transformative, practical function and trajectory embedded in sacred texts: “The liberation theologian goes to the scriptures bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine word. This is a new way of reading the Bible: the hermeneutics of liberation” (Boff and Boff 1989, p. 32). This revolutionary vision then would inspire the activation of the transforming energy of religious texts both on the individual and collective/social levels, offering “an interpretation that will lead to individual change (conversion) and change in history (revolution)” (Boff and Boff 1989, p. 34). In the words of Gustavo Gutierrez: “Theology must be critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements” (Gutierrez [1971] 1988, p. 9). And it is a forward-looking reflection towards the future for the purpose of action that transforms the present. In other words, it is a whole new way of approaching theology, one that protests “against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society” (Gutierrez [1971] 1988, p. 12).

That is why there exists a typical antipathy of liberation theology to the theoretical and elitist academic aspects of textual hermeneutics that may reinforce religion’s detachment from people’s realities or merely emphasize personal piety:

When Carlos Mesters, a liberation theologian from Brazil, writes of ‘interpreting life by means of the Bible’, he encapsulates this way of doing theology. Liberation theology is not the accumulation of, or learning about, a distinctive body of distinctive information. . . . [It] contrasts with much of the theology that has emerged in the last two centuries, centred [*sic*], as it so often is, in university or seminary, with the priority placed on intellectual discourse detached from life and, increasingly, the practice of prayer and charity. (Rowland 2007, p. 4)

However, the scriptural foundations of religious liberational thought are still needed. In fact, the task of re-visioning scriptural concepts that have been misunderstood as encouraging pacifism, complacency, and non-inquisitive acceptance of poverty conditions is a vital assistance to the liberation theology project. It requires epistemological and ethical re-orientation.

### 4. Guiding the People to Work for Justice

A revisiting of ‘Ali Shari’ati’s (1933–1977) thought can act as a renewed gateway as it demonstrates a powerful case of this kind of re-orientation towards constructing an Islamic theology based on decoloniality, anti-capitalism and consumerism, and a sharp critique of complacency in the name of religious piety. Shari’ati, who has been considered a major inspiration for Khomeini’s revolutionary project in the Iranian Revolution of 1978, argued for a kind of Islamic vision towards social and cultural transformation:

Religion is an amazing thing which plays contradictory roles in the life of human beings. It destroys and revitalizes, puts to sleep and awakens, enslaves and emancipates, teaches docility and revolt, etc. In short, the history of mankind is the history of the struggle of “religion against religion” and not of religion against atheism. The history of Islam itself is the story of these contradictory roles of religion among various social classes. . . . The logical and progressive Islam and the Islam of motion and movement, has been outmaneuvered and defeated by the deviant and decadent Islam and by the Islam of stagnation and compromise, a truly enlightened and realistic person knows that the only way to outmaneuver the latter and eradicate it from the minds and lives of people is to substitute the true, life-giving, and primordial Islam for it. (Shari’ati 1986, p. 48)

Not only does Shari’ati tap into the action-oriented and contextual life-force dimension of Islam, but he also calls directly for a collective, revolutionary transformation: “an intellectual revolution and an Islamic renaissance, a cultural and ideological movement based on the deepest foundations of our beliefs, equipped with the richest resources that we possess” (Shari’ati 1986, p. 49). According to Shari’ati, the most dangerous and unethical group of people to fight in a Muslim society are the “hypocrites”, originally referred to by the Qur’an, as they are agents of “social stagnation and narcotizing”, and through phony piety for Allah persuades people to accept the status quo:

A hypocrite is a person who portrays the God of Islam as a phenomenon that rewards only toleration of ignorance, oppression, weakness, poverty, backwardness, and disease. In actuality, the God of Islam respects “dignity”, the Qur’an, and Islam, which is the religion of science, justice, and beauty. (p. 36)

This remarkable paradigm shift in religious thinking and interpretation from personal piety to the collective good, from acceptance of the status quo to socio-political transformation, marks significant features of an Islamic liberation theology. Regardless of political assessments of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, its aftermath, and its developments, the view still stands that Shari’ati’s liberative thought was its major driving force and provided it with the intellectual foundations which had a huge influence on Imam Khomeini himself during the years of his exile (Algar 2001, p. 72). In this regard, Hamid Algar explains that Shari’ati’s use of “ideology” meant a program for action, not a strictly Marxist concept: “What is intended is a comprehensiveness, a totality, that does not restrict itself merely to a moral purification of the individual and the establishment of a spiritual link between the individual and God” (p. 79). Noteworthy here is that it was Imam Khomeini in 1979 on the occasion of the International Day of *al-Quds* and in a 1981 conference speech who first employed the Qur’anic terms of *mustad’afun* (literally, those who are weakened or deemed weak by others) and *mustakbirun* (those who make or deem themselves greater than others) as an interpretation of the oppressed/oppressor classification to be applied as a global division inclusive of all peoples and nations. There are powerful countries and regimes that are corrupt, greedy, affluent, and exploitative of other weak and poor countries. (Abd al-Kareem 2021).

Hence, for the poor and the oppressed to be supported and empowered, for the social and economic conditions that give rise to an unjust duality of the privileged vis-à-vis the marginalized to change, a theology must emphasize, in addition to the mentioned practical dimension, a value system based on justice. In other words, despite the centrality of lived reality and its actual transformations in the foundational writings of a pioneer figure like Gutierrez, he still gives importance to processes of meaning-making, re-interpretation, and re-conceptualization: at the heart of “liberative praxis” is the issue of the “very meaning of Christianity” and living “the meaning that the Word of the Lord give to the historical becoming of humankind” (Gutierrez [1971] 1988, p. 32). And towards this goal of offering a new vision of the essence of Christianity, Gutierrez attempts a re-interpretation of the basic concepts of sin and salvation, moving them from the individual spiritual and moralistic plane as a recommended “flight from the world” to the wrongful “breach of the communion of persons with each other” (Gutierrez [1971] 1988, p. 85).

## 5. Social Equality and Justice as Applied Liberational Qur'anic Discourse

To begin with, how does the Qur'an represent the problem of poverty and the poor? In two recent articles, Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour presents briefly diverse views and discussions in some sources of the Islamic tradition regarding the topic of which is a better quality or condition—richness or poverty. A good example of this debate can be found in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *'Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, in which he basically takes an ethical perspective that judges the situation according to the effect and function of poverty and wealth—which state will prove to be a worldly obsession and a distraction from God's true path (Abdelnour 2021). Apart from this “teleological” approach, Abdelnour demonstrates that the Qur'an and the Prophet's *sunna* do not inherently condemn wealth in an absolute sense, as it can be a means of giving charity and helping the poor and destitute, though in later historical circumstances, Muslim scholars began to view the accumulation of wealth as a *fitna* (a worldly temptation) (2022). Hence, it depends on the context:

It's the means by which people acquired wealth, as well as what they do with it matter. Whoever pursues lawful wealth with the intention of providing for himself, his dependents and improving the world by investing and spending it on what is good and beneficial to the individual and community, then how excellent wealth is for him! On the contrary, wealth in the hands of those who accumulate it for selfish purposes is a means of destruction and evil. (Abdelnour 2022)

An analysis of the Qur'anic concept of *qist* (fairness, equal distribution) as the applied form of *'adl* (justice) in the social and economic spheres demonstrates a concrete and textually specific foundation of an Islamic liberational *tafsir* or hermeneutics. One of the multi-levels of meaning in Ibn Manzur's definition that his classical etymological dictionary *Lisan al-'Arab* provides is the verb *aqsat/yuqsit* as a requirement of the act of doing justice (*idha 'adal*) and the opposite of transgression. It is also associated with another Qur'anic concept and term, that of “*al-mizan al-'adl*” (the just scale/balance) as well as “*al-qistas al-mustaqim*” (the straight scale), and hence more specifically connoting “equal division of shares” (Ibn Manzur 1993, vol. 12, p. 101). Harvey also notes the “transitivity” dimension of *qist* in relation to *'adl* and quotes al-Raghib al-Isfahani's (d. 1108/1109) definition that underscores the idea of “rightful or just share” (*al-nasib bil-'adl*), as well as Muhammad Dawud's observation of its association with calculating measured portions (p. 20).

Upon examination, it is found that *qist* and its derivatives occur twenty-two times, while *'adl* occurs eighteen times (Abd al-Baqi 1984, pp. 448, 545). It either denotes the injunction to treat the marginalized and vulnerable groups in the community with fairness, such as the orphans, the *mustad'afeen*, and non-Muslims, or refers to practical conduct in lived reality, such as the prophets' missions, giving testimony, trade and its association with both the actual physical scale and the symbolic cosmic scale. Nevin Reda calls this specific mechanism of social justice “the *qist* imperative” that is “never used to privilege the powerful and disempower the vulnerable or to promote systematic or other oppressions”, but exactly the opposite (Reda 2022, p. 279).

Toshihiko Izutsu has also noted this applied feature of the term in relation to justice and as referring to the treatment of others fairly and without bias, the opposite of which is *zulm* or injustice (Izutsu 1966, p. 209). Additionally, in his classic *God and Man in the Qur'an: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung*, he demonstrates that Qur'anic terms usually occur in units of particular “conceptual spheres” or “semantic fields” with strong connotative relations, which result in each term acquiring additional dimensional meanings on account of these connections. Thus, he distinguishes between the essential, basic meaning of a term and its acquired “relational meaning” (Izutsu 1964, pp. 12–13). According to this analysis, it is noticed that *qist*, along with *mizan*, *mawazin*, *qistas* (variations on equal scales), *qawwamin* (upholders of justice), and *al-sirat al-mustaqim* (straight path) all circulate within the same sphere, signifying a call for implementing equality and justice and for avoiding the violation of this serious obligation through the practice of *tatfif* in *sura* 83.

Reviewing selected exegetical insights from the *tafsir* literature could help with the inquiry if there existed a hermeneutical tradition of considering *qist* as equivalent to social and economic equality and justice and as more than merely an individual, personal virtue ethic. Since it is impossible within this space to account for all the *qist* verses, only a few representative examples will be considered—4:127, 6: 152, 57: 25—where the term *qist* occurs explicitly, then in other instances on an implicit level.

The first verse under consideration is 4:127, which mentions three marginalized groups in the early community— orphan girls, helpless children, and orphans in general:

They seek a ruling from thee concerning women. Say, "God gives you a ruling concerning them, and that which has been recited to you in the Book concerning the orphan girls—to whom you give not what is prescribed for them though you desire to marry them—and also the helpless among the children: that you should uphold justice [*qist*] for the orphans. Whatever good you do, surely God knows it well". (Nasr 2015, p. 249).<sup>1</sup>

The original Arabic uses *mustad'afin* to describe the children, and the command to uphold justice for the orphans in general uses the associated verb mentioned previously of *qam-yaqum* and the term *qist*. According to Izutsu's theory of discourse analysis, these three terms occur together in the same conceptual sphere for a reason, namely, connecting social equity and economic rights of marginalized groups with a practical commandment to implement a system of justice. Also, we notice that the context of the *sura* as a whole, emphasizing the problem of the disempowered and the vulnerable, creates a sub-text of an obligation for change. The term *mustad'afin* occurs in the same *sura* two additional, preceding times in verses 97 and 98, describing the helpless and the poor among men, women, and children. Then, in a following segment of the same *sura*, verse 135 directly commands upholding *qist* for all as a requirement of being just: "O you who believe! Be steadfast maintainers of justice [*qist*], witnesses for God, though it be against yourselves, or your parents and kinsfolk, and whether it be someone rich or poor, for God is nearer unto both. So follow not your caprice, that you may act justly [*ta'dilu*]" (p. 252). The Arabic uses here specifically the noun "*qawwamin*" (upholders), as in 5:8, to be associated with *qist* in order to underscore the aspect of collective implementation. Establishing more intra-*sura* connections and relational meanings, one notices the occurrence of *qist* and '*adl*' at the beginning of the *sura* in verse 3, also associated with the economic rights of orphans and women, as well as restricting polygamy.

In its entirety, *Surat al-Nisa'* was/is a social, economic, and moral revolution, revealed to shake the hold of power, patriarchal, and class privilege, and to empower various oppressed and marginalized groups—economically, socially, and hence politically, that is representationally within a community. Most of its specific rulings—even polygamy, marriage and divorce regulations, men's financial responsibilities towards women, inheritance laws, forbidding exploitation, orphans' rights, etc.—are concrete examples of this trajectory of social justice, egalitarianism, and empowerment of the vulnerable, embodied and condensed in the term and concept of *qist*. Even v. 34, the most notorious scriptural difficulty in this claim, can and has been re-read in this new light with different conclusions. Together with that major goal/message of the *sura*, it contains explicit injunctions of essential ethical imperatives which are necessary for the understanding and application of these rulings, as well as for individual and collective moral transformation. This kind of holistic, directly liberational reading, however, hasn't been articulated strongly enough in traditional exegesis—especially the link between *qist* in verse 3 and in verse 127, both referring to the exploitative practice of male guardians marrying orphan girls without giving them their due bridal dower or preventing them from marrying others.

Nevertheless, al-Tabari, in his commentary on v. 127, could see the significance of the Qur'anic commandment of new inheritance rights in a context that "did not give inheritance to women, or young boys, or a weak person" (Al-Tabari 1999, p. 411/5). And so, he underscores that the Divine order here to uphold *qist* for the orphans means "to give everyone among them—male or female, young or old—their due rights" (p. 411/5), maintaining that this specific implementation of fairness, *qist*, "is the justice ('*adl*') of God's

commands regarding them" (p. 412/5). Prescribing economic rights and equal distribution of resources among the weak and powerless was a radical Qur'anic egalitarian principle at the time, which was/is intended to be applied throughout changing times and circumstances accordingly. The fact that some of the Prophet's Companions repeated their inquiries concerning these 'new' rights prescribed for orphan girls indicates their dissatisfaction with the reordering of social classes and their economic privileges on one hand and the Divine confirmation of empowering the oppressed and forbidding their exploitation on the other. This is the conclusion we can derive from a 'liberal' interpretive perspective.

The following exegetes, Zamakhshari and Razi, also focused their discussions on the occasion for revelation, meaning the existent pre-Islamic social conditions of exploitation without further interpretive insights regarding a generalized imperative for all the oppressed. Interestingly, Muhammad al-Tahir Ibn 'Ashour (1879–1973), the twentieth-century Tunisian scholar and exegete, makes this observation: "the *mustad'afeen* is a grammatical addition to 'orphan girls', and it is both a completion and an inclusion. . . meaning both male and female, *al-mustad'afin wa-al-mustad'afat*" (Ibn 'Ashour 1984, p. 212/5). It is also worth noting here that in reference to 4:135, quoted above, that uses both terms *qist* and *'adl*, Razi, though he initially considers them to carry the same meaning, proceeds to qualify "*al-qiyam bil-qist*" as an action, and "*ta'dilu*" as a personal quality of the believers. The point is that classical exegetes on this topic may at times merge between the two Qur'anic notions in an abstract sense, while at others exhibit awareness of subtle distinctions in usage and scope.

The second verse under consideration is 6:152, which again associates orphans with *qist*, *mizan*, and *'adl*, placing them all within the same orbit of that recurrent semantic field—in the same way, for example, as another occurrence in 11:85 ("observe fully the measure and the balance with justice [*bil-qist*] and diminish not people's goods").

And approach not the orphan's property, save in the best manner, till he reaches maturity. And observe fully the measure and the balance with justice [*qist*]. We task no soul beyond its capacity. And when you speak, be just, even if it be against a kinsman, and fulfill the pact of God. This He has enjoined upon you, that haply you may remember.

The verse combines injunctions of action, speech, and ethics through the central concretized metaphor of *kayl* (measure) and *mizan* (scale). *Qist* here means specific tangible execution vis-à-vis the orphans' money, as well as a requirement of justice through intangible speech and the ethical imperative of fulfilling God's pact. Although exegetes mostly viewed *qist* and *'adl* as interchangeable, in their commentaries on the prohibition of cheating orphans out of their money and of observing "the measure and balance", they demonstrated awareness of the application aspect of the verse, rather than justice as an abstract concept or universal value. The reality and concreteness of the "scale" metaphor directed their explications towards emphasizing exactness in due rights, with the repeated phrase "without increase or decrease". Zamakhshari explains this concept: "Observing exact boundaries is part of *qist* that denotes no increase or decrease" (Al-Zamakhshari 1986, p. 79/2). Razi also comments on the significance of stating "*bil-qist*" (by means of fairness/equitably) after already ordering full measurement: "God commanded the giver full deliverance of due rights to those who are entitled, without increase or decrease, and commanded the one entitled to these rights to obtain them without excess" (Al-Razi 1999, p. 180/13).

A related interesting note here is a couple of interpretive observations by Tabari and Razi on the relationship of verse 152 to the preceding one, 151, with both stylistic and discursive affinities. Verse 151 lists five prohibitions (with one commandment) and 152 lists four commandments (with one prohibition). Both end with the same phrase, "this He has enjoined upon you", yet 151 follows this with "that you may understand", and 152 with "that you may remember". Tabari considered these two consecutive verses on account of their importance and significance belonging to the category of Qur'anic verses that are "*muhkamat*", meaning clear and direct in language and meaning, in no need of deeper



interpretation (p. 115/8). Razi comments that the five prohibitions in 151 are “apparent and clear, so they require reasoning and understanding, while the four injunctions in 152 are not apparent and obscure, so they require *ijtihad* in thought to reach a clear, exact position” (Al-Razi 1999, p. 181/13).

The third verse under consideration is 57:25; its first half reads, “We have indeed sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and We sent down the Book and the Balance with them, that the people would uphold justice [*li-yaqum al-nas bil-qist*]. And We sent down iron, wherein are great might and benefits for mankind”.<sup>2</sup> Again, the recurrence of the same associated terms as a unit in one semantic field acquires special interpretive significance. Both Tabari and Razi were aware of the symbolic meaning behind this association. Tabari observes briefly that the “Book” is for the Hereafter and the “Balance” for this world, for how people live their lives, “taking by measure and giving by measure. . . to conduct their affairs with justice” (p. 307/27). As for Razi, he presents several facets or multiple interpretations of the three terms—Book, Balance/Scale, and iron—in relation to each other. Particularly, the relationship between the first two notions seems to be complementary, each representing one dimension of people’s lives, the Book naturally pointing to the Revelation and all divine scriptures (the criterial prescriptive aspect), and the Scale pointing to the lived reality of people treating each other fairly and ethically (the concrete, down to earth aspect). Razi considers the first term to represent the “actions pertaining to the self” as it internalizes the moral distinction between truth and falsehood (*al’af’al al-nafsaniyyah*), and the second term to represent “physical interests” (*al-masalih al-jismaniyyah*), i.e., the practical application of separating “justice from injustice, excess from deficiency”. Thus, the Book refers to interacting with the Creator, and the Scale to interacting with the created beings fairly and equitably (*bil-sawiiyyah*). Razi also links the Scale to the Straight Path in being a moral balance between extremeness and negligence. He continues, establishing more symbolic dualities: the Book represents the unveiling of deep spiritual knowledge, and the Scale represents evidence and proof; while the Book represents Divine injunctions from above, the Scale indicates the means and actions by which human beings execute justice and people’s interests on the ground. As for the verse reference to “iron”, it generally represents the might and strength sometimes needed to defend right against wrong, and truth against falsehood. The final comment he makes regarding the connection of all three terms is interestingly nuanced: it is the responsibility of the rulers to enforce rulings that are based on justice and equity, yet according to the verse’s order, “the scholars’ station, being affiliated with knowledge of the Book, precedes that of the kings who are affiliated with the sword (iron)” (p. 469–70/29). In other words, he complicates the relationship between moral and political authority by suggesting that power is double-edged, with the potential of being used to uphold justice or not, and hence, that physical might in the hands of “people of the sword” ought to be regulated by God’s injunctions and ethical knowledge.

Al-Tahir ibn ‘Ashour picks up this ambivalence by commenting on the double description of “iron”, possessing both “might” (*ba’s*) and “benefits” (*manafi*). What is meant is to direct attention to the fact that might or physical power is supposed to be used appropriately to fulfill benefits for the people, not by criminals or “rebels against people of justice” (Ibn ‘Ashour 1984, p. 416/27)—the last phrase is left ambiguous. He seems to suggest that power ought to be put in the service of the people and the cause of justice, an interesting ‘liberational’ interpretive insight.

The purpose of the preceding interpretive exposition of a few sample verses containing the Qur’anic notions of fairness, equity, justice, measure, scale, balance, and the Straight Path is to demonstrate a specific and prominent textual presence of ‘liberation theological’ elements calling for a focused liberational *tafsir*. Such intra-textual echoes in various *suras* create a valid and clear discourse that outlines a call for social justice and equal distribution of life’s opportunities, not merely as an individual virtue ethic of being fair, but as a collective imperative in the Muslim community.

In other instances in the Qur'an, the subject is broached differently, without the explicit occurrence of terms but with parallel concrete implications. In the typically Meccan style, *sura* 90, verses 13–16, in condensed and eloquent fashion, allude to the freeing of slaves and the giving of food at a time of famine to orphans of near kin and to the helpless and homeless. In a way, the verses list categories of the *mustad'afin*, i.e., the socially oppressed and marginalized. The modern Egyptian exegete, A'isha Abd al-Rahman (1913–1998), uniquely gives attention to the social significance of these verses and the purpose of this short *sura*. She takes into consideration the preceding verses of 4, 11, and 12, which state that human beings are created to be in a condition of toil and hardship in this world, facing hurdles and obstacles. As she explains, this shows that the Islamic call is one of “struggle” and that the “Qur'an calls for fighting against slavery, class discrimination, and social injustice” (Abd al-Rahman 1966, p. 177). God alerts us that collective care and reforming the community are a priority because this is ultimately a message of guidance towards the effective reform of social reality. She calls these “verses of social justice aiming to correct the material conditions that allowed the existence of those who boast of ‘squandering vast wealth’ (v.6) and the existence of the deprived orphans and the poor homeless” (p. 178). Such references to specific reform and changes in social and economic conditions occur in the *sura* before the mention of faith in v. 17 towards the end. This means that human dignity and social justice are essential conditions of faith. No one can be considered a true believer except by turning away from transgression and injustice towards his/her fellow brothers and sisters: “A human being cannot believe in the existence of an All-knowing, All-Mighty Creator unless he is liberated first from the arrogance of his own privilege, power, and wealth” (p. 178). In this sense, the Qur'anic discourse illustrates that personal piety should not be passive and useless but accompanied by active, good deeds that benefit communities and societies.

Abd al-Rahman also criticizes the majority of past classical exegetes who did not notice this sequence in the *sura* and misinterpreted the transitional word of “*thumma*” at the beginning of v. 17 by saying it separates the actions of freeing slaves and giving food to orphans and the poor from belief, as belief in and of itself has a higher, more virtuous status, and good deeds are conditioned by faith that precedes them. According to Abd al-Rahman, they reversed and misrepresented the intended Qur'anic meaning when they missed the significance of the actual textual order of the verses. She insists, “There is no place for true, devout belief in a society that allows the ruin and wasting of humanity and accepts the holding of food at times of famine and scarcity, increasing the oppression of the poor and the deprived” (p. 179).

Abd al-Rahman does commend al-Razi, though, when he noted in another short Meccan *sura* (no. 93) that the order of the last three verses shows that God gives precedence to the rights of the orphan and the needy and delays the injunction to thank and praise His blessings, for these are in actual need in life, while the Almighty is self-sufficient and does not want or need our verbal thanks. Moreover, these particular verses use verbs to command action for the sake of the orphan and the needy, while commanding only utterance or proclamation of appreciating God's blessings (p. 48). Hence, this is a unique case of a classical and a modern exegete using the same hermeneutical strategy to articulate a liberational reading and meaning-making which centralizes social justice. A last compelling comment by Abd al-Rahman about the socio-economic and political implications of this *sura* 90 merits quoting here: “This is the ideal society that the noble Qur'an called for, as the highest of humanity's aspirations in their struggle to end the affliction of slavery, the ugliness of classism, the selfishness of tyrannical, transgressive individualism, and the sin of silent passivity towards Truth” (p. 180).

Another strong potential for an interpretive reading that prioritizes social equity, empowering the marginalized, and undermining accepted privileges is the case of *sura* 80. The specific historical occasion of this revelation refers to an incident when the Prophet (pbuh) turned away impatiently from a blind man seeking his guidance, giving priority attention to more renowned tribal leaders, resulting in God rebuking him. There are other



verses that also advise the Prophet to be patient and not give up on those seeking religion (6:52, 18:28), yet this *sura* is unique in dramatizing an actual case and so inscribing and concretizing a particular message. The first ten verses read,

He frowned and turned away, because the blind man came to him. And what would apprise thee? Perhaps he would purify himself, or be reminded, such that the reminder might benefit him. As for him who deems himself beyond need, to him dost thou attend, though thou are not answerable, should he not be purified. But as for him who came to thee striving earnestly while fearful, from him thou are diverted.

The issue here has a deeper nuance than a simple exhortation to treat the poor with equity. There are two implications: first, this is a picture of a society with a distinct division between the powerful and the privileged on one side and the powerless and the weak on another side. Second, the Prophet's initial conduct shows an acceptance of these social norms based on false criteria. Yet, God teaches Muslims through the Prophet to reflect on this situation and on the only valid measure of judgment other than social status, that of moral character and piety. Hence, the *sura* implicitly calls for the liberation of Muslim consciousness from acceptance of the conventional oppressor/oppressed binary and for a vision of a transformed society where both the moral and socio-economic status of the poor and powerless can be elevated to an equitable level.

Yet, the question might arise: do such examples represent only divine spiritual compensation or consolation for the oppressed? Proper holistic understanding of Qur'anic discourses applies significant connections, for example, recalling the two verses of 51:19 (And in their wealth was a due for the beggar and the deprived) and 70:24–25 (And in whose wealth is an acknowledged due, for the beggar and the deprived). Other than some differing exegetical opinions regarding the identity of the two categories of "he who begs or asks" and "he who is deprived or has been impoverished" and if this due money refers to alms (*zakah*) or charity (*sadaqah*), one should note the use of the Arabic word *haqq*, which literally means 'right.' Al-Razi also makes a significant comment on "the deprived" as a reference to all living beings who are unable to voice their needs. Hence, "there is an implied obligation upon those with wealth to be aware of the needs of others, even when others may be reticent or unable to bring those needs to their attention" (Nasr 2015, p. 1275). Such nuances, whether explicitly articulated or not by exegetes, corroborate the thesis that the Qur'anic discourse on equity, social justice, the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, and the vulnerable vis-à-vis the powerful, the wealthy, and the privileged is a connected matrix or paradigm to be publicly applied as a lived, civic ethos and a practiced obligation, not a private or individualistic virtue ethic.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper's goal was to illustrate, via examples of 'close reading' of certain Qur'anic texts, as well as relevant exegetical views, organically Islamic notions and principles that compose an active theology of social and economic justice. Through underscoring the central principle of *qist* (equity), its affiliates, and other intra-Qur'anic connections, I have argued for the continuing importance and relevance of interpretation (*tafsir*), not as an abstract or specialized academic exercise or for outlining a detached value system, but as a divine prescription for a program of action, transformation, and interactive response to people's needs. Even manifestly ontological, spiritual, and metaphysical statements can contain meanings of seeking worldly liberation and social struggle. A liberational *tafsir* in that sense pays attention to the sub-text—the social, economic, and political underpinnings of the Qur'an's insistence on equity, egalitarian ethics, and justice. A liberational *tafsir* perspective opposes misinterpreting the Qur'anic meanings of piety, acceptance of God's Supreme Will, destiny, and Divine tests as acceptance of human-created unjust social and economic conditions or as limiting the imperative of *al-qiyam bil-qist* (implementing equality) to a personal virtue ethic instead of civic, collective duty.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All following translations are from Nasr (2015). It often translates “qist” as “justice”, instead of as “equity” or “fairness”.
- <sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, *The Study Qur’an* uses “mankind” as a totalizing rendition of “nas” and “insan”, whereas ‘humankind’ or simply ‘people’ would have been more appropriate and accurate.

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Article

# Towards a Theology of Class Struggle: A Critical Analysis of British Muslims' Praxis against Class Inequality

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**Abstract:** The primary goal of Liberation Theology is to change the material conditions of marginalised and oppressed groups in society. Within Islamic Liberation Theology, however, issues related to class and economic inequality are notably missing. This paper seeks to begin this conversation and highlight the necessity of addressing economic exploitation, which affects most of the world's population and Muslims disproportionately. Using a praxis-based methodology, it centres the interpretation of activists from Nijjor Manush, a British Bengali activist group, and seeks to understand how Islam is used as a liberative tool to combat class oppression. Through interviews and focus groups, an alternative and revolutionary Islam emerges. Echoing a Marxist understanding of class, it sees exploitation as an inherent part of the current capitalist system and recognises the necessity of people seizing economic power. This overarching objective is the lens through which activism in the here and now is interpreted and tactics decided. Establishing economic justice therefore means trying to secure "non-reformist reforms" in the short term, which resist the logic of capital and secure the interests of the marginalised, while working towards the ultimate goal of ending economic exploitation and, by extension, abolishing class.

**Keywords:** Islam; praxis; economics; class; inequality; poverty; Marxism; capitalism; Islamic socialism; liberation

## 1. Introduction

Liberation Theology seeks to use religion to combat the various manifestations of oppression that marginalised groups in society face. Within the subfield of Islamic Liberation Theology, particular focus has been given to issues related to pluralism (Esack 1997), gender (Raheemulla 2018; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002; Ali 2006; Mernissi 1992) and, to a lesser extent, race (Jackson 2009; Curtis 2006; Mubarak and Walid 2016), with other issues, most notably class, being peripheral. This is not a problem limited to the Islamic context but more broadly applies to studies of religion, which have failed to account for the relationship between faith and class (Rieger 2013). This lack of systematic engagement with class is detrimental to liberation movements, particularly at a time when economic inequality and exploitation affect most of the world's population. This study seeks to bring class and economic inequality into the discussion and answer the primary question, How do those involved in praxis against class oppression use Islam as a liberative tool in the London context? Using interview and focus group data from discussions with members of the British Bengali activist group Nijjor Manush, it centres the religious thought of activists in producing a theology of class struggle.

This study seeks to add to the growing literature within the field of Islamic Liberation Theology and centre the issue of class. The urgency of this cannot be understated in light of the growing inequality between a rich minority and the masses. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and political and economic instability have resulted in a cost-of-living crisis, making the effects of capitalism even more acute and living increasingly precarious, even in much of the Global North. The importance of this discussion is compounded by the economic position of Muslims, who overwhelmingly belong to economically exploited

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classes. For example, in London, 9% of Muslims are unemployed, with 44% of those who are employed paid below the London living wage (Vizard et al. 2013). Second, it makes an intervention into the method through which Islamic liberation theologies are developed. To date, most Muslim liberation theologians have focused on hermeneutical analyses of Islamic sources, providing alternative readings to the mainstream interpretations distorted by the powerful. However, as the Argentinian liberation theologian Ivan Petrella (2006) notes, it is only when this academic exercise is attached to a historical project, in other words, a means by which ideas can be transformed into a concrete reality, that they attain real content and can be used to achieve liberation. In focusing on the religious knowledge produced by activists, this paper asserts the importance of praxis and illustrates how Islamic Liberation Theology can refocus on changing the material conditions of marginalised and oppressed groups.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief conceptual framework, which defines class, arguing for the use of the analytical approach provided by Marxists. The second briefly discusses how the intrinsic relationship between praxis and any theology of liberation influences methodology. Building on this, the third outlines the British context, paying particular attention to Britain's imperial legacy, a racialised working class and the rise of neoliberalism since the early 1980s. It then gives a brief outline of Nijjor Manush and the activism that it is involved in. The fourth and final section presents the findings from the interviews and extracts key themes that can be used to produce a liberation theology that tackles class and economic inequality. It starts with a critique of apolitical and conservative views, recognising the materialist origins of religious knowledge production. It then outlines what are seen as the economic goals of a liberative Islam, which critiques capitalism and argues for the abolition of class. Finally, it discusses praxis and how economic justice can be established, using Nijjor Manush as a case study.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### *Defining Class*

Although class is regularly referred to in academic and public discourse, definitions and understandings of the concept are often vague and anecdotal. Before developing a theology of class struggle, therefore, it is essential to clarify what is meant by class and demonstrate why a Marxist understanding is the most useful to understand the root causes of class and economic exploitation.

Although Karl Marx predates Max Weber, it is useful to start with the latter's conceptualisation of class, as it dominates public and mainstream political discourse. Weber's works challenged the Marxist framework (which will be discussed in further detail later) by arguing that, rather than being determined by the relation to production, class was shaped by an individual's position in the market, with different classes seeking to improve their relative provision of goods (Allen 2004). Being the consequence of market conditions, they lack "belonging" and are unlikely to develop a common consciousness or act as a unified political force (Gane 2005).

Weber's conceptualisation has inspired countless social stratification models of class. Based on Weber's emphasis on the market, they often focus on typologies that divide groups into classes according to their job title, salary, consumption patterns, etc. (Allen 2004). Following this logic, many have sought to play down the role of class (some even claiming it is redundant) and the dominance of a content middle class (ibid.). They follow Weber's lead in providing a fragmented description of society's economic reality, dividing people into arbitrary groups based on abstract categories. This lack of analytical rigour means that Weberian stratification models provide little insight into the nature of a capitalist economy, people's differing positions within it or the relationship between classes. They present class as a natural phenomenon ordained by fate (or God), which has coincidentally placed people on different steps of the socio-economic ladder. Perhaps more dangerously, it can also be used to promote the idea that people are poor or wealthy solely, or primarily, because of their abilities and efforts. Such models, therefore, fail to recognise (or choose

to ignore) the exploitation present in the production process, which is hidden behind a descriptive classification of economic difference.

A Marxist worldview addresses these issues and focuses on the role that relations of production—the relationship different classes have to the means of production (such as labour, technology, tools and raw materials)—play a role in determining the economic, social, cultural and political structure of society. On this basis, Marx illustrated how, with the exception of collectivist societies, humans have always lived in classed societies, where a minority are able to exploit the majority through controlling the means of production (Marx and Engels 1974; Molyneux 2012). Within the current mode of production, capitalism, the dominance of the capitalist class means that they are able to live off the labour of others, while workers rely on selling their labour to survive (Mo Sung 2013). Due to this imbalance in economic power, capitalists can appropriate the surplus value, which is, put simply, what remains after paying wages, and use this to amass profit. This can be invested in acquiring more capital and increasing socio-political power, through which the capitalist class structure is reproduced (Marx 2013; Wolff 2013). Furthermore, this inequality means that workers have little power over what or how goods are produced and how profits are distributed. This is decided by the capitalist class, which is primarily driven by capital (or wealth) accumulation rather than broader social benefit, meaning that capitalists will prioritise efficient and low-cost production, including by suppressing wages (Singer 2000).

Theorists have developed Marx's ideas in various directions and produced further insights based on his understanding of capitalism. The works of what are often termed the "Third World", decolonial or Black Marxists are significant, particularly concerning the British and international socio-economic position of Muslims. They highlight the fundamental role that slavery, imperialism and colonialism played in capital accumulation, which the metropole used to develop, and how the international division of labour maintains an exploitative relationship between the First and Third Worlds,<sup>1</sup> stunting the latter's economic progress (Rodney 2018; Galeano 2009; Tharoor 2017).<sup>2</sup> Others have noted how race has been used, both in the colony and in the metropole, to maintain the capitalist structure (Fanon 2001; Field et al. 2019; Roediger 2007, 2019). The prominent Marxist C.L.R. James (2001, p. 230) summarises this relationship between race and class, which was often overlooked by European Marxists, noting, "The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics. . . but to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental". Factoring in race, as well as other factors, such as gender, is therefore essential in understanding how capitalism operates and maintains an exploitative economic structure.

Ultimately, Marxism challenges the Weberian notion that class is a natural phenomenon by highlighting that it is a *product* of social relations and, therefore, should be seen as a *relationship*, not a thing (Vanneman and Cannon 2018). It highlights how all classed societies are inherently exploitative based on the appropriation of surplus value. While the means through which this is undertaken may differ between different modes of production, this inherent characteristic remains. Today, the capitalist class uses the means of production for its own gain through the exploitation of workers and drive for profit. This not only maintains the status quo but also worsens inequalities, as a smaller group of the economic elite controls the means of production. A Marxist conceptualisation, therefore, goes to the heart of why inequalities exist and provides an analytical framework through which we can understand class and its effects on our current world.

### 3. Methodology

#### *Theology and Praxis*

As mentioned earlier, Liberation Theology places great importance on praxis and achieving material change for the marginalised. Liberation theologians do not feign neutrality but acknowledge that oppression exists in the contemporary moment and must be combatted—through praxis. As Freire (2017, p. 52) argues, "Liberation is a praxis: the

action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it". It is not, therefore, a purely academic exercise but must be directed towards worldly change.

To achieve this, a theology of class struggle must be developed precisely in that: the struggle. Esack (1997, p. 111), building on Freire and the work of Brazilian liberation theologian Clodovis Boff ([1982] 2009), asserts that theology is the "second act" that is preceded by political involvement. The centrality of praxis necessitates, therefore, that a liberation theology is produced in conjunction with activists who are involved in the struggle to combat class exploitation. As Esack (1997) argues, from a Muslim perspective, this methodology originates in the Quran, where God says, "And those who strive hard for Us, we shall surely guide them in Our Ways" (29:69),<sup>3</sup> promising Divine knowledge to those who engage in *jihad*.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this, this paper uses qualitative research methods to bridge the gap between practice and theory. Initial in-depth interviews, which lasted between one and three hours, and were followed by more informal conversations in person or online, were used to understand more about Nijjor Manush's activities, the activists' socio-economic backgrounds and experiences, their motivations for getting involved in activism and the role that religion played in informing their political worldviews and engagement. Conversations at the organisation's events, including protests, talks and workshops, were used to build trust and, along with snowball sampling, recruit participants.<sup>5</sup> A focus group expanded on some of the religious themes that came up in the interviews, such as justice; discussed Islam's political and economic goals in greater depth; and explored relevant verses and *hadith*. These research methods were further supplemented by participant observation and open source research, which analysed online media related to Nijjor Manush, including articles and social media. The use of these various methods allowed the study to centre activists, giving them an opportunity to articulate a theology on the shared basis of their beliefs and lived experiences, outlining how Islam and Muslims should intervene in our current moment to end class exploitation.

#### 4. Contextualising a Theology of Praxis

Before analysing how Muslim activists in London (re)interpret Islam to combat class and economic inequality, it is important to understand the social context in which they operate. As argued earlier, any liberation theology must be centred on historical change, requiring involvement in specific historical projects. Regarding Britain, two factors are particularly important to understand: the development of a racialised working class and the rise of neoliberalism in the past few decades. These are discussed next, followed by a brief discussion of how Nijjor Manush intervenes in this milieu as a historical project for change.

##### 4.1. The Racialised Working Class

Britain's historical role as an empire and one of the birthplaces of modern capitalism means it played a central role in creating and upholding the international division of labour and the racial dynamics that underpin it. This history reverberates in Britain today, where migrants (mostly from former colonies) populate low-paid and precarious jobs and, notably, sustain social services, such as the NHS.<sup>6</sup>

Migrant communities gravitated towards areas with greater job opportunities, predominantly port cities, such as Cardiff and Liverpool, or industrial and manufacturing hubs, such as Birmingham, Greater Manchester and Glasgow.<sup>7</sup> As the capital, a port city, manufacturing hub and diplomatic centre, London has always attracted disproportionate numbers of migrants. According to 2021 census data, 46% of Londoners are non-white, making its white population, proportionately, the lowest in the country (UK Government 2022). This migrant community is also more diverse than elsewhere, with large Middle Eastern and African groups present in the capital. Like much of the rest of the country, London's working class communities are concentrated in precarious employment, particularly in services and hospitality. Due to the dominance of the capital's financial hub, the City of



London, however, the divide between rich and poor is also higher. The top 10% hold 42.5% of the city's wealth, with the bottom 50% holding only 6.85%, while 28% of Londoners live in poverty, 6% higher than the national average (Trust for London n.d.b). Like elsewhere in the country, these trends disproportionately affect racialised communities. Between October 2020 and September 2021, for example, 39% of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, 34% of Black and 33% of mixed-race people were unemployed (Trust for London n.d.a). These specificities of the London context are important to note since this is the arena of struggle for Nijjor Manush's activists.

Tower Hamlets, which borders the City of London to the east, is particularly important. Whether it was Irish or Jewish refugees fleeing famine and persecution, respectively, in the 1800s, or South Asians in the postwar period, the Brick Lane area, in particular, has been the point of arrival for migrants coming to London for centuries. Today, the borough is 35% Bangladeshi, making it the largest Bangladeshi community in the UK, both in terms of absolute numbers and in terms of proportion of the population (Tower Hamlets Council 2022). According to 2021 census data, however, it is the poorest London borough and has a child poverty rate of 56%, the highest in the country and 25% higher than the national average (Peach 2022). Although Nijjor Manush does not limit its activities to Tower Hamlets, such statistics and its centrality to Bengali life in the UK make it a key site of struggle—explored further next.

The borough, as well as London and the UK as a whole, reflects a racialised capitalist structure, which ensures that minoritised groups overwhelmingly find themselves in the most vulnerable economic positions. Byrne et al. (2020) show how this economic inequality is a major factor in explaining racialised communities' concentration in deprived neighbourhoods and increased health risks, with these groups overwhelmingly ending up in densely populated "internal colonies" in Britain's cities (Charles 2019, p. 168). Therefore, race and class should be seen as mutually constitutive, as Third World Marxists argued, with the legacies of Britain's imperial history visible in its contemporary streets (Goodfellow 2019). In this sense, terms such as "multi-ethnic", "racialised", "British Pakistani/Bengali" and "Black British" often imply a working class position and, as Shilliam (2018, p. 180) argues, "Race is class. . .there is no politics of class that is not already racialised".

#### 4.2. *The Triumph of Neoliberalism*

Although, as we have seen, most racialised groups were always exploited and excluded from centres of power, the postwar period also saw the creation of a variety of state social welfare provisions, such as the NHS, social housing and benefits. Built on the principles of Keynesian economics and to ward off the threat of Marxist-inspired revolutions, such as that which occurred in Russia in 1917, this system sought to blunt the sharpest edges of capitalism. The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 ended this postwar consensus. Influenced by the principles of neoliberal economics espoused by thinkers such as Milton Friedman,<sup>8</sup> Thatcher's government systematically cut back state provisions and allowed the private sector to further encroach into the economy. The subsequent New Labour (1997–2010), Conservative–Liberal Democrats Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015–) governments all adopted this worldview, emphasising private-sector-led growth, which widened the gap between the rich and the poor and led to greater economic exploitation (Charles 2019).

The scaling back of government services, which reached a new level of ferocity with the enforcement of austerity measures after the 2008 global economic crash, disproportionately affected the poor and working class, who depended on these services. Indeed, while government funding for tax credits, social welfare, disability benefits, legal aid, universal credit, etc., continues to be eroded, the 1000 wealthiest Britons doubled their wealth between 2008 and 2016 (Jones 2020).

Directly due to the retreat of government, the private and charity sector has stepped in to provide basic goods and services. The commodification of housing is particularly significant in the London and Nijjor Manush context since, rather than being seen as



a human right accessible to all, the market increasingly dictates housing. As part of Thatcher's push to remove the "lazy" poor's reliance on government handouts, councils did not replace the social housing stocks that were sold off from the 1980s, creating longer waiting lists and increased prices in the private rental market (*ibid.*). In London, the effects of this are even harsher, with housing costs making up 56% of the net income for London's residents compared to 37% for the rest of England ([Trust for London n.d.b](#)). The privatisation of housing and increasing demand have inevitably led to the gentrification of entire neighbourhoods in the city. The consequent unaffordability of rent and local services means that entire populations have been displaced as a result, breaking up established communities and social networks ([Trust for London n.d.c](#)). Tower Hamlets, in particular, which borders the City of London and contains Canary Wharf, another financial hub, experienced the highest levels of gentrification of any London borough from 2010 to 2016 ([My London n.d.](#)). This commodification of housing, which is a direct result of the shift to neoliberal economics, has disproportionately and negatively impacted the working class, which, as we have seen, often intersects with race, therefore, again affecting British Muslim communities. This is the context that Muslim activists operate in and to which they are responding.

#### 4.3. *Nijjor Manush*

Nijjor Manush, formed in 2018, is a group of (Muslim) Bengali activists who sought to reclaim and revive a radical socialist politics inspired by the British Black Power and Asian Youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s (see [Sivanandan 2019](#); [Field et al. 2019](#); [Shafi and Nagdee 2022](#)).<sup>9</sup> They expressed a frustration that the community had retreated from politics and sought to assimilate within the existing socio-political structures.<sup>10</sup> The group's name, which means "our own people" in Bangla, reflects the organisation's communalism and collective beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Rather than seeing itself as a nationalist project,<sup>12</sup> they describe themselves as an "independent campaigning group that aims to educate young Bengalis in the UK to challenge issues facing women, working class communities and people of colour today" ([Nijjor Manush n.d.a](#)).

These goals are reflected in their two main areas of activity. First, Nijjor Manush engages in community education through various events and workshops designed to bridge the gap between culture, history and politics. Indeed, members were critical of events that simply celebrated culture (although acknowledging the necessity of this at times) without attaching it to the realities of the diaspora (See note 12 above). Their Bangla Fora project, launched in November 2021, is particularly important in this regard. It aims to educate participants' on history and social issues while developing practical skills as community organisers. It mixes educational activities about the history of the diaspora with modern anti-racism activism, digital campaigning and community outreach methods ([Nijjor Manush n.d.b](#)).

Bangla Fora acts as a bridge between Nijjor Manush's first campaign area, community education, and their second, critical interventions. The latter aims to organise the community around local and international issues that affect them, such as poverty, gentrification and state violence ([Nijjor Manush n.d.c](#)). To date, the majority of its activism has centred on the Save Brick Lane campaign, which looks to resist gentrification in the Brick Lane area of Tower Hamlets. As mentioned, this gentrification has had adverse effects across London, particularly in inner-city boroughs. Tower Hamlets has faced particularly large pressure by developers to "regenerate", which has a detrimental effect on local communities. In the Brick Lane case, the owners of the Old Truman Brewery, who own significant amounts of land in the area, are proposing to build a shopping mall with four floors of corporate offices on Brick Lane, which campaigners say threatens the cultural integrity of the area and ignores the needs of local residents, such as affordable housing, work and community spaces (*ibid.*). Being home to the country's largest Bengali community, which is also overwhelmingly Muslim, Nijjor Manush has been instrumental in resisting these plans, collecting petition signatures from 550 residents and 140 local businesses<sup>13</sup> and organising

protests and a legal challenge to the council's approval of the regeneration plans. Through its involvement, it has become embedded in the local community, earning the trust of many and reviving hope in the possibility of an alternative way of living.<sup>14</sup> Nijjor Manush's grassroots critical interventions are part of a broader socialist historical project, which looks to combat the sources of economic and racial violence. The following section looks at the interplay between this worldview and Islam.

## 5. Developing a Theology of Class Struggle

Nijjor Manush's activism is the most vital component of the hermeneutical circle through which a liberative theology to combat class and economic inequality is developed. Interviews and discussions with members uncovered how religion influenced this praxis. Particular themes and principles emerged that can be extrapolated to lay the foundations of a theology of class struggle, challenging orthodox, apolitical or capitalist interpretations of Islam and outline the economic goals of Islam and means through which economic justice can be achieved in the current epoch.

### 5.1. Challenging Orthodoxy

Activists showed a dissatisfaction with the way in which Islam was interpreted and practiced by the majority of Muslims, arguing that this either obscured or upheld the unjust political status quo. Reflecting the depoliticisation of the Bengali community mentioned before, an apolitical approach to Islam was also critiqued. For example, Fatima critiqued an "assimilationist" Islam that, in many ways, imitated the integrationalist attitude of many first-generation immigrants, who feared to become involved in politics.<sup>15</sup> This reluctance reflects Muslims' (and other racialised communities') conditional acceptance as "British", which is dependent on being a so-called "good citizen" who does not cause trouble or challenge the status quo, instead showing gratitude for the perceived benefits and compassion shown by their British (read: white) hosts. Additionally, it reflects a particular individualist politic, discussed in detail later, which encourages people to prioritise personal progress over societal and collective concerns.

Influenced by these dual factors, religious spaces and institutions were critiqued by activists for their aversion to politics, which prevented them from protecting the Muslim community's worldly, as well as spiritual, well-being. Tasnima notes that religion and politics are "almost seen as two entities instead of one thing".<sup>16</sup> She observes that mosques' political outlooks are limited to fundraising for particular causes (often abroad) but without asking "why are we fundraising... what else do they need?" (See note 16 above). This apolitical trend is exacerbated in the current climate of securitisation and state surveillance, which prevents Muslims and mosques from engaging in politics for fear of repercussions from the state and accusations of extremism (See note 16 above). As a result of these factors, the landscape is dominated by an apolitical Islam, which refuses to challenge the status quo and encourages individualist engagement with society. It refuses to tackle issues such as capitalism and racism in anything more than a superficial manner and fails to address the root causes of class exploitation and economic inequality.

Activists were also heavily critical of a second, more reactionary, trend within Islamic discourse. Rather than obscuring the unjust political reality, like apolitical Islam does, this actively justifies it and espouses its virtues. Azfar notes:

influential figures in the Muslim community, who don't know what they're talking about at all, they know nothing about race, nothing about feminism, nothing about socialism, but they are... just repeating the words of right-wing ideologues.<sup>17</sup>

While, as Azfar notes, these reactionary and oppressive views are not limited to questions related to the economy, with several female activists noting the treatment and positionality of Muslim women in particular,<sup>18</sup> they result in capitalist principles becoming accepted within an Islamic framework:

Often in passing, what are deemed to be authoritative Muslim public figures basically naturalise capitalism as if we can't question that. It's just natural and always existed, even in the Prophet's time. [And so,] the economic question, they just put it away and they deal with social and cultural questions [instead].<sup>19</sup>

Simplistic arguments, such as "Islam allows private property and trade and therefore, is closer to capitalism than socialism", are used to dismiss systemic critiques and questions around the way society is structured and reinforce the capitalist mode of production, which lies at the root of class and economic inequality.

On a granular level, this reinforces the individualistic neoliberal ethic, which encourages Muslims to pursue material wealth and be unconcerned with broader questions around social inequality. Rather than seeing these as the result of structural issues, this ethic encourages an entrepreneurial spirit, blaming inequality on a lack of individual will or ability to succeed (Klein 2008; Jones 2020). Fatima highlights this trend within the Muslim community:

I feel like Muslims, from having grown up in this [society], are very much soft capitalists. . . They very much aspire towards having capital, access to capital and climbing up the class hierarchy. . . That's not to say there aren't Muslims who aren't. . . invested in that, but overall I don't think that's a priority for Muslims, to overturn these inequalities because the focus is very much on the self. . . and acquiring assets and commodities to basically live what they deem, I guess, a comfortable life.<sup>20</sup>

This quote provides a sharp assessment of dominant attitudes within Muslim communities and shows how a pro-capitalist Islam has permeated into their worldview and coincided with the broader neoliberal ethic promoted within society. Therefore, activists find themselves challenging an apolitical Islam and a reactionary Islam, which naturalise capitalism and encourage an individualistic worldview. Muslims are encouraged to work hard within the system to improve their condition, rather than focusing on structural critiques and combatting economic exploitation or capitalism.

## 5.2. Developing a Liberative Theological Alternative

Integral to activists' critiques of mainstream Islamic interpretations was the recognition that a radical alternative was possible. Members of Nijjor Manush reflected Liberation Theology's theoretical assertion that religious knowledge, just like other ideas, is influenced by power relations and that orthodoxy will often reflect the interests of the powerful. This materialist worldview requires acknowledging individuals' positionality and resisting the temptation to essentialise Islam. As Tanzil put it:

This is not to say that there isn't. . . a perfect text [the Quran] right, but that [it] is the perfect text that's been interpreted by historically constituted beings and so their understanding of this perfect text is always going to be limited.<sup>21</sup>

Tanzil further noted the influence of Ali Shariati, a foundational figure in Islamic Liberation Theology, who highlights the existence of different religions, which either support or oppose oppression:

There has existed throughout human history. . . a struggle between the religion of deceit, stupefaction and justification of the status quo and the religion of awareness, activism and revolution. (Shariati 1979)

Using metaphors, such as the struggle between Cain and Abel or Red versus Black Shi'ism, Shariati's thought provides the theoretical foundation for a liberative theology that recognises the impact of the material world on religious thought. Regarding the former, for example, Shariati (ibid.) argues that history is a struggle between the systems of Cain, which uses religion to justify reactionary and oppressive structures, and Abel, which uses religion to encourage revolution and establish justice. Within the Shi'a tradition, Cain was represented by the institutionalisation of religion under the Safavids (Black Shi'ism), which

severed it from its true, historical position as the religion of the oppressed (Red Shi'ism) (Shariati n.d.a).

In our current epoch, the influence of capitalism over Islam, as we have seen, is particularly relevant. As Tasnima says, it is important to recognise:

the way we view religion is going to be influenced by capitalism as well, because it's a system. Religion isn't just here, it's gonna be influenced by every single thing that affects the world. It's not in a vacuum.<sup>22</sup>

This materialist approach to religious knowledge resists the hegemonic claims of a capitalist Islam and allows for the possibility of a liberative alternative to be produced. For several activists, echoing Shariati's claim that a revolutionary religion for the marginalised has always existed, the foundations of this alternative are visible within Islamic intellectual history itself. Of particular importance was the development and attempted implementation of Islamic socialism in many parts of the Muslim world. While the limitations were acknowledged, particularly in its application, this school of thought was a source of hope for several activists that an alternative to a reactionary, capitalist Islam was possible. Azfar, for example, believed that it can be used to overcome the "intellectual. . .backwardness that Muslims find themselves in, especially in the West".<sup>23</sup> Several figures were mentioned, such as Mirza Sultan-Galiev (1892–1940), a Tatar Bolshevik revolutionary; Tan Malaka (1897–1949), an Indonesian Marxist philosopher; Haji Misbach (1876–1926), a communist activist in the Dutch East Indies; and Ihsan Eliacik (1961–), a Turkish theologian and socialist. However, it was Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880–1976), or the *Laal* (Red) Mawlana, whom research participants mentioned the most often. Born under the British Raj, Bhashani's political career spanned over eight decades in British India, post-partition Pakistan and independent Bangladesh. He was a staunch anti-imperialist, proponent of Third World solidarity and advocate for the rights of the poor, whom he wanted to offer spiritual and material emancipation through his brand of Islamic socialism (Uddin 2018). As Fatima explains:

Mawlana Bhashani did this phenomenal thing [in] the way he organised the peasant class of Bangladesh, and in particular, how he utilised very leftist politics with religion. . . And what was phenomenal about that is because, in contemporary times, people always think socialism and Islam can't go hand in hand, and Mawlana Bhashani is literally the epitome who. . . [embodies] socialist Islam, or [an] Islam that is socialist.<sup>24</sup>

While the context in which these trends of Islamic socialism developed varied greatly from London today, their importance comes in their inspiration and ability to present an alternative to the normalised and hegemonic capitalist Islam that groups such as Nijjor Manush inevitably clash with. It highlights the role that human agency, context and power relations play in our understanding of Islam and paves the way for a liberative Islam that addresses capitalist exploitation, which is at the root of class and economic inequality.

### 5.3. Economic Goals in Islam

A revolutionary programme is one set forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system to a better one. . . [whereas] a reform programme is set up by the existing exploitative system as an appeasing handout, to fool the people and to keep them quiet. (Seale 1990, pp. 412–3)

Liberation Theology, rightly, emphasises praxis. However, it is important to also define the goals towards which this is directed and through which current conditions can be interpreted and tactics decided. This overall ideology is essential to give praxis a clear direction, as the above Bobby Seale quote argues. Regarding Liberation Theology in particular, Petrella (2006) noted how, in the aftermath of the fall of the socialist bloc in 1991, Latin American theologians lacked a historical project to which their reflections were attached. To avoid falling into this trap, an Islamic theology must define the economic goals it is interpreted in relation to and judged against.

In response to the question of whether Islam ultimately aimed to abolish class, however, members of Nijjor Manush were not in agreement. Fatima argued that this was not possible in the material world. Rather, within Islam, “There’s a recognition this will exist, but it wants to . . . create a society where people can live with dignity”.<sup>25</sup> While she acknowledged that even this could not be achieved within an exploitative capitalist system, she did not share the view of other participants—that class needs to be abolished entirely. Tasnima, for example, believed that Islam calls for “the overthrow of everything that we know”.<sup>26</sup> Tanzil, recognising that Islam could be interpreted in various ways, used less definitive language but maintained:

even if it doesn’t definitively make that argument for the demolition of class, could one make a reasonable argument that it calls for a classless society. And I think . . . there’s some really, really interesting things there, that you could almost see as heirs to ideas like the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>27</sup>

This tension can be reconciled by returning to our theoretical understanding of class, analysing how it operates within a capitalist system and through which mechanisms people are made poor. As Tanzil notes:

it’s incumbent upon us to understand how people are made poor because people aren’t made poor because of some kind of pathology or biology right. But Islam, clearly, I think, you know, mandates us to understand . . . what are the background conditions that make people poor? (See note 27 above)

This approach prevents Islam from becoming a static system of thought, allowing it to adapt to different conditions. It therefore is no longer enough to simply say poverty, wealth and inequality existed at the time of the Prophet and therefore are acceptable. Rather than being based on such abstract arguments, judgement is based on the material conditions to which people are subjected.

The centrality of justice and anti-oppression in Islam means that these principles can be used as the litmus test against which the question of class abolition is judged. Tasnima, for example, notes that “Islam is a religion for the oppressed. It always will be . . . God is always with the oppressed”.<sup>28</sup> Supporting this, Fatima argues, “Justice is central to being Muslim and practicing Islam”.<sup>29</sup> The key question therefore is whether class and economic inequality exists because of injustice or not. As a Marxist understanding illustrates, it is the result of an exploitative relationship between the capitalist and working classes, where surplus value is extracted from the latter to enrich the former. Azfar reframes this by making a distinction between poverty and exploitation, arguing that the focus should be on the latter:

I think, for me, there’s a clear, quite explicit injunction in the Quran and hadith against exploitation in the abstract. . . I think that’s the question we’re dealing with. . . —in the course of building something Islamic. . . how in doing so [do we] create conditions whereby exploitation is negated or no longer allowed, and therefore any sort of distinction between the rich and the poor become one, drastically limited. . . undercutting the root of inequality. So again, the main point, I think, is a distinction between rich and poor, and exploiter, exploited.<sup>30</sup>

This focus on exploitation can be used to reconcile disagreements around whether Islam calls for the abolition or managing of class. An analysis of how class operates and people are made poor within the current capitalist context shows that exploitation is inherent to the system. God’s affinity to the oppressed and injunctions to uphold and establish justice make this status quo unacceptable and require Muslims to tackle the oppression that lies at the root of a capitalist system. Only through this can economic justice be established, and it will inevitably lead to the abolition of class and a drastic reduction in inequality.

#### 5.4. Interpreting Economic Principles

A critique of class was not limited to a general aversion to injustice and exploitation, however. Other, more specific principles were extracted from the Quran and *hadith*, which could be used to further support, what Tanzil describes before as, “a reasonable argument. . .for a classless society”.<sup>31</sup> The prohibition of theft, for example, Tanzil highlighted with verse 4:29, which commands believers to “not devour wealth among yourselves unrightfully, but. . .trade by mutual consent”, could be extended to the idea of surplus value today (See note 31 above). This argument is further supported by constant prohibitions to hoarding wealth, which Tasnima notes is “one of the main reasons why class exists”,<sup>32</sup> and an animosity towards wealth accumulation as an end in itself. For example, Surah al-Humaza states:

Woe to every slanderer, backbiter, who amasses wealth and counts it over. He supposes his wealth will make him immortal! No, indeed! He will surely be cast into the Crusher. (104:1–4)

and Surah al-Ma’un criticises

the one who drives away the orphan. . .does not urge the feeding of the needy. . .those who show off and deny aid/withhold things of use from others (107:2–7).<sup>33</sup>

Based on these verses, and others, the activists argued that an argument could be made for challenging classed economic systems, which expropriate wealth and facilitate its concentration in the hands of a few.

In addition to this general position, particular mechanisms, such as Islamic taxation, *zakat* specifically, and prohibitions of interest also point towards a desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth.<sup>34</sup> They can be interpreted as directing society towards common ownership, a key principle of a socialist society. Indeed, reflecting on 4:126, “to Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth”,<sup>35</sup> and Allah encompasses all things”, Tanzil says that here God establishes a “global commons that we all have access to. . .and ideas of enclosure, private property are an anathema to the idea that this is God’s property”.<sup>36</sup>

This radical interpretation of the Islamic canon provides a critique of capitalism and calls for structural change. Through combining an analysis of contemporary exploitative economic conditions and an assertion of God’s preference for the oppressed and criticism of the wealthy, a strong case can be made for a historical project that seeks to abolish class. As an alternative, it seeks to establish the common ownership of the means of production, where wealth is used for the benefit of the collective, not a wealthy minority.

#### 5.5. Establishing Economic Justice

In addition to this normative position, there was a recognition that immediate action needed to be taken to alleviate the condition of the poor and economically exploited. The verse in Surah al-Qasas, “And We desired to show favour to those who were abused<sup>37</sup> in the land, and to make them *imams*,<sup>38</sup> and to make them the heirs, and to establish them in the land” (28:5–6), which is a foundational verse in Islamic Liberation Theology, provides activists with a direction to take praxis in the here and now. Mirroring God’s preference for the oppressed, Muslims are tested by whether they stand with the exploited and oppressed.<sup>39</sup> Giving the poor a dignified life, which Fatima emphasised, would be more suitably placed here as a transitory goal until wider systemic change is achieved and the roots of exploitation removed. Indeed, asserting this dignity, as well as other forms of praxis, is a requirement, as emphasised in the *hadith*:

Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith.<sup>40</sup>

For those who are exploited, God’s commands to the privileged, such as giving in charity and not hoarding wealth, are indicators of what their rights are—rights they can



demand, through violence if necessary.<sup>41</sup> As Abu Dharr, a Companion of the Prophet, said, “I am perplexed by a hungry person who has no bread in his house; why does he not arise from among the people, his sword unsheathed and rebel” (Shariati n.d.b, p. 10). Preference for the oppressed and working to establish them in the land, as per 28:5–6, is a guiding principle for Muslim activists and at the core of establishing economic justice.

Although activists agreed on the centrality of economic justice, they noted that the substance was left undefined. Here, tensions between short- and long-term goals, as well as differing perspectives on what justice means, come to the fore. As Mohammed said:

How we go about [establishing justice] is the ultimate question really and it’s something that I grapple with because it also makes you think about your faith and where you stand and [whether you should be] organising merely to overhaul the system or should you be also organising to help plaster the maladies that have come about because of this system. . . I mean, these are questions I often ask myself, and it’s also a question of where I stand and how I can go about doing things.<sup>42</sup>

This tension is perhaps best illustrated in discussions around the role of charity and *zakat* in establishing economic justice. While the latter was acknowledged as an obligation of spiritual benefit to the believer,<sup>43</sup> the emphasis on these as the only way to engage political and economic issues was criticised. It reflects a “neoliberal understanding of the faith”,<sup>44</sup> which has commodified giving<sup>45</sup> and only allows for a “narrow” solidarity with the oppressed.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, it serves more as a way for Muslims “making themselves feel good”<sup>47</sup> than addressing the “root cause of inequalities and exploitation”.<sup>48</sup>

Although activists did recognise the value in even these short-term measures, the lack of structural critique and the absence of a wider historical project were highlighted. By focusing only on the present, these measures lacked any political weight, as Tanzil argued:

We can look at the deeper meaning behind [*zakat* and *sadaqah*], that there is this duty and obligation towards the made-marginalised. And if you take that deeper meaning, that opens up a completely different kind of politics and engagement that you have with the world. Is it really enough when homeless people are sleeping outside of boarded up houses, when people are drowning in the English Channel, is it really a fulfilment of your duty that every Friday at *jummah*, you put a couple of quid in the bucket?<sup>49</sup>

Rather, if Islam

has a preference for the poor and it has a normative aspiration of equality. . . then your reading and conceptualisation of justice would be completely different, what we might in the contemporary moment call social justice, right or transformative justice. Whereas, if you don’t see class difference, if you don’t see any other kind of embedded material difference through reading attempts, then your conceptualisation of justice might be something akin to an individualistic justice, you know, eye for an eye, criminal justice, punitive approaches, those kinds of things. So, I think that the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes justice within Islam, as well as it being a sentiment, a disposition, it has to be read through how we think Islam, and all of its collection of texts, understands the world and its aspirations.<sup>50</sup>

These quotes illustrate the importance of defining economic goals and a clear historical project against which particular tactics and tools for change can be judged. As activists highlight, charity is limited in this regard, and although it can alleviate some of the worst effects of economic exploitation, at best, it fails to address these structural issues, while in many cases, it actually helps to uphold the exploitative status quo.

Conversely, Nijor Manush took its praxis in a different direction, asserting that economic justice requires addressing *systemic* issues and is attached to social transformation. This can be articulated through what are called “non-reformist reforms” that, although



achieved by working within the system, do not endorse the overall socio-economic structure.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the ambiguity and lack of codification of the concept of justice in the Quran give grassroots campaigners the necessary flexibility to adapt to changing conditions and demands.

This was reflected in the Save Brick Lane campaign, which Nijjor Manush has led. Here, a conception of justice emerged through a dialectical relationship between activists and the local community, who were threatened by regeneration plans. Fatima explains how “we came in with a particular idea [of justice], but that itself was challenged, it shifted, it then reformulated into something else, it has a different meaning now”.<sup>52</sup> She expands:

Justice isn't just something you arrive at on your own. . .because often knocking on literally hundreds of peoples' doors and speaking to them in English and Bengali, trying to figure out what it is they want and. . .the thing that kept coming up over and over and over again, where they felt like injustice was being done to them, is their housing situation. So, coming to the particular conclusion, and therefore, a particular goal that we want to reach for the campaign was done in relation to what we were observing, alongside the other campaigning groups, but also, coming to that conclusion, based off what we learnt from the collective struggle of the local residents and tenants (See note 52 above).

Here, Fatima illustrates how praxis informs not only theology within the hermeneutical circle but our understanding of social justice and class struggle itself. Through conversation with people during the campaign, it meant demanding good-quality and affordable housing, rents and community spaces, while resisting eviction, home foreclosure and forced displacement. By challenging the power of capital and securing the interests of the working class and racialised communities, Nijjor Manush is seeking to secure non-reformist reforms, which eat away at the overall capitalist power structure.

Activists emphasised that the Save Brick Lane campaign should not be isolated from a broader worldview, which looks to politicise and mobilise the Bangladeshi community. In the absence of hope, Nijjor Manush helps them to imagine an alternative way of living, where not only “they survive, but where they thrive and where they flourish”.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, it seeks to build up the Bengali community as a political force that understands the root causes of racial capitalism (supplemented by community education programmes, such as Bangla Fora) and helps them to imagine and work towards a viable alternative. Unlike neoliberal practices of charity, Nijjor Manush activists saw praxis through the lens of a broader worldview, which attaches contemporary struggles to the desire to achieve systemic change. This approach is indicative of a liberative perspective, which balances short- and long-term goals through recourse to the historical project of ending economic exploitation and abolishing class.

## 6. Conclusions

For any liberation theology to be truly liberative, it has to prioritise praxis and achieving material change for the marginalised and oppressed. Within the Islamic context, class and economic exploitation has not been addressed, which is particularly concerning in the current moment, where the inequality has reached unprecedented levels and increasingly more people are finding themselves unable to obtain the necessities to live. Nijjor Manush intervenes in a British context where a racialised working class is being exploited by the expansion of a neoliberal regime, which commodifies basic goods and services, in particular housing.

A praxis-based liberation theology by necessity prioritises the activist, with religious knowledge being developed in and through the struggle. Members of Nijjor Manush recognised the influence that material reality had on religious knowledge and were critical of its hegemonic apolitical and reactionary manifestations. They emphasised the existence of contrarian traditions, particularly Islamic socialist trends, that challenged capitalism and demonstrated the potential of a revolutionary alternative. Through this inspiration and an interpretation of the canonical texts, activists argued that an Islamic liberative project should

aim to remove all forms of economic exploitation. Contradictions in political objectives among members could be reconciled by using a Marxist understanding of class, which sees exploitation as inherent to any class-based system. Based on this and Islam's aversion to injustice, abolishing class becomes the necessary end goal for a liberative theology. This historical project dictates how economic justice is achieved in the here and now. The flexibility afforded by general injunctions to "establish justice" in the Quran allows grassroots organisers to develop their understandings in conjunction with the oppressed and work towards radical "non-reformist reforms". These challenge the foundations of an exploitative economic structure and show that a theology of class struggle is necessary if Muslims want to achieve economic justice.

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## Notes

- 1 The terms "First" and "Third Worlds" have deliberately been used here in an attempt to reaffirm their continued relevance in the contemporary world. In opposition to other descriptors, such as the Global North and South, these terms not only speak to a particular exploitative relationship between the metropole and the periphery but also speak to a form of solidarity, movement and praxis, which began with high-profile events, such as the Bandung Conference of 1955, which continues today with the legacy and work of Third World Marxists, feminists, etc.
- 2 Although not a Marxist, Shashi Tharoor's book *Inglorious Empire* gives a detailed account of how wealth was extracted from India to develop Britain.
- 3 All translated verses of the Quran are based on Ali Quli Qara'i's (2004) translation, unless otherwise stated, with small changes made by the author, where necessary, for clarity.
- 4 Here, the word *jihad* refers to the verb *jahadu* mentioned in verse 29:69, translated as "to strive hard".
- 5 Five members of Nijjor Manush took part in this study: Fatima Rajina, Tasnima Uddin, Azfar Shafi, Mohammed Ullah and Sarah Sarwar. They are all part of the organisational core and work closely to decide on Nijjor Manush's identity, activities and future trajectory. One former member, Tanzil Chowdhury, who helped to found the organisation but has since stepped back to focus on other projects and commitments, also participated. All interviewees agreed for their actual names to be used in this paper. In this case, anonymity would have been a form of erasure that would not allow them to take ownership of their words and the vital praxis in which they are involved.
- 6 For more on the role and struggles of migrants, see Field et al. (2019), Clark and Shankley (2020) and Goodfellow (2019).
- 7 According to the 2011 census, 97.4% of Asians and 98.1% of Black people, along with 92.4% of mixed-race people, in England live in urban areas (UK Government 2018).
- 8 For more on the global rise of neoliberalism and the influence of Milton Friedman, see Naomi Klein (2008) and Angus Burgin (2012).
- 9 Azfar Shafi, co-author of *Race to the Bottom: Reclaiming Antiracism*, is also a member of Nijjor Manush.
- 10 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021; Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Sarah, interview with author, 13 May 2022; Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
- 11 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
- 12 Ibid.; Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
- 13 Fatima Rajina. Lecture. "Subaltern London: Neighbourhoods of Resistance and Care", London, 17 November 2021.
- 14 Ibid.; Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
- 15 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
- 16 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 17 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
- 18 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021; Sarah, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

- 19 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
- 20 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
- 21 Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
- 22 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 23 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
- 24 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
- 25 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
- 26 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 27 Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 28 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 29 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
- 30 Azfar, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 31 Tanzil, *ibid.*
- 32 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 33 Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022; “withhold things of use from others” was the translation provided by Tanzil in our discussion, which follows the general meaning provided by other translators.
- 34 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 35 The translation of the first section of this verse is taken from Sahih International.
- 36 Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 37 *Ustufu* is variously translated as *abased*, *oppressed*, *(made) weak*, *inferior*, etc.
- 38 Qurai does not translate the word *imam*, but this is often translated as *leaders* or *rulers* by other translators.
- 39 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
- 40 Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi (Hadith 34). This hadith was mentioned by both Fatima and Tasnima in interviews with the author.
- 41 Tasnima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 42 Mohammed, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
- 43 Fatima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 44 Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
- 45 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
- 46 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
- 47 Mohammed, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
- 48 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October, 2022.
- 49 Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December, 2022.
- 50 Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 51 Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
- 52 Fatima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
- 53 Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

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Article

# Locating 'Praxis' in Islamic Liberation Theology: God, Scripture, and the Problem of Suffering in Egyptian Prisons

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the tenability of a project for Islamic liberation theology by exploring the religious lives of Egyptian prisoners—with an emphasis on their encounters with the Qur'an, devotional and contentious contemplation, and theodicy. It employs an ethnographic approach to the study of Islam in Egyptian prisons by interviewing former political prisoners incarcerated after the 2013 military coup. By examining the work of key liberation theologians Farid Esack (b. 1959), Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951), and Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939), I ask: can a justice-oriented hermeneutics, concerned with pluralism and breaking down binaries, be a meaningful starting point to those struggling under oppression? I posit that the concern with developing hermeneutics can potentially limit the praxis whereby the faithful struggle with the text in the very moment of suffering. It shows how Egyptian prisoners' devotional (and contentious) contemplation (*taddabur*) of the Qur'an—rather than reading liberation into the Qur'an—allowed for emancipatory embodiments of scripture. Furthermore, I show how prisoners stripped of their agentic power come to understand human action and divine action in history and how the metaphysical responses to human suffering inevitably shaped how they view both structures of inequality and domination as well as their potential liberation from it.

**Keywords:** Islamic liberation theology; Egyptian prisons; theodicy; Qur'an; hermeneutics

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## 1. Introduction

In the first four days of his enforced disappearance, Mustafa could not pray ([United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner n.d.](#))<sup>1</sup> It was not that he did not want to pray; he just could not. An anti-riot squad had knocked down his door and dragged him out of his house. They moved him to a clandestine cell. He was blindfolded and alone. However, he was keenly aware that in the adjacent cells were others who were also alone and potentially as scared as he was.

I was always the type of person on top of my prayers, but in the first four days, I was in a state of shock that I didn't move at all. I couldn't pray. I didn't know where I was.

In the first forty days of his disappearance, he was being tortured daily and without stop. He was blindfolded for the first two months. What was most eerie, however, was the sound of the Qur'anic recitations emanating from the corridors and surrounding the solitary cells. The screams of prisoners being tortured would pierce through the melodious albeit somewhat grainy Qur'an recordings. Mustafa explained that the officers tried to drown out the sounds of torture with the loud Qur'an recitations. It was not exactly an overcorrection due to guilt, Mustafa noted these were truly religious people. They would take breaks from torturing him to pray their obligatory prayers. As for Mustafa, who was a graduate of Al Azhar and had memorized the Qur'an as a child, the salient presence of the Qur'an did not provide him solace nor did it alienate him. He was keenly aware that this was not for him. The sound of the recitation merely served a pragmatic purpose for the officers. Paradoxically, it amplified the faint screams it tried to mute. It was only later,



when he held a physical copy of the Qur'an and read it for himself that he would seek answers to his suffering from the text.

This paper attempts to assess projects of Islamic liberation theology with an emphasis on praxis (Gutierrez 1988; Ziad et al. 2013). As such, I conducted an ethnographic study of the religious lives of Egyptian political prisoners. I interviewed twenty former political prisoners—twelve male and eight female former prisoners who had been incarcerated after the 2013 military coup in Egypt. I first show that despite the tentative nature of formulating an Islamic liberation theology, the project appears to have certain features and contours and employs some hermeneutical methods (*Diàleg Global—Diálogo Global—Global Dialogue* 2014). However, as an encompassing justice-oriented project formulated primarily within the academy—despite having strong roots in anti-racist struggles—it remains distanced from the lived practices of many of those seeking physical and metaphorical routes to emancipation (Esack 1997).

In this paper, I examine the tenability of a project for Islamic liberation theology by exploring the religious lives of Egyptian prisoners—with an emphasis on their encounters with the Qur'an, devotional (and contentious) contemplation, and theodicy—as a form of praxis. I argue against the efficacy of solidarity as a basis for liberation theology. I suggest that to truly be committed to praxis, scholars ought to start not from the question of what is at stake—in terms of negotiating hermeneutical practices and critiquing sources—but rather *who* is at stake? Meaning that an emphasis on a justice-oriented hermeneutics, particularly with an emphasis on pluralism such as that of Farid Esack or a liberation theodicy concerned with breaking down binaries of self and other such as that of Hamid Dabashi, could potentially lack the nuance to the particularities and commitments central to praxis (Esack 1997; Dabashi 2008). This could potentially render the marginalized a mere theoretical present not a focal starting point for liberation theology. This paper examines how devotional and contentious contemplation (*taddabur*) of the Qur'an was conducted by Egyptian prisoners—rather than reading liberation into the Qur'an—allowed for emancipatory embodiments of scripture. Furthermore, how prisoners stripped of their agentic power come to understand human action and divine action in history and how the metaphysical responses to human suffering inevitably shaped how they view both structures of inequality and domination as well as their potential liberation from it.

This paper will first provide a short history of liberation theology beginning from its Latin American roots with the emergence of Christian Base Communities—committed to a praxis of liberation and the subsequent 1968 Medellín Conference in Colombia (Abalos 1969). It will show the key components of Catholic liberation theology as outlined by key liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez in 1971 (Brown 2013). It will then assess the key thinkers of Islamic liberation theology with an emphasis on their articulations of the problem impeding liberation and hermeneutics. Namely, this paper will examine South African scholar Farid Esack (b. 1959), Iranian American scholar Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951), and Indian scholar Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939). This very emphasis on Qur'anic hermeneutics and in Dabashi's case on theodicy will be the focal point in my assessment. My concern here is the fundamental question: what do we miss when our reading of Muslim popular theologies emphasizes only triumphant narratives of ideological figureheads or indeed even justice-oriented scholarship? In doing so, I ask in the very moments of struggle, how do the marginalized (in this context prisoners) relate to the Qur'an and derive meanings from it? Furthermore, how do they understand their own suffering in both metaphysical and social constructions of reality? By contending that the Qur'an is a generative and living text, the prisoners deduce subjective and universal meanings that both liberate but also constrain.

## 2. Toward a Liberation Theology

Liberation theology first emerged as a response to the radical organizing mission of 'Christian Base Communities' in Latin America in the 1960s. During this period, Latin American countries saw immense class disparity and struggle, the proliferation of corrosive

capitalist authoritarianism, coupled with imperial domination. Moreover, different elements within the Catholic Church—particularly ones embedded within working-class and rural communities—saw a greater need to think beyond institutional Church structures and develop a more thorough commitment to grassroots evangelizing missions. As a result of these evangelizing missions, semi-autonomous and grassroots movements—often led by lay people—committed to a radical Christian praxis dubbed Christian Base Communities emerged in towns and in rural areas (Boff 1986). This was the initial makings of an embodied liberation theology in which the pious married a revolutionary struggle for social justice with Christian doctrine.

In acknowledgment of the need to articulate a comprehensive theology of liberation, Latin American Bishops met in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968. They characterized liberation theology as a ‘preferential option for the poor’ (Burke and Lassalle-Klein 2006). Although this theology of liberation preceded the conference and existed in the praxis of Christian Base Communities, the goal was to enshrine it into a Catholic mainstream (Surlis 1988). It also reflected and formalized a longstanding trend within modern Catholicism that began with *Rerum Novarum*—an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 ‘On the Conditions of Labor’—and resumed with breakthrough papal encyclicals in the 1960s (Ziad et al. 2013). It was forged as a moderate critique of the excesses of capitalism. It criticized the treatment of workers and affirmed their right to fair treatment and fair wage as well as their right to organize as unions and strike if need be all the while maintaining the right to own property (Nepstad 2019).

Three years after the conference was held, Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez published a manifesto for the movement titled *A Theology of Liberation*. This not only provided a systematic view of Catholic liberation theology but also represented a call for action. Combining a Marxist critique of ‘sinful structures’ that reproduced suffering with Christian doctrine, Gutierrez’s call for action as praxis resonated with Churches and Catholic communities all over Latin America (Robson 2010). For Gutierrez, the praxis these communities embodied was more significant than theorizing liberation theology itself (McGovern 2009). He insisted that the very embodiment of liberation theology owes in great part to the presence and theologizing of the ‘absent’ from society, church, and history (Gutierrez 1988). Gutierrez explained, ‘By “absent” I mean: of little or no importance, and without the opportunity to give expression themselves to their sufferings, their comrades, their plans, their hopes’ (Gutierrez 1988, p. xx). Liberation theology thereby is characterized by ‘the right of the poor to think out their own faith’ (Gutierrez 1988, p. xxi). Indeed, the term ‘poor’ here is also all-encompassing. It relates to economic deprivation but extends to ‘Dominated peoples’, ‘exploited social classes’, ‘despised races’, and ‘marginalized cultures’ (Gutierrez 1988, p. xxi).

By the 1980s and the 1990s, Catholic liberation theology experienced fundamental challenges. There were internal disputes—namely the opposition of more conservative elements of the Church. A part of the Vatican’s office, The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued instructions questioning the movement’s radical politics and emphasis on class struggle (Singer n.d.). Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—who later became Pope Benedict XVI—wrote, ‘the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith... brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought’ (Ireland 2022, p. 123). While Catholic liberation theology faced significant internal challenges in the 1990s, theologies of liberation emanating from other religious traditions and contexts continued to provide substantive theoretical and practical interventions to how the oppressed conceive of their lived realities, God, and justice.

### 3. Islamic Liberation Theology

By the 1990s, Muslim scholars and intellectuals began articulating and advocating for an Islamic liberation theology. This paper considers the scholarly reflections of three leading liberation theologians—namely Asghar Ali Engineer, Farid Esack, and more recently Hamid

Dabashi. However, it should be noted that although we could deduce certain commonalities in their projects, they are indeed separate attempts at formulating an Islamic liberation theology and do not claim to be under the rubric of a single ideological project. In this paper, I consider two themes central to these articulations—namely hermeneutics and theodicy. I assess the main conjectures with reference to the praxis of prisoners in Egypt. As such, I will first begin contextualizing these projects and introducing the scholars who articulated them.

Ashraf Kunnummal aptly noted that these scholars share two common positionalities. Engineer, Esack, and Dabashi all grew up in the 1970s and were notably from countries where Muslims were a minority (Kunnummal 2017). Kunnummal further notes that their respective contexts impacted their articulation of Islamic liberation theology in many ways. Most significant is their preoccupation with questions of pluralism and breaking the boundaries between self and other. This informs their approach to hermeneutics in the case of Engineer and Esack and theodicy in the case of Dabashi. In doing so, some a priori truth claims regarding the nature of the texts could be deduced in their approach of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Engineer's conception of an Islamic liberation theology was influenced significantly by the Third Worldist and anti-colonial movements burgeoning in India at the time. Engineer was born in 1939 to a Dawudi Bohra family. His father was an Islamic scholar and taught him Qur'anic exegesis and jurisprudence (Rahemtulla 2018). Impacted by the communal violence in India between Muslims and Hindus, Engineer dedicated his later years to writing on the topics of social justice, gender justice, and pluralism. He believed that although religion was important to a peacebuilding project in India, ultimately only secularism could provide a lasting solution to communal violence (Rahemtulla 2018). Engineer contended that 'Muhammad's movement stressed liberation from ignorance, superstition, and injustice through the power of reason and the pursuit of knowledge' (Ziad et al. 2013, p. 316). Thus central to the Qur'anic message was the emphasis on compassion which he argued could be deduced in Sufi practices.

Similarly, South African scholar Farid Esack's conception of liberation theology originated in the struggle against apartheid. He was thus impacted by the developing Black Christian Liberation Theology in South Africa as well as its Latin American predecessors (Kunnummal 2017). In his magnum opus *Qur'an, liberation & pluralism: an Islamic perspective of interreligious solidarity against oppression*, Esack identifies his positionality in a chapter he aptly calls 'What baggage does this interpreter carry?' (Esack 1997). In the chapter, Esack lays out his personal history. Being raised by a single mother in a country with many faiths under apartheid, Esack began his religious journey at nine when he joined the Tablighi Jamat. He went to Pakistan on a scholarship, and as someone who belonged to a Muslim minority in South Africa, he was troubled by the treatment of Christian and Hindu minorities in Pakistan (Esack 1997). Back in South Africa in the 1980s, Esack noted, 'the conflict between two expressions of religion, accommodationist and liberatory was increasingly evident. In a context of oppression, it seems that theology, across religious divisions, fulfils one of two tasks: it either underpins and supports the structures and institutions of oppression or it performs this function in relation to the struggle for liberation' (Esack 1997, p. 1) Moreover, the cornerstone of this liberation theology required interfaith solidarity—as spiritual praxis and hermeneutical approach to text. This was true particularly in the context of apartheid since believing Christians and Muslims were fighting an unjust system that accommodationist (believing) Muslims and Christians were upholding.

Esack classified this Qur'anic hermeneutics of pluralism as,

'This work primarily focuses on rethinking approaches to the Qur'an and to the theological categories of exclusion and inclusion rooted in a struggle for freedom from economic exploitation and racial discrimination; its application is intended to be broader than these two forms of injustice. I believe that the ideas I put forward can have a wider application to all categories of social and political injustice, ranging from the obvious

oppression of women in Muslim society to discrimination against left-handed people.' (Esack 1997, p. 8)

For Esack, despite the importance of contextual meanings that underpin revelation, the Qur'an is not speaking principally to a particular time or space. As divine speech, it moves across temporalities to directly converse with the faithful. This is the root cause behind the universality of the text. This particular hermeneutical approach is situated in a wider argument against scholarly authorities acting as gatekeepers of the Qur'an. Instead, he reads the Qur'an through the eyes of the marginalized (*al-aradhil*) and the downtrodden (*al-mustad'afun*) (Rahemtulla 2018; Esack 2003). In this sense, Esack seeks a comprehensive reading of the Qur'an that speaks to a potential liberation that is essentially pluralistic in nature. Thus, as Rahemtulla shows, "Prophetic"—or a principled—solidarity, therefore, is a fundamental component of liberation and lies at the heart of a meaningful commitment to social justice' (Rahemtulla 2018, pp. 10–11).

In recognition of the fluidity of oppressor–oppressed categories, Esack insists the principled and Prophetic solidarity as central to forging liberation theology. He contended that the Afrikaners once victims of the British became the colonizers of indigenous Black land in South Africa; similarly, in the case of European Jewry that experienced the brunt of the Holocaust but also became supportive of settler-colonial projects in Palestine. On an even more micro-level, Esack explained, 'While I can, for example, be in solidarity with a male black worker in respect of the exploitation that he experiences at work, I ought to be in solidarity with his abused wife in the home context' (Rahemtulla 2018, p. 33; Esack 2006, p. 125). The notion of solidarity thus plays an interesting role as it pertains to plurality and the Qur'an.

Engineer's work too shows a preoccupation with the question of pluralism. As Rahemtulla shows, Engineer's starting point is that for Qur'an to be a liberating text, it must be a liberated text (Rahemtulla 2018; Engineer 1990). This could be deduced from his readings on gender and pluralism in the Qur'an. He does this by emphasizing parts of the Qur'an that from the outset seem to portray a liberationist and pluralistic message. Thus, he contends, for example, that the Qur'an upholds complete equality between men and women (Rahemtulla 2018; Engineer 2001). He also points out that Islam 'does not even indirectly hint at coercion, let alone violence, when it comes to any religious or spiritual matter' (Rahemtulla 2018, p. 62; Engineer 2005, p. 95). He laments the projects of Islamic revival for emphasizing ritual practices and outwardly shows of piety over liberationist approach, such as ones that prioritize social and economic justice, thus further entrenching the power of the scholarly elite (Rahemtulla 2018). Both Esack and Engineer emphasize a deity active in human history and on the side of the oppressed. The question of human suffering thus appears to have a salience—albeit implicit—in articulations of liberation theology.

In Hamid Dabashi's 2008 book *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, he clearly struggles with the question of theodicy so much so that he advocates a move from liberation theology to liberation theodicy (Dabashi 2008). Dabashi 'relied on post-structuralist thought with a postcolonial critical lens to develop a global Islamic Liberation Theology by connecting radical trends in black and subaltern studies' (Kunnummal 2017, p. 14). Dabashi's forged project of liberation theodicy takes the notion of theodicy outside its classical definition of accounting for suffering or evil in the world. Rather, he uses it to resolve the question of multiplicity and diversity, as Carool Kersten notes, to convey both diversity and alterity of truths (Kersten 2022). For Dabashi, this effectively means developing mechanisms and shared language that transcends the binary of Islam and the West. Kersten further notes, 'As a rhetorical device, Dabashi envisions hermeneutics of alterity as defying schematization and categorization, presenting itself as appositional, contrapuntal, centrifugal, anthropocentric and open to cultural heteroglossia' (Kersten 2022, p. 166) In Dabashi's view, this so-called new reality necessitates a 'worldly cosmopolitanism' that decenters geography and is characteristically post-Islamist.

In fact, Dabashi is speaking from a particular historical moment—which he believes warrants post-Islamism as a new reality—that is, the post-9/11 context but with a keen reflective eye on the failure of the Iranian revolution which rendered Iran a theocracy. The dual violence of militant Islamism and imperial violence—both premised on the dichotomy of self and other—ought to thus be transcended. As such, Dabashi notes, ‘Today all liberation theories will have to be formulated above and beyond all binary oppositions, first and foremost one between the religious and the secular. Immediately contingent on that collapse is the recognition that no singular *liberation theology* can be speculated in a hermetic seal from the rest of the world—and only in a fictive and combatant conversation with a “West” that simply no longer exists’ (Dabashi 2008). He contends that a retrieval of this theodicy is possibly through reflections in the works of the great Persian poets (Ibn Haldun University 2020).

Dabashi conjures Malcolm X as the embodiment of what he envisions this project of liberation theodicy to be. Malcolm X emerges in Dabashi’s project as an almost post-Islamist figure, having liberated himself from the binary of self and other to embody a form of Islamic universalism and cosmopolitanism. He thus juxtaposes Malcolm X’s supposed ‘universality’ with Sayyid Qutb’s enclosed and dichotomous view of the world. For Dabashi, the figure of Malcolm X ‘discovered an emancipatory vision of Islam’ in his departure from the Nation of Islam through breaking down the racial distinction to embody a larger *ummah* (Demichelis 2014). Thus, Malcolm X ‘rejected the Islam of [Sayyid] Qutb and that of generations of other Muslim revolutionaries trapped inside a binary opposition between two false consciousnesses: Islam versus the West, and no longer limited, defined or confined his free thought’ (Demichelis 2014, p. 146). In this sense, Dabashi renders Malcolm X as an almost early post-Islamist figure. Dabashi’s conciliatory reading of Malcolm X, whereby he transcends the specificity of Black radical politics after his hajj, is a common revisionist reading of his life that assumes a sharper ideological shift than in reality (Grewal 2015; Marable 2011). What is fascinating here is that Dabashi points out that both Sayyid Qutb and Malcolm X came to consciousness in prison; however, he does not necessarily sufficiently examine the relationship between confinement and liberation. Rather than examining subjective and intra-subjective dynamics of oppression and liberatory praxis, where ideology really comes to fruition, Dabashi’s concern with macro-theorization reflects a set of anxieties about a polarity in the world order but not one that people in their moments of oppression necessarily share.

In many ways, Asef Bayat’s qualms about the liberatory potential of ‘Islamism’ mirror the problem of Dabashi’s cosmopolitan turn. Both characterize what is said to be Islamism—and indeed its proponents—as belonging to a predominantly identarian movement based on the boundaries between self and other with a foremost commitment to a nation state-building project (Gresh and Bayat 2018). Unlike Catholic liberation theology, Bayat contends, which did not aim to proselytize their worldview or indeed Christianity, Islamism is predominantly concerned with Islamizing society. Both Dabashi and Bayat, therefore, contend that a post-Islamist condition is required for an Islamic liberation theology to flourish. For Bayat, the underlying view relies upon a depiction of liberation theology as an open and comprehensive revolutionary call for social justice while not wholly concerned with Christianizing society, in contrast to a so-called Islamist worldview, which is a closed system based on binaries, modes of exclusion, dogmatic state-building projects, and proselytization. Bayat inadvertently misconstrues both complex phenomena and, thereby, the relationship between both.

In fact, much of the early triumph of liberation theology in Latin America was due to the evangelizing efforts of Christian Base Communities in rural and urban working-class areas. This included meetings that emphasized Christian worship, Bible study, and political action (Nordstokke 2014). Moreover, for key liberation theologians like Gutierrez, the structures of capitalism are to be considered ‘sinful structures’, and thus, overturning them is a matter of Christian commitment and praxis. Therefore, it could not be said that liberation theologians were ambivalent about state-building projects. Furthermore, there is



a strong historical and hermeneutical link between Islamic modes of liberation theology and movements dubbed as Islamist that Bayat neglects. As Matthew Palombo shows, Islamic liberation theology emerging from the South African context is historically linked to early Islamist anti-apartheid movements from the 1950s onward—such as the Qibla Mass Movement, the Call of Islam, the Muslim Youth Movement, and significantly from the teachings of Imam Abdullah Haroon (d. 1969) who died in prison as a result of his anti-apartheid activism. He goes on to show that contrary to the prevailing academic view of so-called Islamist movements, these were not primarily concerned with state-building projects but with praxis—whether in Qur’an study circles (*halaqat*) or direct political action. Palombo therefore contends that the development of Islamic liberation theology in South Africa was a confluence of African humanism and Islamism (Matthew Palombo 2014). Additionally, leading proponents of Islamic liberation theology in South Africa—such as Farid Esack—came from these Islamist backgrounds and continue to share a common view of hermeneutics with early thinkers associated with Islamist movements. Rahemtulla notes,

It is worthwhile noting that Esack’s emphasis on the present bears a striking resemblance to Islamist readings . . . In other words, scripture does not speak through the mediation of a primary audience (classical Arabia) to a secondary audience (the present). Rather, a direct hermeneutical link is forged between God and the faithful, transcending time and space. Another common characteristic between Esack’s readings and those of Islamists, then, is their markedly lay character. South African Muslims engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle routinely came together in religious circles (*halaqat*) to reflect collectively on a translation of the Qur’an, asking one another what they felt the various verses meant and how these verses spoke to their experiences. (Rahemtulla 2018, pp. 17–18)

Asef Bayat provides a diametrically different view as he characterizes Islamism as, an ideological package filled with seemingly consistent components, clear responses, and simple remedies, such that it automatically ejects philosophical doubts, intellectual ambiguities, or skeptical probing. And finally, Islamism continues to project a utopian image of itself in a world in which the grand ideals and dreamlands (such as communism, democracy, freedom) have collapsed or being questioned; it continues to project itself as a unique combatant, revolutionary and emancipatory ideology. (Gresh and Bayat 2018)

Bayat is not entirely wrong. However, some complexity seems to be missing. The internal ideological, theological difference—still notwithstanding the diverse subjective formations—of those said to belong to an allusive ‘Islamist’ orientation has led many scholars to the conclusion that the very notion of Islamism is not useful (Qureshi 2022). Even Islamist movements—such as in the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood which Bayat studies—tend to embody an ideological complexity that allows for diametrically opposing views to (uncomfortably) exist under one organizational rubric or even represent it (Ayyash et al. 2023). While organizational dogmas exist, the diversity existing within the ranks allows personal meanings to be remade and reshaped constantly. Furthermore, Islamism—even as an intellectual classification—inherently carries the baggage of securitization and criminalization of Muslim political identity, on the one hand, or typecasting, on the other, which Bayat inadvertently does. For instance, Alain Gresh goes on to ask Bayat ‘And what does it mean to challenge the imperialist order when you support neoliberalism?’ (Gresh and Bayat 2018). Bayat responded that while left-leaning politics characterized Islamism of the previous decades, neo-liberal populism is now the mainstream. He cites leading Islamist figures to illustrate his point such as Erdogan or Khairat al Shater. Bayat goes on to add,

What is there in the Islamist “anti-imperialism” for the Muslim subaltern—the poor, the marginalized, the excluded? . . . I suggest that Islamist “anti-imperialism” has been non-liberatory, to say the least, even oppressive—it’s violence has triggered “war on terror” victimizing the mostly ordinary Muslims; it has embold-



ened autocratic regimes to quell dissent in the name of anti-terror campaign; and when Islamists have had a chance to rule, they have established authoritarian religious rule, exclusivist social order and moral discipline (theirs has been somewhat similar to Robert Mugabe's "anti-imperialism"). (Gresh and Bayat 2018)

My primary disagreement with Bayat here is who constitutes the 'Muslim subaltern' and what are they saying? And are those facing the brunt of the War on Terror empty vessels for state violence and Islamist counter-response or do they act on some agentic capacity? Furthermore, is it appropriate to assume that just because Khairat al Shater or Erdogan are committed to the free market that the so-called 'Islamists' in working-class neighborhoods or in rural areas facing the brunt of the War on Terror share the same class commitments? I would argue what is sorely missing from these scopes of analysis are the actual voices of the oppressed in narrating and ultimately theologizing their own oppression. By emphasizing praxis and subject formations, I highlight the cleavages within the academic discourse on those whose political identities are criminalized, on the one hand, but also do not embody lofty aspirations of Islamic liberation theology of transcending boundaries.

This paper does not merely conjure prison and the carceral as an example or case study, but it is my contention that the carceral is central to the consciousness of the Muslim subaltern. Indeed, prisons exist not just in the lives of prisoners, but the continuous looming threat of incarceration shapes the political choices and realities of many Muslim populations. Thus, by examining the way Muslim prisoners theologize their own suffering, I argue that liberatory praxis is not concerned with overcoming binaries and achieving pluralism. That is for the simple reason that boundaries and binaries are imposed on them and they are not equal participants to it. Thus often, it is within the confines of particularity from which praxis emerges. Conversely, praxis does not reproduce ideal types or harmony. It is characterized by struggle and contention—both with the material realities of suffering and with scripture and scriptural understandings. I see the problem with the emphasis on liberationist hermeneutics—whereby the text ought to be 'liberating' before becoming liberated, as Engineer contends—as two-fold. It discounts the experiential struggle with scripture that allows for it to be a generative and ultimately liberatory text. Moreover, a 'liberated' text, particularly one that envisions and strives for a resolution—either through the appeal to achieving pluralism or breaking down binaries—might not be a text that necessarily speaks to the oppressed. Since, for many, they may have to come to terms that there may never indeed be a resolution to their suffering but liberatory praxis is necessary for their survival, nonetheless.

This reality thus poses certain questions to Muslim liberation theology (and indeed theologians)—in their preoccupation with pluralism and formulating an encompassing and coherent justice-oriented hermeneutics. In the case of Esack's conception of comprehensive (Prophetic) solidarity, which underpins his understanding of Islamic liberation theology, to be achieved, he needs not to only be in solidarity with the male Black worker but also with his abused wife at home. Solidarity is thus by definition principled albeit conditional. Meaning, the point of theologizing needs to stand outside both parties with an objective set of justice claims that speaks of the oppressed and not necessarily *from* the oppressed. While Esack's positions were arrived at through a history of lived struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the appeal to comprehensiveness has its limitation. For example, how does this abused wife of a Black worker narrate her suffering? Or how does this Black worker understand his conditions and suffering but also see the suffering he inflicts? What do we lose when our liberation theology stems neither from the Black worker nor his abused wife but rather from a committed 'other' in conditional solidarity to both? While appeals to comprehensiveness may be warranted, especially as part of liberatory movements' self-critique, it does not account for how either oppressed party narrates their own suffering, or how the appeal to comprehensiveness can be mobilized against the oppressed in the liberal order—which has been the case after the War on Terror. That is, despite Islamic liberation theology's internal critiques of liberalism, it is still situated within liberalism and thus has to contend with the question of co-option and indeed has to articulate a thorough response

against it (Esack 2003; Diàleg Global—Diálogo Global—Global Dialogue 2014), hence my question: *who* is at stake—in terms of the oppressed—rather than *what* is at stake—in terms of coherent and comprehensive hermeneutics?

#### 4. Toward Praxis in Egyptian Prisons

In this section, I take the cue from Gutierrez whereby the theologizing is done by the absent. These are derived from interviews I conducted with former Egyptian detainees arrested after the 2013 coup led by General Abdel Fatah El Sisi against President Mohamad Morsi.<sup>2</sup> I asked the detainees about the religious lives and practices in prison, their relationship with the Qur'an and with God, and how they reconcile their conditions with the notion of divine justice.

When Abdullah El Shamy was first detained from the site of the Rabaa massacre, he was subsumed not with fear but with an overwhelming feeling of anger. Bodies of dead men, women, and children littered the streets. It had been twenty-four hours of nonstop killing. The mosques were turned into morgues, and blood flooded the streets. Ordinary people, however, were looking at them from their balconies and on to the streets. As he was being hauled away to the stadium, where all the prisoners were to be detained, he saw an eerie sense of normalcy in the streets.

For a moment, I started thinking. Why is everyone just watching us? Is that it? A few hours ago almost one thousand people were just killed—just like that. People are just going about their life like nothing happened . . . And then the moment you leave the square, people are fine. Cafes are open. You would think as someone who has just witnessed what you've witnessed that people might be angry that people are being killed just a few kilometres away but that just didn't happen.

Like Abdullah, Mona was bewildered and devastated by the sharp boundaries she did not draw between herself and society. The violence she endured was not just state violence, but there was a palpable sense of vengeance on the streets of Cairo. After her detention, she was being transported in a roofless van. A mob of ordinary people surrounded the van; once they discovered she was a political prisoner, they began to throw stones at her aiming for her face. She could not relate to or understand their anger or their vindictiveness.

For Abdullah and Mona, it was not necessarily the question of divine justice that preoccupied them, it was the very question of human nature. How can humans do that to one another? Later in prison, Abdullah would encounter guards and officers who would insist that they did not mean him harm but that they were only doing their job. At the time, he was in one of the very few prisons that had a communal place of worship. The congregation would be led by an imam from the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and beside each prisoner standing in congregation would be two officers. The officers were so close that they could hear the prisoners' supplications, but in turn, the prisoners could also hear the officers' supplications. Abdullah recalled,

During prayer, the officer that had escorted me out of my cell stood praying next to me. Like every Muslim he began reciting du'a for himself and his family. So I began to say 'Allahuma ikhreb baytuh [O Allah demolish his home]. We were both in prayer. He could hear my supplications and I could hear his. Every du'a he would make, I would make the opposite.

Abdullah went on to add,

When I was released, the head officer at my block came to take me. He held my hand. As we were walking to the gate, he said, 'Abdullah, please don't make du'a against me'. I smiled because that came out of nowhere. He said, 'Abdullah, please don't. I never wanted this for you'. Even the officers who would treat us badly have this lingering feeling that something is wrong.

Prisoners were often unphased by shows of sympathy from officers who claimed that they were just doing their job. As Mohamad Soltan noted whenever benevolent officers

would try to illicit sympathy or even cordiality, he would recall the verses of the Qur'an: [Those who followed will say, "If only we had another turn [at worldly life] so we could disassociate ourselves from them as they have disassociated themselves from us." Thus will Allah show them their deeds as regrets upon them. And they are never to emerge from the Fire"] (Qur'an 2:167)<sup>3</sup>.

Omar<sup>4</sup> spent a few years in the infamous Scorpion Prison in Cairo. The prison authorities attempted to exert control over the prison population through starvation tactics, stripping detainees of clothes, possessions, and blankets. The medical neglect led to the death of many inmates (Human Rights Watch 2016). The close modes of physical control were also accompanied by modes of spiritual control. The prison authorities banned prisoners from receiving copies of the Qur'an. Omar explained that this made memorization of the Qur'an especially important for prisoners because the prison authorities could not take away what the prisoners knew in their heart. From mundane acts of consistent brutality to active moments of coercion, the prison population was keenly aware that the prison authorities and the system in large attempted to usurp God's power from the outset by deciding who gets to die and who gets to live, by controlling the movements, space, minds, and bodily functions of prisoners.

Deliberate acts conducted by the prison authorities—from continuous traumatization through torture to mundane acts like banning paper, pens, books, or having access to a watch and knowing the time—all aim to cement their control over the prisoners' minds. In turn, the prisoners' insistence on maintaining a connection with God became a way of cultivating spaces where they can connect with a deity that is both true and not confined in prison or even space. Thus, they too could transcend the prison and connect with atemporal truths. Further, the act of memorization allows the prisoners to cultivate an inner reality—where the mind cannot be controlled or managed by the modes of prison control.

The overt attempt of prison authorities to usurp God's power over prisoners could be illustrated in an encounter Mohamad Soltan had with the prison vice warden. Soltan recalled,

[The vice warden] hauled me in my wheelchair to his office. They started beating me so I can pass out. Then they started taking my vitals. He looked at me and said, '... Here in this country, we are like God. We say *kun fa yakūn* (Be And There Was; a phrase used eight times in the Quran to describe God's power). Whatever we want we will get'. I never heard that before; someone compares themselves to god and uses a weak prisoner to show it. It reminded me of the story of Ibrahim.

As Esack argued, the Qur'an is not just generative but also crosses temporality and space to provide meaning and speak to the faithful at that time (Esack 1997). Soltan was reflecting on the verse (Qur'an 2:258):

[Prophet], have you not thought about the man who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because God had given him power to rule? When Abraham said, 'It is my Lord who gives life and death,' he said, 'I too give life and death'. So Abraham said, 'God brings the sun from the east; so bring it from the west'. The disbeliever was dumbfounded: God does not guide those who do evil.

Soltan was at his most vulnerable. This very vulnerability and helplessness render the relationship the prisoner forges with God and scripture more dynamic. It also provides a stronger emphasis on orthopraxis. In one instance, for example, prisoners were placed in concurrent solitary cells—like the one Mustafa was in. This very space impeded their ability to perform communal worship. The sensory deprivation limited their ability to gauge the direction of the *qibla*, and the limited access to toilet facilities made ablution difficult. Still, prisoners concocted a way to maintain congregation. The person at the very first cell would lead prayer, and the prisoners would stand near the utmost end of the cell as if standing in a straight line behind. Another example is the story of a female prisoner who was at the end of her menstrual cycle in her first days in detention—while she was forcibly disappeared in an all-male detention facility. She was not allowed to shower or be ritually pure. She was also afraid of showing signs of overt religiosity in front of

the prison authorities. She performed all of the prayers in her head, and when she finally moved to a cell where she could shower, she made a regiment where she made up all of the prayers that she missed.

The question here is why? Why would the community of prisoners be concerned with maintaining religious practices (and doing it right) in prison—a place of effective social death? The easy answer would be that the prisoners were pious before prison and continue to be inside prison. My research found the correlation to be far more tenuous. From the outset, not everyone starts off as pious or even believing. Secondly, pious prisoners go through many crises of faith that render the religious–secular categorizations very fluid. Acts of ‘correct’ worship, forged connections and generative meanings of the Qur’an, and devotional practices are predicated on the experiential dimensions of theodicy that interrogate divine justice and restitution, suffering, and free will. This is intrinsically related to the nature of prison as an institution that seeks to eliminate the free will of the prisoner but also usurp God’s power to punish and dictate the prison population’s destiny. Thus, the recognition—and indeed acts of worship—denote that the prison is thus a false god which in turn transforms the believer into an agentic being with free will. It is not as Engineer had suggested a dichotomy of liberation and exoteric practices.

Mustafa, the prisoner who heard the recitations of the Qur’an that distracted from the torture, related the instances when he struggled with this very question. He said,

I don’t know whether to categorize imprisonment as tribulation or evil that generally just exists in the world. I used to think, if this was a form of tribulation then why is it so intense and so difficult? Why do I have to suffer this much?... They say the Prophet was tried and suffered for years. Okay, but I am not a prophet or a messenger. I am a believer in God and He gives me strength but there were, at points, I would reach this place of extreme anger and resentment. I would be like why is He doing this to us? Why is He treating us this way? Like He does not need to show us He exists. We worship Him already; what is He trying to prove? Why am I being put through this? Why are my family being put through this? He is punishing my whole family not just me. Sometimes, I’d think maybe God has just lost his power. He is just not able to protect human kind. We grew up hearing, God will punish the oppressors but that doesn’t make sense human history is history of human oppression. It was really difficult, so I just didn’t want to talk to anyone. I used to pray regularly. I got much closer to Allah during that period of enforced disappearance. I would make du’a (supplications) all the time and pray all the time. When they got me a Qur’an I would just sit and read it all the time.

Mustafa recalled a *hadith* that would placate him in the period of enforced disappearance,

And remember that if all the people gather to benefit you, they will not be able to benefit you except that which Allah had foreordained (for you); and if all of them gather to do harm to you, they will not be able to afflict you with anything other than that which Allah had pre-destined against you. The pens had been lifted and the ink had dried up. (Riyad as-Salihin 62)

As Jamall Calloway noted, the question of suffering—for the oppressed—is rarely resolved merely by intellectual deliberation (Calloway 2020). The meanings of suffering are generative and experiential. Theodicy, thus, as Peter Berger noted, ‘directly affects the individual in his concrete life in society. A plausible theodicy (which, of course, requires an appropriate plausibility structure) permits the individual to integrate the anomic experiences of his biography into the socially established nomos and its subjective correlate in his own consciousness’ (Berger 1967, p. 71). He goes on to explain that even *meaning* that does not promise relief to the suffering is valuable, and it is therefore ‘misleading to consider theodicies only in terms of their “redemptive” potential’ (Berger 1967, p. 72).

The question of divine justice and theodicy were recurring in my interviews. The first realization most of the prisoners have come to is that God will not give victory to the oppressed as a group simply because they are oppressed. In turn, the oppressors will not be defeated just because they are oppressors. God is active in history, but His action is not always easily discernable or has the outcome the oppressed may desire. Similarly, you can be oppressed but not righteous. What distinguishes this realization, however, from Esack's proposal for Prophetic solidarity, as a basis for liberation theology, is that it is not relational. Hence, it is not necessarily an attempt at forging pluralism but locating the individual self in a larger social and metaphysical story of a suffering that needs to be overcome.

This is how former detainee Bilal described it:

My whole problem was Qada wa Qadar (fate and predestination)—whether we are predestined or if there was free will. Every time, I spoke with someone they would recite clichés or ask me if I believed in God. I am a believer but I had an issue—do we have free will or are we predestined to have things happen to us? If we are predestined then God did not create me to be free; why would he choose something so horrible as prison for me? Is God not just? Well, if I actually do have free will then how come I am in a place where I can't practice this free will? Why can't I just leave? If God is able—then why hasn't He used His power to free me? I started to think...well maybe God can't. That took me down a whole rollercoaster. The one thing that enlightened my path was Surah Maryam. The verse said:

{And, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, 'I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!'} (Qur'an 19:23)

This verse was about her giving birth to Jesus. She was scared they would call her a whore for giving birth out of wedlock. How did God respond to her? She said something that if I had said in prison people might say I lost faith in God but God responded to her,

{And shake to you the trunk of the palm-tree (and) it will let fall ripe dates down on you, readily reaped. So eat and drink and comfort your eye} (Qur'an 19:25–26)

It was like He was comforting her. It was like He was telling her, I know it's tough but here just eat something; have a chocolate; have a date and try to forget. It was like God was telling her this had to happen but I am sorry.

Bilal's devotional albeit contentious contemplation on the Qur'an spoke directly to his situation. Abas Asyafah explains *tadabbur* as 'an integral reflection that can lead to an implied meaning of the words of Allah with their deep and profound messages' (Asyafah 2014, p. 99). This explains the practice of prisoners as they approach the Qur'an. Sometimes, they consult books of exegesis or ask a more learned prisoner, but more commonly, the meanings arrive to them as they contemplate the text—a pedagogical practice of embodied understanding (Mouftah 2019).

## 5. From Theory to Praxis

Engineer's starting point for Islamic liberation theology is a profound claim: 'for Qur'an to be a liberating text, it must be a liberated text' (Rahemtulla 2018, p. 67). This is a significant hermeneutical project for a liberation theology. However, it is not one that the oppressed would necessarily recognize or employ. In the case of Egyptian prisoners, there is not a single hermeneutic but rather a continuous engagement with scripture in the context of their oppression. Often, they struggle with the text; they approach it seeking meaning but make no grand claims of liberating the text. Furthermore, the questions of pluralism and boundaries are not typically questions raised by the oppressed but by those in distant solidarity attempting to manage different claims of victimhood under the rubric of a single hermeneutical study. The question becomes: what is at stake in terms

of hermeneutics and progressive scriptural reasoning rather than a question of who is at stake—in terms of people theologizing and struggling with scripture from the midst of their oppression?

To conclude, this paper engaged the question of Islamic liberation theology moving from theory to praxis. Namely, I ask how in the context of oppression—such as that of Egyptian prisons—would the faithful read liberation in faith? And to what degree do the projects of Islamic liberation theology make sense? I first identified the features of liberation theology since its inception in the Latin American Catholic context—and especially the work of one of its key thinkers Gustavo Gutierrez. I then examined the hermeneutics and the epistemic assumptions of three key Islamic liberation theologians, namely South African scholar Farid Esack, Iranian American scholar Hamid Dabashi, and Indian scholar Asghar Ali Engineer. I argue that the project of Islamic liberation theology is untenable as a work of systematic theology and especially if the foremost positionality of the theologian is one acting in solidarity. Lastly, by showcasing prison religious narratives, I posit that devotional contemplation rather than hermeneutics is a more tenable form of theology in praxis—especially, as the oppressed struggle to give meaning to their suffering.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Enforced disappearance is defined by the UN high commission as ‘the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law’.
- <sup>2</sup> These interviews are for a forthcoming book with Pluto Press *When only God can see: the Faith of Muslim Political Prisoners*.
- <sup>3</sup> Qur’an 2:167; 2:258; 19:23; 19:25–26.
- <sup>4</sup> I use *pseudonyms* for most of my interlocutors.

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Article

# Islam and the Emancipatory Ethic: Islamic Law, Liberation Theology and Prison Abolition

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a genealogical overview of discourses pertaining to emancipation within Islamic thought. I demonstrate how classical Islamic scholarship developed a tradition in which a clear emancipatory ethic can be located. Further, I explore how emancipation came to be read as anticipating the abolition of slavery in the contemporary period through focusing on the work of Muhammad Abduh. Finally, I discuss the potential engagements between Islamic notions of emancipation and contemporary discourses pertaining to prison abolition. I argue that the strong emancipatory ethic found within the classical legal tradition would not abide by the exploitative prison systems found across various nations. Engaging Islamic law through a Liberation Theology framework, I claim that a serious engagement with prison abolition discourses is a natural continuation for a tradition with such a strong precedent of emancipatory impetus.

**Keywords:** Islam; slavery; prison abolition; Liberation Theology; racism; emancipation; islamic law

## 1. Introduction

### [Definition of] Emancipation:

Lexically: Liberation; Deliverance;

Legally: Liberation from enslavement for the sake of God... God says in the Qur'an 'And liberate the slave' (Q4:92), and therefore the law recommends freeing the slave as God has also stated 'What will make you realise the steep path? It is the liberation of the slave' (Q90:11–12)... And God also says, 'Do not take God's communications as mockery' *-al-Sarakhsī, Kitāb Al-Mabsūṭ*.

Within Islamic thought, granting freedom to the enslaved has consistently been described as one of the most meritorious acts that a believer can perform. As the Qur'anic exegete al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) stated, 'Manumission and charity are the most virtuous of deeds, and it is narrated from Abū Ḥanīfa that manumission is preferable to giving charity' (*al-'itq afdal min as-ṣadaqa*) (al-Qurṭubī 1995, vol. 22, p. 302). Throughout the Islamicate past, narratives of manumission can be located across spatial and temporal ranges. Whether through the hagiographies of Rābia al-Adawīya (d. 801) in which she gains freedom due to her saintly miracles (Ford 1999), the court chronicles of Timbuktu which reveal various emancipation contracts (DDS Center for Research Libraries 2005), or narratives from the late Ottoman empire in which the manumission of enslaved people was understood to be 'automatic' after 7 years of service (Erdem 1996). Discourses of emancipation have strong precedent within the Islamic tradition, both in theoretical and historical registers.

The emancipatory trend has perhaps been derived from the Qur'anic text. Within the scripture of Islam, we find there are numerous verses that impel believers to free enslaved people for various reasons, whether for the expiation of certain sins, breaking of vows, or simply because it is a righteous deed. This appears to have led to an ethos in which

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emancipating slaves was not only recommended within Islamic law; rather, jurists can be seen to employ radically counter intuitive logics to help facilitate freedom.

This, of course, is not to assume that the impulse towards manumission led neatly to an abolitionist impulse. In fact, scholarly opponents to abolition claimed that the abolition of slavery was contrary to the spirit of Islam as this would 'deny future generations the opportunity to commit the virtuous deed of freeing slaves' (Clarence-Smith 2006, p. 189). The idea that the emancipation promoted in the Qur'an was anticipating the wholesale abolition of slavery was developed and propagated by 'Islamic abolitionist' scholars in the 19th century, such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935).

In contemporary times, the fact that the Qur'an is a text that supports the abolition of slavery has become so widely accepted within Islamic thought that few would question such a claim. However, this was a reading that only began to gain traction a century ago. This transformative shift in re-reading emancipation in a new context provides significant insights into the ever-evolving discursivity of Islam as a tradition. It also highlights the potentialities of what Islamic understandings of emancipation could mean for those fighting for freedom today.

While the abolition of slavery within Islamic thought has shifted from a peripheral interpretation a century ago to a hegemonic reading in contemporary times, could a similar shift take place regarding prison abolition in the future? I argue that a serious theological engagement with prison abolition discourses is a natural continuation for a tradition with such a strong precedent of emancipatory impetus.

I engage with the works of prison abolitionists (Davis 2005; Alexander 2010; Dubler and Lloyd 2020) who argue that slavery was never truly abolished in the context of the USA. Rather, the exploitative conditions of slavery were transmuted from enslavement to the racist practices of Jim Crow, which eventually transformed and are currently manifested in the practice of mass incarceration. Using the USA as a case-study to think through the problematic links of prisons, neo-slavery and racism, I contend that the emancipatory ethic found within the classical tradition of Islam would not abide by the oppressive systems currently normalized by the prison-industrial complex. In doing so, I call for a theological reappraisal of the acceptance of prisons within Islamic thought.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I provide a genealogical overview of conversations pertaining to emancipation. I demonstrate how classical Islamic scholarship developed a tradition in which a clear emancipatory ethic can be located. Furthermore, I explore how emancipation within Islamic thought came to be read as anticipating the abolition of slavery in the contemporary period through focusing on the work of Muhammad Abduh. Finally, I discuss the potential engagements between Islamic notions of emancipation and contemporary discourses pertaining to prison abolition. In doing so, I contribute to the growing field of Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT). Within ILT, there is an active attempt to challenge injustice using the discursive universe of the Islamic tradition. While much work has been done on ILT and readings of the Qur'an (Esack 1997; Rahemtulla 2017), this paper attempts to develop a sustained conversation with the Islamic legal tradition.

## 2. Emancipation in the Classical Legal Tradition

The Qur'an promotes the emancipation of slaves in numerous verses, and many hadith traditions were equally interpreted as advancing an emancipatory spirit (Freamon 2019). While the scriptural source texts remained the bedrock upon which the legal system of Islam built upon, Muslim legal scholars found themselves with increasingly complex queries and scenarios which they were expected to legislate for. What can be seen within the legal tradition is a fascinating penchant for facilitating emancipation, even when it appears to be in contradiction to the general principles of the Islamic legal tradition. This is what is referred to as the '*emancipatory ethic*' in Islamic law (Bashir 2024, *in press*).

A clear instance of this can be seen with the issue of 'blasphemous emancipation'. That is, if a master emancipates his slave in the name of Satan or idols. According to the

Hanafi school, such a statement, while completely illegitimate in general, would still be considered a valid manumission contract.

As al-Qudūrī (d. 1037) states, ‘whoever sets his slave free in the name of God or for Satan or for an idol, the slave is considered free’ (al-Qudūrī 2010, pp. 475–76). In his famed commentary on the *Mukhtaṣar of al-Qudūrī*, al-Maydānī adds, ‘since the ordinance of manumission was issued by the master and thereby extends to the slave, the emancipation occurs. His statement thereafter is nonsensical and sinful, as he seeks to venerate disbelief’ (al-Maydānī n.d., vol. 3, p. 117).

While it may appear striking that this was viewed as legitimate in consideration of the fact that *shirk* (polytheism) is usually described as the only unforgivable sin within Islam, human freedom was often given precedence in legal thought. This led classical scholars to overlook the manner in which the moment of emancipation was achieved, and emphasise that once it had occurred, it could not be reneged.

In another case, the Hanafi jurist al-Sarakhsī (d. 1090) discusses a ruling in which there is a dispute between a *mukātab* and his owner. A *mukātab* was a slave that had entered a contract with his owner that ensured he would be emancipated once a certain agreed sum had been paid (the estimated price of the slave). The dispute explores an instance in which it was argued that the *mukātab* claimed his freedom contract was worth 1000 dirhams, and his master claimed the contract is worth 2000 dirhams. Surprisingly, the ruling states ‘the judge should rule on the claim of the *mukātab* so long as he takes an oath and establish the contract at 1000 dirhams’ (al-Sarakhsī 2001, vol. 8, p. 66).

The fact that the slave’s word would be held in higher regard than his masters’ claim is fascinating. However, this perhaps has little to do with the potential integrity of the enslaved. Rather, in the minds of jurists, the lower amount (1000 dirhams) hastens the completion of the *kitāba* contract and results in manumission with more immediacy.

Furthermore, al-Sarakhsī clarifies that if the master can bring undisputable evidence that the contract was in fact 2000 dirhams, the judge must accept he has made a mistake in emancipating the slave at 1000 dirhams. Nevertheless, though the court has mistakenly emancipated the enslaved person, this cannot be undone—as once emancipated, it is illegal to enslave a free person.

In another legal discussion, Ibn Qudāmah (d. 1223) of the Hanbalī school cites an issue that similarly raises problematic consequences and appears to contradict general wisdom regarding contracts and their stipulations. He narrates a ruling in which it is stated that ‘if [the master] says to his slave: you are free if I sell you, then he proceeds to sell him, the slave becomes free’ (Ibn Qudāmah 1997, vol. 6, p. 27).

Legal scholars generally hold that the seller cannot govern over that which he does not own. Therefore, once the sale has been completed, the previous owner has no adjudication over the sold item. As such, once the slave is sold, the master is in no position to free him and has no power over him, as he is no longer his property.

Ibn Qudāmah discusses this position and appreciates its merits. However, he concludes, while the criticism of the ruling is consistent, the slave should be freed as ‘it is incumbent that freedom is given preference’ (*yajibu taglīb al-hurriya*) (Ibn Qudāmah 1997, vol. 6, p. 27). In this instance, the master continues to govern over something that is not his property—which would not hold true in other circumstances.

The facilitation of emancipation in contradiction of the usual logics of Islamic law can be consistently located throughout legal literature. Another case explored a paternity dispute linked to a female slave. The *umm al-walad* (lit. mother of the child) was a female slave who had been impregnated by her master. Due to the pregnancy and the shift in status, she was promised freedom upon the death of her master and could not be sold.

It was argued that if a married female slave gave birth to a child, and her master claimed paternity, his claim would not be accepted. Rather, the lineage of the child would be established through the female slave’s husband. However, ‘the child is still born free (*yusīru al-walad hurri*), and the female slave still becomes the *umm al-walad* of the master’ (Zarka 1989, p. 413).

In this instance, it is logically inconsistent that the child should be attributed freedom and the mother would become an *umm al-walad*, whilst simultaneously denying the paternity of the master. In normal circumstances, a woman only becomes *umm al-walad* when she gives birth to her master's child, and only then she is promised freedom upon her master's death. Similarly, if a child is born to two slave parents, the child was also considered enslaved. The fact that the child would be born free, and the female slave would be granted the status of *umm al-walad*, while denying the claim of paternity of the master, simply does not follow logical functions of Islamic law. Either the master is the father of the child, and the slave woman can claim to be *umm al-walad*, or the master is not the father, and she is not *umm al-walad*. Nevertheless, jurists justified the illogical and incoherent to facilitate freedom.

Perhaps the most interesting case to highlight the emancipatory ethos in classical Islamic law can be seen with a paternity dispute between an enslaved Muslim couple and a free non-Muslim couple. It was claimed that if a free non-believer and an enslaved Muslim laid claim to a child as their own, it was preferable to allocate the child to the free non-believer. al-Sarakhsī narrates,

'If an enslaved Muslim claims paternity of a child from relations with a female slave, and a free non-believer claims paternity of the child from relations with his [free] wife, the ruling is enacted in favour of the free non-believer. In his statement there is an affirmation of freedom for the child, and this contains immediate benefit [for the child]. The child may not obtain emancipation as they grow, but perhaps Allah will guide them, and they will become Muslim on their own accord. The consideration of the [child's] freedom is given preference in regard to his rights' (al-Sarakhsī 2001, vol. 17, pp. 99–100).

Al-Sarakhsī's position may perhaps appear provocative at first glance. The fact that jurists were willing to sacrifice a child's adherence to the religion of Islam, in place of his opportunity to gain freedom, certainly raises fascinating questions regarding our understandings of classical jurists and their worldviews. Nevertheless, it clearly indicates the high regard in which attaining freedom and granting emancipation was held.

The emancipatory impulse perhaps manifests most clearly in the three manumission contracts that were developed within Islamic law: the *tadbīr*, the *istīlād*, and the *kitāba*. The *tadbīr* designated that a slave was to be granted freedom upon the death of his master, and therefore, the slave that was bestowed this contract was named a *mudabbar*. As mentioned previously, in cases in which a female slave gave birth to a child from her master, her status was transferred to that of the *umm al-walad*. At this juncture, it was not permitted for her master to sell her or transfer her ownership to another, and she would be granted freedom upon the master's death.

Interestingly, basing the contingency of a slave's freedom upon the death of their master was not the most innocuous incentive for a slave hoping to attain freedom. Consequently, jurists were forced to legislate for the problematic, yet quite conceivable situation, in which a slave may murder their master in a bid to attain freedom.

In discussion of the *mudabbar*, the position attributed to Mālik states, 'if the slave murdered [his master] intentionally, his *tadbīr* contract is void, and he remains a slave for the heirs [of the master]. If they wish, they may execute him or allow him to live as a slave to them.' (al-Ṭahāwī 1995, vol. 3, p. 189). Ibn Qudāmah similarly adds that the *tadbīr* contract is nullified through murder as '[the *mudabbar*] intended to hasten his emancipation by means of murder, and he is therefore punished through affirmation of the opposite of his intention, which is the nullification of the *tadbīr* contract.' (Ibn Qudāmah 1997, vol. 14, p. 437). This is because the *tadbīr* resembles inheritance, and inheritance becomes void if the beneficiary murders the person he will inherit from. However, the Ḥanafī jurist Al-Ṭahāwī (d. 993) adds that the contract remains valid, 'if the murder was accidental, then there can be no charge imputed against [the *mudabbar*]' (al-Ṭahāwī 1995, vol. 3, p. 189).

Similar to the *tadbīr*, the freedom of the *umm al-walad* was also contingent on the death of her master. Unlike with the case of the *mudabbar*, it was surprisingly argued that the



*umm al-walad* would be considered free upon murdering her master. There was agreement amongst the schools that,

‘If the *umm al-walad* murders her master, she is emancipated. It is not possible to transfer her ownership to another, and the ownership of her current master has ceased through his death. She therefore becomes a free woman, as would have been the case if he had been murdered by another, and she must pay the price of herself. It is not obligatory that she should face retribution’ (Ibn Qudāmah 1997, vol. 14, p. 607).

The fact that she should be considered free was accepted by the Shāfi‘ī school; however, with the proposed caveat that she was liable for *diyya* (blood money) in order to become a free woman. This was justified through the fact that ‘it is obligatory for a free person who murders a free person to pay blood-money’. However, the Ḥanafī and Ḥanbalī schools maintained that when the crime was perpetrated, she was not free but in a state of servitude as an *umm al-walad*, and therefore cannot be expected to be judged as a free person and is not obligated to pay more than her price (*fa-lam yaajib bi-hā akthar min qīmatihā*).

The fact that jurists argued that the *umm al-walad* could legitimately murder her way to freedom is demonstrative of the complex nature of laws pertaining to slavery within Islamic law, and again, highlights the somewhat absurd positions that jurists found themselves defending to facilitate emancipatory positions.

The third of the contracts was the *kitāba*. The *kitāba* contract stipulated that the enslaved person would pay their estimated price to the master and would be granted freedom once the amount was complete. As such, this suggested the *mukātab* could own property independently of his master. The Mālikī position was perhaps the most explicit regarding the issue, with the jurist Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 829) stating ‘[the *mukātab*’s] property is inviolable; his master may not touch it once the contract has begun’. (Brockopp 2000, p. 18). Within the Mālikī school, it was even stipulated that the *mukātab* gained the ability to own slaves and concubines of their own (Ali 2010, p. 165).

On many other issues, the *mukātab* gained a number of rights and was ostensibly viewed as akin to a free person. He gained the ability to trade and disobey direct orders from his master. For instance, it was argued that the *mukātab* could not be prohibited from travelling if he so wished. While the Shāfi‘ī school limited this to travelling to a relatively close location, the majority of jurists allowed the *mukātab* to travel without restriction, irrespective of his master’s permission (Ibn Qudāmah 1997, vol. 14, pp. 475–76). In fact, the Ḥanafī and Ḥanbalī schools contend that even if the restriction of travel was stipulated within the *kitāba* contract, the clause should be considered void, as it limits the ability of the *mukātab* to earn wealth in order to attain his freedom.

Furthermore, the master had no right to terminate the contract unless the conditions had been violated. Indeed, even if the master perished, the contract remained valid and was to be inherited by the master’s heirs. The only method in which the contract was nullified was if the *mukātab* failed to make his payments or the *mukātab* died.

In both cases, however, jurists attempted to legislate in a bid to offer leniency. For example, the Ḥanafī school argued that that if a *mukātab* is unable to make his payments, a judge should assess his circumstances, and if he is owed a debt or there is a chance the *mukātab* may gain some property that may cover his payments towards the contract, ‘the judge should not hasten towards declaring him insolvent (*lam yaj’al bi-ta’jīzihī*)’ and should grant him time to attempt to locate funds. Similarly, a narration attributed to Abū Yūsuf states ‘he should not be declared insolvent until two successive payments have been missed’ (al-Qudūrī 2010, p. 490).

Regarding insolvency, al-Shāfi‘ī added that the decision is ultimately linked to the good will of the master, and it was only if the master chose to void the contract, that the *kitāba* would be nullified (al-Shāfi‘ī 2001, vol. 9, p. 427). It was also stipulated that if a *mukātab* was to perish, and he owned property or some form of wealth, the remainder of the owed amount should be taken from this wealth ‘and it is ruled that he was set free during



the last part of his life' (al-Qudūrī 2010, p. 490). This consequently led to the children of the *mukātab* being set free and inheriting whatever wealth was remaining.

In sum, what can be seen within the classical legal tradition is a radically counter-intuitive logic in which emancipation is pursued to the detriment of other principles in Islamic law. Jurists attempted to justify the blasphemous, the incoherent and the outright absurd to allow enslaved peoples to achieve freedom. Arguably, the strong inclination towards freedom stems from the Qur'an itself in which numerous injunctions promoting freedom can be found, which led to an ethos in which emancipating slaves was viewed as one of the most blessed and rewarding acts a Muslim could undertake. As a result, there is a clear 'emancipatory ethic' found within the classical legal tradition.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted, however, that in the pre-abolitionist age, slavery was very much a normalized practice. Therefore, while emancipation was promoted, slavery was still viewed as a legitimate trade by classical scholars. It was not deemed sinful or problematic within classical discourses. The transformative horizons of abolitionism remained beyond their perception, and they were unable to dream of a world without slavery. This naturally impacted their interpretations of law and scripture. The idea that the emancipatory verses in the Qur'an were, in fact, pointing towards the complete abolition of slavery gained prominence in the 19th century in which Muslim scholarship engaged with global abolitionist currents (Bashir 2024, *in press*).

### 3. Emancipation as Abolition

The genealogy of abolitionist thought remains a heavily contested research area. While Eurocentric scholarship has historically sought to assuage the horrors of colonialism through the citation of the abolition of slavery as a praiseworthy feat, the role of colonial powers is far more complex than has often been suggested (Lewis 1990). For example, scholars have argued that the popularity of abolitionism dovetailed with the lack of economic viability of slavery, and subsequently free labour was viewed as more profitable as modern economies began to take shape (Williams 1944). Others have emphasized that abolitionists were often deeply racist individuals who cared very little for the enslaved, while scholars have increasingly cited the impact rebellions from enslaved communities had on conceptions of the viability of slavery as a profitable institution (Robinson 2000; Davis 2008). These facts challenge simplistic narratives in which Western colonialists are viewed as altruistic humanitarians (Bashir 2019).

One key aspect of abolitionism that has certainly been overlooked in scholarship is the articulation of abolitionist ideas across non-European linguistic registers; namely, the engagement of Muslim scholarship with abolitionist thought that led to 'Islamic abolitionism'. The contribution of Muslim scholarship promoting abolition helped facilitate the adoption of abolitionist ideals across the Muslim world, and the recovery of such histories is significant as we look to unmoor Eurocentric readings of the past through a decolonial lens.

A key contributor towards 'Islamic abolitionism' was the famed Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). It has been argued that Abduh's interpretation of Islam as a tradition promoting abolition was key for anti-slavery sentiment to gain traction amongst both scholars and common people in Egypt, as 'the abolition of slavery in Egypt would not have been possible without the eventual support of the people and their religious leaders, particularly Muhammad Abduh' (Robinson-Dunn 2006, p. 67). As well as his own writings, Abduh's ideas were articulated and propagated further by his student Rashid Rida (d. 1935).

Abduh was among the first to articulate the idea that the Qur'an not only promoted emancipation, but the emancipatory trend was in fact a precursor to the complete abolition of slavery. The basic argument claimed that slavery had not been completely abolished by the Qur'an in the seventh century; however, the foundations for abolition had been established due to various calls to emancipate slaves throughout scripture, and the restriction of fresh enslavement delineated within Islamic doctrine. Therefore, the abolition of slavery was in fact completely attuned with the aims of the religion of Islam (Ghazal 2009).

Abduh states, ‘the religion of Islam permitted enslavement in the same manner as all previous religions; however, this religion, advanced in its legal wisdom in contrast to previous dispensations, did not discontinue the harsh laws all at once’. Rather, he claims, Islam challenged the application of these laws and reformed the severe exploitation of slaves that was being practiced in the name of religion. As a result, ‘it can be seen that Islam narrowed the avenues of enslavement, and it becomes clear beyond a doubt that the intention of Islamic law was the fundamental eradication of slavery gradually (*ibtāl al-riqq asāsan bi-al-tadrīj*)’ (Rida 1905).<sup>3</sup>

To justify his position, Abduh listed a number of legal rulings in a bid to demonstrate that Islamic law clearly sought to delimit the sources of enslavement, in order to restrict slavery in general. He pointed to numerous discourses that demonstrated an emancipatory ethic, such as ‘illegal enslavement is considered amongst the most despicable acts (*a’zam al-muḥarammāt*)’ and that ‘emancipation is considered as the best way of demonstrating gratitude to God’s blessings’ (Ibid).

For Abduh, the fact that jurists went to such lengths to promote manumission highlights that slavery was always viewed as ‘problematic’ within the religious tradition of Islam—even if it was not explicitly stated as such. Perhaps the most significant ruling cited by Abduh concerning abolition can be seen with the claim that the leader of Muslims can contradict the legal schools to restrict slavery,

‘If the Caliph of the Muslims in his legal judgment (there is no doubt that the Caliph is a legal expert) considers all slaves illegal, then the ruling to free them all at one time is valid, regardless of whether this contradicts the judgements of the classical legal schools’ (Ibid).

Accordingly, the religion of Islam cannot therefore be accused of tolerating and allowing slavery. Abduh’s views impacted many, and one of those who was influenced by his arguments was the Syrian scholar Abd al-Rahman al-Kawākibī (d. 1902). In the same article, al-Kawākibī buttressed Abduh’s claims and argued that the reason for the continuation of slavery was in fact due to the abuse of the religious tradition by tyrannical rulers. al-Kawākibī states, ‘the reality is that the continuation of slavery is due to despotic rulers who are not guided by the religion of Islam; rather, they apply the law according to their whims’ (Ibid).

al-Kawākibī severely critiqued the wanton abuse of the Islamic tradition for the nefarious desires of political elites. He accused political leaders of hypocrisy, as ‘those rulers now appear in Europe claiming they desire to prohibit slavery but are unable to do so as they fear their Muslim citizens. [They claim] slavery is legally permissible [according to Islam] and there is a necessity to protect Islamic culture’ (Ibid).

However, al-Kawākibī argues that the continuation of slavery is not linked to Muslim populations, most of whom do not possess slaves; rather, the preservation of slavery in the Muslim world is linked to ‘the arrogance of the rulers and those that follow them, not the religion of Islam’ (Ibid). al-Kawākibī proceeds to claim that Muslim scholars have generally remained silent regarding the misuse of the religious tradition due to fear of tyrannical rulers, and it is only for this reason that Islam is perceived to have a link with slavery. In doing so, he provides political justification to Abduh’s reformist reading.

The idea that emancipation in the Qur’an was referent to the abolition of slavery constituted a unique reappropriation of classical doctrines pertaining to manumission. While emancipation was consistently praised in the classical legal tradition, the eradication of slavery was never cited as an aim of Islamic law by classical scholars, nor was slavery conceptualized as a problematic practice *per se*. Therefore, Abduh’s claims were certainly seen as a radical and heretical innovation in his time. In fact, those of a more traditional disposition explicitly challenged Abduh to demonstrate any calls for abolition prior to his own. The idea that previous injunctions could be reinterpreted in an abolitionist manner was deemed as a capitulation to ‘foreign ideals’ for Abduh’s opponents—as it broke away from the established practice of the legal tradition (Ghazal 2009).

However, Abduh's *Salafist* hermeneutical shift allowed him to overlook centuries of accrued tradition and return directly to scriptural sources to re-read Qur'anic injunctions within a radically new context. While Salafism is often collapsed into Wahabism in contemporary discourses, for Abduh (and his mentor Afghani), an appeal to early Islam (the time of the *salaf*—traditionally defined as the first three generations of Muslims) allowed him to bypass centuries of accrued tradition and interpret the core texts of Islam with more flexibility. This early period was viewed as a dynamic, creative, and inspired time that was not to be emulated in the content that had been produced, but rather in its spirit.

In this sense, for Abduh, the concept of emancipation was not bound to the interpretations of previous generations, and it was incumbent on Muslims to partake in *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to renew the Islamic faith (as the *salaf* had done). The development of this hermeneutical shift was justified due to the rigidity of the frameworks that preceded it, and for Abduh, the fact slavery had been permitted in the name of religion for millennia demonstrated the need for a critical re-evaluation of the tradition.

#### 4. What Could Emancipation Mean Today? Liberation Theology and Prison Abolition

The transformation from reading *'Itq* in the Islamic tradition as the emancipation of an individual slave to being understood as referent to the wholesale abolition of slavery marked a significant shift within the interpretive tradition of Islam. Yet, it is relatively clear that the position promoted by Abduh (and many others) has not only become 'mainstream' but could currently be described as hegemonic.

In contemporary times, the fact that the Qur'an is a text that supports the abolition of slavery has become as axiomatic a statement for Muslims as declaring that the Qur'an promotes monotheism. However, this was an interpretation that only began to gain traction a century ago. Prior to moving to the centre of the interpretive tradition, when initially conceived, Qur'anic abolition was a peripheral position that was actively challenged by Muslim defenders of the slave trade as heretical, unorthodox, and innovative (Bashir 2024, *in press*).

The acceptance of the interpretive shift was facilitated by an increased awareness of the horrors of slavery and the plight of enslaved peoples (Al-Harathi 2018). In this final section, I explore whether similar shifts within Muslim interpretive consciousness could occur regarding prison abolition as more information becomes available regarding the detrimental functions, abuses and the deleterious impact prisons have on individuals, families, and society more generally.

Within Liberation theology, there is an active attempt to develop Islamic discourse to provide concrete solutions to the problems that societies currently face. The hermeneutical key upon which ILT builds is the idea of establishing divine discourses of justice within the world. Taking from narratives of the Prophet Moses freeing the Israelites in Egypt, as well as the radical egalitarianism promoted by the Prophet Muhammad, ILT claims that the divine message is intrinsically linked with establishing justice on the ground. As such, ILT seeks to actively work towards a more just society in which oppression is actively challenged and combatted (Rahemtulla 2017).

With that, let us consider discussions pertaining to emancipation through an ILT framework. I argue that the current discourses pertaining to emancipation and Islam remain mired in a polemical and apologetic paradigm.

Discussions pertaining to emancipation are used to deflect from criticisms that Islam allowed slavery and is therefore an immoral religion, in a bid to highlight the 'humane' nature of classical Islamic thought in comparison to other practices at the time (Uthmānī 2013). Alternatively, they are cited by those supportive of the reformist positions promoted by Muhammad Abduh—to progress an argument that emancipation was always anticipating an age of abolitionism (Rahman 1979).

In both instances, however, I claim that the emancipatory flame within Islamic thought is roundly extinguished. For those historicising the emancipatory ethos, the legal rulings discussed in the first section of this paper become little more than an intellectual retort

to those critiquing the history of slavery in the Islamicate. Slavery may have existed, the argument runs, but the emancipatory ethos found within the tradition mitigates against critiques that men, women, and children were enslaved in the name of Islam. Therefore, once the emancipatory rulings have been established as a defensive armour against charges of immorality, any broader significance of what the emancipatory ethic *could mean* is overlooked and roundly ignored.

For the second group, those such as Abduh, Rahman etc. who used slavery as a clarion call for a reformist hermeneutic, much of the emancipatory impetus becomes redundant as the legal abolition of slavery has occurred. In this instance, the call to ‘liberate the slave’ is read as the legal eradication of the slave trade. As this has now been achieved, much of the traditional material surrounding emancipation is viewed as superfluous and redundant (not necessarily explicitly, but certainly through the omission of its discussion).

As one example, the Qur’an clearly stipulates one of the recipients of alms as those ‘in bondage’ (*fī al-riqāb*) (Q2:177). In classical exegesis of the verse, commentators stipulated that charity should be provided to help the *mukātab* achieve his freedom. For example, Ibn Kathīr argues that the verse refers to the *mukātab* slave who is seeking to free himself but ‘cannot find enough wealth to buy his own freedom’ (*lā yajidūna mā yu’addūnahū fī kitābatihim*) (Ibn Kathīr 1974, pp. 1997–98). Due to the abolition of slavery, the status of the *mukātab* does not currently exist, nor are there any ‘official’ slaves. Therefore, in contemporary discussions of these verses, or in the distribution of charity funds, this category is routinely overlooked.

For example, in his 1991 translation of the classical Shafi’ legal manual *Reliance of the Traveller*, Nuh Keller removes all English translations of rulings pertaining to slavery and emancipation, claiming the issue ‘is no longer current’ (Ali 2006, p. 51). While this raises fascinating theological questions regarding the purported universality of the Qur’an, it also overlooks that numerous populations and peoples find themselves in *slavery-adjacent* conditions. That is, while peoples are technically not ‘enslaved’, their situations and contexts are similar to (or in some cases, worse than) enslaved communities of the past. Simply put, many remain in need of emancipation from their oppressive conditions.

From an ILT perspective, this discursive focus on emancipation cannot abide. Islam cannot simply be a conduit for discussing the past but must become the basis upon which we are able to build new futures. To argue that these issues are ‘no longer current’ is not only to misunderstand the current moment in which we find ourselves; moreover, it is a betrayal of the emancipatory potential of Islam. In this sense, I argue that a serious engagement with prison abolition discourses is a natural continuation for a theological tradition with such a strong precedent of emancipatory impetus.

Prison abolitionists contend that large scale incarceration harm societies more so than help (Davis 2005). The idea, of course, is not to swing open the doors of penitentiaries so that dangerous individuals are free to roam the streets. There is certainly the possibility that specific institutions in which violent individuals are separated from the remainder of society continue to exist.

Rather, the primary focus of prison abolitionist thinking centres around the idea that prisons are obsolete and archaic forms of infrastructure that tend to criminalize poverty, mental health disorders, homelessness and generally sweep away those that have slipped through the cracks of ‘polite’ society (Dubler and Lloyd 2020). For example, in the UK, the majority of prisoners are currently incarcerated for non-violent offences (Prison Reform Trust 2022).

In place of continually encaging human beings, often with large corporations actively profiting from such, funds can be focused on housing, education, and health care to provide the structural apparatus to avoid the need for so many prisons to be built. This is especially significant when considering that the cost for every prisoner per year (2020–2021) in the UK was approximately £47,000 (Prison Reform Trust 2022). The abolitionist argument follows that the billions of pounds that are currently being spent to encage human beings could

be used in a far more efficacious manner to build up preventative measures to mitigate against the need for prisons.

From a theological perspective, the question is raised regarding how Islamic initiatives could support the push for prison abolition. For example, could *Zakat* be distributed to support those who are imprisoned? Could madrassas raise *sadaqa* funds to initiate mentorship programmes for those at risk of falling into criminality? Is there a possibility for mosques to provide support groups and community scaffolding to mitigate against potential (re-)offending?

For the sceptic, the argument may be raised that the recipients of charity in Islam were certainly those who were impoverished, needy and in bondage. However, there are no references to those who have committed crime within the traditional heritage of exegesis and legal commentary. While such a statement is historically factual, it evinces a superficial understanding of criminality, racism, and the prison–industrial complex in its current manifestation.

Let us consider the USA—which currently houses the biggest prison population in the world (almost two million people). Research points to the emergence of carceral systems in the USA as intimately linked to racist systems of control and brutalization (Davis 2005; Blackmon 2009; Alexander 2010; Dubler and Lloyd 2020). The US civil war that centred around the abolition of slavery in the 1860’s did not upend racism and exploitation. Following the emancipation proclamation in 1863, new systems were devised by White elites to exploit Black communities for economic gain. Without the abusive mechanism of slavery to rely upon, many Southern states teetered on the edge of economic collapse.

To mitigate this, and to retain some form of the previous order, many states adopted measures to reintroduce slavery in another guise. For instance, states adopted ‘vagrancy laws’ which ‘essentially made it a criminal offense not to work and were applied selectively to Blacks—and eight of those states enacted convict laws allowing for the hiring-out of county prisoners to plantation owners and private companies’ (Alexander 2010). Blackmon (2009) highlights how in this period thousands of African Americans were arrested on capricious charges, fined arbitrarily and ultimately compelled to work off the fines to secure their release.

Prisoners were often sent as forced labourers to various sites to complete gruelling work on railroads, farms, plantations etc. Alexander (2010) notes that these new circumstances could perhaps be described as worse than slavery. This is due to private contractors showing no concern for the health of their laborers, unlike slave-owners who at the bare minimum wanted to protect their investment, which ultimately led to higher death rates in the post-abolition period.

This new order came to be known as Jim Crow. According to the new system, virtually every Southern state had established laws that sought to disenfranchise Black communities across all spheres of life, which created a racial paradigm that extended ‘to schools, churches, housing, jobs, restrooms, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries’ (Alexander 2010).

It was only after the intense struggle of the Civil Rights movement that culminated in the legal shifts in 1960’s that these laws were challenged and overturned. However, while the abuse of slavery was transformed into Jim Crow, so too were the sentiments that allowed Jim Crow to flourish, transmuted into new language. Many scholars have noted that the shift from the 1980’s onwards towards the ‘War on Drugs’, and the subsequent growth of the ‘prison–industrial complex’, has simply been another iteration of the same exploitative mechanism (Daulatzai 2012).

While the ‘War on Drugs’ may appear racially neutral, the dog-whistles of ‘law and order’, the targeting of geographical areas, and the linking of particular communities with specific crimes all highlight the implicitly racialised nature of the discourse (Daulatzai 2012). Consider Alexander’s provocative claim that more African Americans are currently under correctional control today ‘than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began’ (Alexander 2010, p. 175).

This demonstrates a clear link between the racist brutalisation of communities in the USA and the growth of prisons. While this is clearly an example specific to the USA, it certainly disaggregates the simplistic claim that prisons are set up to reform or rehabilitate unsociable or criminal behaviour, or that prisoners are simply miscreants and lawbreakers. Discourses pertaining to law, order and justice have been manipulated to abuse and exploit Black communities in the USA (Dubler and Lloyd 2020).

However, similar examples can also be found in the UK. The prison population across England and Wales currently ranks amongst the highest in Western Europe and has risen by 70% in the last 30 years (Prison Reform Trust 2022). As with the USA, the UK has increasingly seen prisons becoming privatised, with large corporations such as Serco, G4S, and Sodexo being handed large government contracts (Rifkind 2019).

In a similar trend to the USA 'justice system', research demonstrates that within the UK, there was 'a clear direct association between ethnic groups and the odds of receiving a custodial sentence' (Prison Reform Trust 2022). Those of particular ethnic backgrounds were 81% more likely to be sent to prison for an indictable offence from the crown court in comparison to White prisoners. Equally, those of Black and Asian backgrounds were more likely to be serving longer sentences than White prisoners for committing the same crime. Further, the number of Muslim prisoners in the UK currently account for 18% of the prison population, while making up 5% of general population (Prison Reform Trust 2022).

The Islamophobic nature of the judicial system becomes more provocative when considering that the Muslim prison population do not make up a singular ethnic bloc (37% are Asian, 29% are Black, 19% are White). In France, the situation is more striking. While Muslims make up approximately 7.5% of the population, it is estimated that 60% of the prison population is currently Muslim (BBC News 2015).<sup>4</sup> This is not even to consider the use of prisons as tools of political repression across the Middle East and wider Muslim world (Quisay 2022).

For the Muslim theologian, there are two options. One is to accept that Black and Muslim minorities across Britain, France and the USA are intrinsically more prone to crime than their non-Muslim/White counterparts (due to genetics or culture?), or the second (non-racist position) is to recognise that the judicial systems across Western nations, as with prisons, are structurally racist and Islamophobic institutions that abuse and exploit minority communities.

If the second option is chosen, it becomes incumbent on Muslim thinkers to grapple with prison abolition in a more serious manner. To this end, promising scholarly discourse has been developing within certain spheres surrounding this topic. In 2018, the American scholars Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Kecia Ali began a conversation that explored the links between *Zakat* and freedom from incarceration (Dubler and Lloyd 2020, p. 216). This led to the development of the 'Believers Bail Out' initiative in the USA, in which money was raised from *Zakat* funds to help bail out Muslims in pretrial incarceration and ICE Custody (Immigrations and Customs Enforcement).

The purpose of the Bail Out was to support 'efforts to abolish money bail and to raise awareness within Muslim communities on the injustices of the bail bond system, immigration bonds, and the broader prison-industrial complex of which they form part' (Believers Bail Out 2018). To provide theological justification for this, those involved in the project point towards the Qur'anic verse 9:60 which sets out the categories of recipients for *Zakat*, including 'those in bondage'. They argue that those trapped within the systems are the modern-day referents of '*fi al-riqāb*'. The initiative began with the intention of raising \$30,000 and by the end of Ramadan 2018, they had raised over \$100,000 (Dubler and Lloyd 2020, p. 216).

Similarly, in the UK, a Muslim charity entitled the Nejma Collective have organized to raise awareness regarding the injustice of the UK prison system as well as support those who are incarcerated (Nejma Collective 2022). The collective argue that prisons have historically been used to control and discipline 'poor and working-class people', specifically 'repressing and monitoring indigenous Black and brown people who threatened that system



of oppression'. They equally note that 'Muslims are disproportionately behind bars in the UK' (Nejma Collective 2022).

While Muslim communities have come to recognise the need for chaplaincy to cater for prisoners (Ali 2018), a more meaningful, sustainable, and transformative approach would be to work towards a situation in which prison chaplains are not needed due to the lack of (Muslim or otherwise) prisoners.

Prison abolition should not be viewed only as an interesting discussion; rather, this initiative should be taken on as a matter of urgency for Muslim communities. Referring to the first section of this paper, I argue that such theological activism can stake a greater claim to the historical emancipatory ethos expounded by the legal scholars of the past.

Muslim scholars were once willing to justify the illogical, the blasphemous and the illegal to allow enslaved people to attain freedom. The lack of consideration of human freedom in contemporary Islamic discourse appears a betrayal of the theological legacy that Muslims have inherited. It could certainly be argued that those working towards freeing engaged people today are *more representative* of the classical emancipatory ethos than those who choose to brandish this legacy simply as an instrument of intellectual jousting.

To re-emphasise this point once more, let us consider a final ruling from the *Mabsūt* of al-Sarakhsi. It reads, 'If a [slave] from the Abode of War murders his master, steals his wealth and absconds to us, he is considered free and what he has absconded with becomes his own' (al-Sarakhsi 2001, vol. 10, p. 100). The factors of murder and stealing are not necessary caveats in the injunction but are used to highlight the extent to which the slave may have transgressed. This is to say, *even* if he is a murderer, and a brigand, he is still considered free. Ostensible criminality, then, was not enough to abstain from granting freedom. In a time in which 'criminality' is being used as a tool to exploit the already disenfranchised, the extent to which Muslim theologians remain brave enough to apply the logics of pre-modern Islamic law remains to be seen.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, three key claims were made. Firstly, the paper demonstrates a strong emancipatory trend within the classical legal tradition. Secondly, I highlighted how this emancipatory ethic was read as a call for the legal abolition of slavery, as a system, in the 19th century through the writings of Muhammad Abduh. Finally, I considered how this emancipatory ethic could (should?) be refashioned and reimagined through an engagement with prison abolition discourses.

It is important to consider that all scholars are ultimately shaped by our environments; the languages we speak and the intellectual contexts we find ourselves in. In a time in which slavery was a norm globally, Muslim scholarship facilitated emancipation through the legal mechanisms they had at their disposal. In a world in which abolition became a possibility, groups of Muslim scholars reformulated their worldviews and promoted the abolition of slavery. As oppressive systems continue to adapt and transform—namely, from slavery to mass incarceration—it becomes incumbent on a new generation of Muslim theologians to continue to rise to the challenges presented.

This paper began with a quote from *Kitāb Al-Mabsūt* in which the famous Qur'anic verse is cited, 'and what will make you realise the steep path? It is liberating the slave' (Q90:11–12). al-Sarakhsi understood this as referring to the literal manumission of one/many slave(s). In the 19th century, Muhammad Abduh read this to mean the complete eradication of the slave-trade.

The idea that we have now *solved* the riddle, and indeed realised 'what the steep path is' appears far too presumptuous on our parts. Perhaps a more theologically humble approach would be to accept that 'realising the steep path' is a process that Muslims will continually have to struggle with. As such, 'liberating the slave' remains not a moment, or event in history, but an ethos.

This ethos, however, must be generationally re-actualised. In this sense, the function of the verse, and the metaphor more specifically, may continually be renewed for new

places, peoples, and struggles—but the emancipatory ethic will always remain. Promoting freedom, in whatever guise it presents itself, will remain the objective of the divine word (*Kalām Allah*).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term ‘prison–industrial complex’ is used to describe the relationship between institutions of imprisonment and the numerous businesses that benefit from them.
- <sup>2</sup> This is not to claim that ‘pro-slavery’ readings cannot also be found within the Islamic tradition, of course. It is to highlight that a trend of radically emancipatory thinking is explicitly present within the classical legal tradition.
- <sup>3</sup> The article is written by Rida, Abduh’s student. Abduh is not cited by name in the article; however, an anti-slavery figure from the Arab ‘*ulamā*’ is referred to. Ghazal identifies this figure as Abduh and argues his anonymity was due to political sensitivities. See: Ghazal, ‘Debating Slavery’, p. 146.
- <sup>4</sup> The shocking reality remains that when confronted with these statistics, numerous commentators are unable to see the Islamophobia that allows such a high representation of Muslims in prison. In place of this, the commentaries tend to focus on prisons being a hotbed of ‘extremism’ due to the high percentage of Muslims (BBC News 2015).

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Article

# Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism

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**Abstract:** This article theorizes Islamic feminism as a form of 'friendship with/in tradition', drawing creatively on Sufism. It unpacks these feminist friendships as forms of 'radical, critical fidelity' which includes commitments and loyalties to tradition while simultaneously engaging critically with sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Core epistemological and ethical concerns are explored, including the nature of relationships to tradition; analytical methods for engaging with Muslim tradition from a gendered lens; religious authority and authoritarianism; and most significantly, engaging with emancipatory horizons of imagination that are attentive to the contemporary axes of power and privilege. The paper turns to rethinking approaches to hierarchy and possibilities for abuse, focusing on the shaykh–murīd and broader teacher–student relationships. It presents a nuanced approach to engaging with hierarchies as a serious analytical category that requires attention. Positing fluidity, transparency, and accountability as central to cultivating responsible hierarchical practices, the article suggests that friendship as a modality of relationships can contribute to such positive transformations. This article, emerging from a project on Muslim feminist ethics, presents creative theorizations of Islamic feminism as a liberatory project of human and divine friendships, inspired by Sufi ideas of *walāya*.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminism; gender; Sufism; *walāya*; friendship; spiritual abuse; grooming; feminist ethics; hierarchy; *awliyā*; sexism; homophobia; intersectionality; racism

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## 1. Introduction

Muslim subjectivities, communities, and tradition-making are informed by diverse and cosmopolitan imaginaries. Islamic feminism represents one such contemporary development, emerging from within Muslim tradition and focused on developing a liberation theology. Amongst other things, such Islamic feminist scholarship addresses crucial epistemological questions about how to engage with tradition critically and constructively, in ways that are responsive to the contemporary ethical challenges of gender equality and social justice.

In the last three decades, the scholarship on Sufism and gender has developed into a significant area of study, making meaningful contributions to Islamic feminist debates. As part of a broader project on contemporary Muslim feminist ethics, this paper explores theorizations of Islamic feminism as a liberatory project of human and divine friendships. As such, inspired by Quranic descriptions of God as the ultimate Friend (*al-Walī*) and believers as being protecting friends (*awliyā*) of one another, and by selectively and creatively drawing on Sufi ideas of intimate friendship with the Divine (*walāya*), I offer some reflections on gender, relationality, and ethics. The following Quranic verses provide me with central inspiration in this regard:

Allah is the *walī* (friend) of those who believe, (Allah) leads them from the depth of darkness into the light. (Quran 2:257)

The believers, men and women, are *awliyā* (allies, protecting friends) of one another; they enjoin the doing of what is right (*al ma'ruf*) and forbid the doing

of what is wrong (*al-munkar*), and are constant in their prayers, and render the purifying alms, and pay heed unto Allah and Allah's Apostle. Allah bestows grace upon them, Indeed Allah is mighty, and wise. (Quran 9:71)

Behold, your only *wali* (protecting friend) shall be Allah, and Allah's Apostle, and those who have attained to faith—those that are constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and bow down [before God]: (Quran 5:55)

Surely, the friends (*awliya*) of Allah, no fear shall be on them, nor shall they grieve. (Quran 10:62)

Drawing on Sufi approaches to *walāya* in this paper, I expand on this conceptual trajectory of friendship for theorizing Islamic feminism. I suggest that friendships in their various forms—friendships between human beings, friendships between men and women, and friendships with God—can provide ways to cultivate religious subjectivity and nourishing forms of relationality. These explorations attempt to critically respond to the hegemonic approaches to religious authority found in many Muslim communities. The paper turns critical attention to the issues of power, abuse, and hierarchy in shaykh–murīd and broader teacher–student relationships. Drawing on feminist reflections on modes of relationality and friendship, I reflect on ways to strengthen responsible and ethical praxis in teaching contexts.

## 2. Situating Islamic Feminism

Older debates on gender in Islam include claims that Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive and Islamic feminism is a contradiction in terms. The opponents, whether these are anti-religious feminists, Islamophobes, or patriarchal Muslim men, are strange bedfellows who, despite their different locations, all claim that narratives of gender justice are the primary and exclusive property of a secular west and are simply adopted by other groupings instrumentally.

Such simplistic binaries of Islam versus feminism are often premised on several inaccurate and problematic assumptions. Firstly, it ignores and silences a rich and robust legacy of Muslim gender contestations within the tradition. While it serves the gatekeepers of patriarchy to marginalize the contested nature of gendered histories within Muslim tradition, such silences do not accurately reflect the nature of Muslim tradition. Secondly, such binaries posit an erroneous separation between religious subjectivity and intellectual context, as if religiosity exists in a realm separate from people's broader social and intellectual milieu. Thirdly, such binaries assume that people are formed primarily by narrow narratives and exclusivist discourses, and that there is and must always be a tension between being Muslim and seeking gender justice. Ideas on gender justice, in this view, must always come from somewhere "outside" of where Islam exists; that is, it only has roots that belong exclusively to the sphere of the secular.<sup>1</sup> These interconnected assumptions are flawed and erroneous.

The narrow formulation of Islamic feminism runs contrary to the self-definitions of many Muslim feminists who present their work as a development, refinement, and application of their faith imperatives while party to the emerging conversations in various currents of feminist thought (Mir-Hosseini 2019; Sirri 2021; Al-Sharmani 2014; Shaikh 2003).<sup>2</sup> Before it was fashionable to use the language of the decoloniality of knowledge, Islamic feminists contributed to a broader decolonial archive by retrieving the genealogies of gender egalitarianism from within Muslim tradition, while engaging in what Chandra Mohanty, decades ago, described as "horizontal comradeship" and dialogical engagements with other feminist discourses (Mohanty 1991, p. 4). This involved the learning and sharing of analytical tools and solidarities between groups of feminists who are attentive to their embedded and specific locations and who do not assume a universal feminist voice, nor a singular type of subject.

I suggest that when Islamic feminists authorize, authenticate, retrieve, and imagine the past and engage with the present, we do so in complex and non-binary spaces that

are informed by the diverse intellectual vocabularies defining our contemporary worlds. Islamic feminists address crucial epistemological questions, including: what is the nature of a critical and constructive relationship to tradition; what analytical methods are crucial to engaging with Muslim tradition; what core resources within tradition are nourishing; how to critically engage contemporary forms of religious authority; and most significantly, how to develop inclusive and emancipatory horizons of imagination for our times at the intersection of numerous axes of power and privilege.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Theorizing Islamic Feminisms: Friendship as Radical, Critical Fidelity

I offer a theorization of Islamic feminism as a ‘friendship with/in tradition’; that is, a project of friendship suffused with intimate existential and ethical relationships based on love, nurture, devotion, and allegiance. (Shaikh 2021, pp. 46–47)<sup>4</sup> Using the composite preposition ‘with/in’ tradition signals that Islamic feminists navigate complex forms of belonging within Muslim communities: we are both insiders within the tradition, as well as scholars who analyze and evaluate parts of the tradition critically and reflectively. Such lived engagements and intellectual labor entails Islam-making as a process—Islamic feminists engage, wrestle with, and reimagine the nature of tradition through a constructive theological imagination that addresses social justice.

I suggest that Islamic feminism as a ‘friendship with/in tradition’ may be theorized as a position of ‘radical, critical fidelity’.<sup>5</sup> Islamic feminists are often committed to and inspired by the rich Islamic teachings of God, human nature, and existential potential. However, such commitment includes forms of radical love that candidly critique all forms of prejudice and discrimination that might appear within other parts of the tradition. Such a radical, critical fidelity firmly opposes injustice and oppression, prioritizing the needs of those marginalized and on the periphery of Muslim communities. A radical politics engages with evolving notions of justice and gender while emphasizing increasingly inclusive understandings of God, human beings, and community. Moreover, this approach adopts an intersectional lens of analyzing social power; that is, the awareness that people and communities might occupy complicated positions of power and privilege in a complex social world of interconnected hierarchies, and that one cannot isolate gender from other social relations of power.

As such, a ‘friendship with/in tradition’ from this perspective is not only defined by a commitment to Islam, but also by a simultaneous critique towards parts of the tradition and community that are sexist, patriarchal, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic. While some Islamic feminists and gender activists do not address questions of sexual diversity,<sup>6</sup> increasingly, a number of Islamic feminists are more attentive to and critical of queerphobia and the demeaning of non-binary people within religious communities. Particularly for those Islamic feminists whose identities have been privileged by heteronormative and/or racist ideologies, we/they are called upon to expand a critical feminist lens to the damaging axes of patriarchy, homophobia, and racism. Jerusha Lamptey, drawing inspirationally on prophethood as exemplifying a social critique of power and hegemonic elites, points to the importance of Islamic feminist reflexivity around one’s positioning within a dominant status quo. She urges Islamic feminists to engage in actively destabilizing complex systems of unjust privilege, within which we might be co-opted and benefit from. (Lamptey 2018, p. 154). The imperative to critically engage with intersecting forms of injustice as they appear and exist on the social horizon will enable us to deepen the moral compass of Islamic feminist commitments.

The contribution of Islamic feminists as part of this relationship with/in tradition is three-fold. Firstly, they critically deconstruct parts of the tradition, past and present, that are patriarchal, androcentric, racist, and/or homophobic. Secondly, they retrieve, recover, and bring into visibility the marginalized histories of women, black, and/or queer folk, as well as foreground gender egalitarian narratives from within the histories and current practices of the tradition. Thirdly, they reconfigure, reimagine, and envision core theological and



ethical categories in ways that are inclusive of all human beings as part of the ongoing work of creating egalitarian and spiritually vivifying tradition.

As such, these engaged scholars might varyingly conform, be inspired by, dissent, reject, and reconstitute previous ideas and methods, while presenting original new insights. In these complex relationships to the past, they are part of a long historical trajectory of believers who are both the subjects and contributors to an emerging Islamic tradition unfolding in the present.<sup>7</sup> Foregrounding these kinds of relationships with/in tradition highlights the obvious, but sometimes elided, reality that religious traditions are dynamic and continuously being shaped by historically situated human beings—and in particular, that Islam as a tradition continues to be in-process and co-created by diverse individuals and communities in the contemporary period.

Kirsten Wesselhoeft has recently described Islamic feminist work as constituting an intimate “set of ethical relationships in their own right” (Wesselhoeft 2017, p. 169). From the perspective of Islamic feminists, gender justice is a central ethical imperative for the cultivation of Muslim subjectivities and the embodiment of Islamic virtue in the present. As such, it presents a vision for contemporary Muslim becoming. I suggest that a ‘radical, critical fidelity’ describes how Islamic feminists engage with modes of religious becoming through inclusive, compassionate, critical, justice-based, imaginative, and courageous ways of being” (Shaikh 2021, p. 47). I thus locate Islamic feminism as an expansion, elaboration, and development of Muslim tradition in the contemporary period.

To further elaborate my theorization, I propose that Islamic feminism as a ‘friendship with/in tradition’ defined by a “radical, critical fidelity” signals the following:

1. an overarching commitment to being part of an unfolding Muslim tradition;
2. mapping human subjectivities and social formations within a foundational God–human relationship that grounds the processes and goals of individual and social life in the attainment of a right relationship with God;
3. a conceptualization of tradition, theology, and religious knowledge as open, dynamic, and ongoing processes;
4. a critical and constructive engagement with past/present intellectual legacies and practices within the living tradition of Islam;
5. contesting authoritarian modes of religious authority;
6. an enduring commitment to gender justice that is responsive to the grounded social realities of a context and receptive to emerging calls for ever-more comprehensive forms of social justice that intersect with race, sexuality, and a host of other axes of power;
7. asserting the full moral and religious agency of every believer, with a commitment to centering the experiences of those oppressed and marginalized in the community
8. including Muslim women’s experiences as an epistemological base to theorize;
9. rethinking the binary gender formulations that pervade the legacy, including perspectives of Muslims who identify as queer and non-binary;
10. seeking to establish forms of sociality that nourish the full spiritual possibilities, intrinsic dignity, and social equality of every human being.

I offer this ten-point conceptualization as a way to deepen the reflections on forms of radical, critical fidelity within Islamic feminism. Given that I propose friendship as a mode of relationality for Islamic feminism, I proceed to unpack in more detail some theological ideas on friendship.<sup>8</sup>

Friendship is an evocative concept that helps us to reimagine modes of relationships built on intimacy, reciprocity, mutuality, and fluidity, which have the potential to reconfigure ideas of power and static hierarchies. I engage the ideas of friendship whilst drawing on Sufi ideas, as well as the work of selected contemporary theorists.<sup>9</sup> My approach to Sufism generally—and to Sufi concepts of *walāya* in particular—is critical, creative, and constructive. While drawing on these ideas, my readings are not bound by previous contours of signification and meaning. Moreover, as I have argued in previous work, Sufism is a multifaceted and polyphonous tradition, without a monolithic approach to

gender (Shaikh 2012). It is inaccurate to represent Sufis as the “good Muslims”, with a singularly peaceful, pluralistic, and gender egalitarian form of Islam, as depicted in some forms of contemporary media (Safi 2011).

Through time, Sufi discourses present us with a range of approaches to gender from highly patriarchal formations, on one end, to radically egalitarian approaches on the other, with many instances of crisscrossing on this spectrum. Sufi teachings and communities in various spaces also reflect ambivalences and tensions around gendered practices and concepts, which are embodied and negotiated in varied ways by practitioners.<sup>10</sup> Meena Sharify-Funk (2020) provides an instructive review of the state of scholarship at the intersection of Sufism and gender, noting the expansion of this field beyond text-based scholarship to include ethnographic data from diverse contemporary Sufi communities. Such studies based on fieldwork in Muslim contexts ranging from South Asia (Abbas 2002; Pemberton 2010), West Africa (Hill 2018), Turkey (Raudvere 2002), Egypt (Schielke 2008), and the Americas (Hernandez-Gonzalez 2019; Dickson 2015; Sharify-Funk et al. 2018), illustrate the varied lived negotiations of gender through spaces of musical performance, rituals, and shrine cultures, as well as both formal and informal types of women’s leadership in established Sufi tariqas (Sharify-Funk 2020, pp. 59–60). Furthermore, Sharify-Funk suggests that there are marked differences between two contemporary interpretive approaches to understanding gender dynamics in Sufism, which she describes as progressive (Shaikh 2012; Silvers 2010) and traditionalist (Murata 1992; Dakake 2008), respectively. She observes:

Whereas scholars with a Traditionalist orientation seek to revalorize the spiritual and socioreligious norms of premodern Islam and deflect modernist critiques, many scholars within the progressive Muslim community articulate respect for Sufism while nonetheless subjecting historical practices and writings to critical scrutiny, without deference to traditional authority structures. . . Scholars who adopt the (progressive) orientation place emphasis on critically analyzing both text and context, with attention to power dynamics, historicist critique, and the social construction of oppressive relationships. In contrast to this liberatory project, Traditionalists frame their own scholarship as a defence of an integral, ancient culture against cultural imperialism. In contrast to historicity, Traditionalists invoke what they regard as transhistorical and perennial values (Sharify-Funk 2020, pp. 64–66)

Pointing to this distinction, Sharify-Funk illustrates that the pre-understandings, commitments, and hermeneutical lenses of scholars significantly impact their interpretations of a tradition with diverse, and at times tense, approaches to gender. Given the liberationist perspective that is intrinsic to Islamic feminism, and in continuity from my previous work that Sharify-Funk describes as “progressive,” I am explicitly engaging Sufism from a contemporary set of lenses invested in notions of human equality that embrace the integrity between spiritual and social justice. However, my approach is not about essentializing Sufi ideas, but rather drawing fruitfully on the central resources within Sufism to enable creative and egalitarian imaginaries.

#### 4. Creative Readings of Walāya

Traditionally in Sufism, friendship as *walāya* has strong currency.<sup>11</sup> *Walāya*, as a verbal noun in Arabic, is a term that incorporates a complex range of meanings surrounding friendship, including notions of proximity, intimacy, love, loyalty, assistance, mutuality, protection, and power. The Quran, in over 40 instances, describes God as the Divine Friend (*Al-Walī*), and identifies exemplary human beings as “*awliyā Allah*,” friends of God, with the term *walāya* occurring twice in the Quran, and the trilateral root *w-l-y* in the Quran occurs over 232 times (Lawson 2016, p. 24).<sup>12</sup>

Interpretations of *walāya* have a powerful and diverse circulation in Muslim tradition and have resulted in varied understandings of the concept in different fields of Islamic tradition, including, amongst others, law, mysticism, and philosophy. These readings and

applications have been shaped by the assumptions, contexts, and discourses of distinct groups of Muslim interpreters.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that premodern male legal scholars, drawing on the same root term, elaborated on the dimension of protection from within their patriarchal worldview to create the juristic concept of male guardianship (*wilāya*) over women (Mir-Hosseini et al. 2015). Muslim feminists have illustrated how this juristic concept has enabled inequitable hierarchical forms of male authority and contributed to restricting female legal capacity in Islamic law (Ibid.). The Islamic feminist Asma Lamrabet (2015) reveals the ways in which most premodern jurists selectively interpreted the Quranic text in relation to their own gendered historical and sociocultural conditioning, while ignoring other explicitly egalitarian Quranic invocations in order to reinforce extant gender hierarchies. Moreover, she powerfully retrieves inclusive Quranic teachings and selected exegetical works on Q 9:71, situating these within broader Quranic ethical concepts to argue for a vision of *wilāya* that urges all believers to collectively and inclusively build the common good (*al-ma'ruf*) and forbid that which is bad (*al-munkar*) in the public and domestic spheres. Using a contemporary lens, she argues that this notion of *wilāya* can be applied to demands for full and equal citizenship of men and women, as well as the joint work of building just and morally equitable societies (Lamrabet 2015, pp. 71–76).

What becomes apparent from some of these debates is that language, terminology, and concepts like *walāya/wilāya* constitute meaning-making units within diverse communities of believers and within varied Muslim discourses. Interpretive communities, engaging with the specific ethical, spiritual, and political assumptions and norms of their times, have created varied trajectories of meanings from these concepts. As such, notions of *walāya/wilāya* have unfolded in diverse and ambivalent ways, both historically and contemporarily, in areas of Sufism and jurisprudence, amongst others. To innovatively engage deeply-rooted Islamic concepts in ways that respond to the emerging challenges and systemic inequalities and that seek to animate more justice-based forms of praxis is indeed the broader mandate of Islamic feminism specifically, and Islamic liberation theology more broadly. As such, my contemporary reading of *walāya* freshly engages with specific Sufi ideas in ways that both attend to the challenges of authoritarianism that the concept has engendered, while also addressing the imperatives of justice and beauty from within the tradition.

Within Sufism, the term *walāya* is used to signify relationships embodied by spiritually refined human beings whose work of inner cultivation has resulted in a loving proximity to God; that is, a friendship to God. These *awliyā*, or friends of God have attained the ideal, ultimate human subjectivity in spiritual terms. Sufis have developed elaborate mappings of *walāya*, with the 11th century Hujwiri's sweeping assertion that the foundations of Sufism and the knowledge of God rests on *walāya* (Hujwiri 1982, p. 210). For the 13th century Ibn 'Arabi, *walāya* is primarily differentiated by the experiential knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of those who have attained deep intimacy, love, and friendship with God (Lawson 2016, p. 19). As such, the goal of human life, or the ideal human subjectivity for a believer to aspire towards, is this kind of aspirational friendship. Hence, friendship presents a central form of interaction around which Sufi concepts of personhood and theology revolve: self-formation that attains the deepest knowledge in spiritual terms is intriguingly described as a reciprocal relationship between the ultimate Divine friend and the human being.

Drawing on Sufism and expanding ideas of a friendship with God founded on love and intimacy as an aspirational form of religious subjectivity and relationality is part of my Islamic feminist project. Friendship offers an archetypal model for relationship to the Real; and pursuing this relationship assists the believer in attaining the ultimate ends of Islam. Spiritual refinement is contingent on forms of friendship, and the cultivation of spiritually imbued friendships in the social world simultaneously nourishes friendship with the Divine friend (*Al-Walī*), while allowing us to give form or social reality to this innate divine quality of friendship lodged within the human heart. This theological lens enables us to recognize our images of the Divine in ways that have the potential to reconfigure approaches to the God–human relationship and to interpersonal relationships.

*Walāya* in Sufism has been typically used to designate specific forms of spiritual attainment and the range of relationships forged by a special, rare group of people who have realized high stations of intimacy and friendship with God.<sup>14</sup> Historically, Sufi ideas of *walāya* are embedded in notions of distinct spiritual hierarchy, where the friends of God occupy various positions, degrees, ranks, and levels of proximity to the Divine (Hujwiri 1982, pp. 212–15; Chodkiewicz 1993).<sup>15</sup> As such, the *awliyā* in Sufism describes a relatively elite group of people who, having attained divine friendship, play a unique cosmological and social role and become the purveyors of blessings, miracles, and various teachings (Cornell 2010; Palmer 2019).

In particular, within Sufism, the *awliyā* are those exceptional individuals whose modes of being, spiritual discipline, and internal cultivation have enabled them to attain forms of knowledge such that they are socially benevolent and empowering for their communities. The internal state of an accomplished *walī* is such that she is able to see with two eyes: the eyes of distinctiveness, recognizing human diversity in all its complexity and varying states of consciousness ranging from the lowest to the highest, while simultaneously apprehending the unitive, exalted divine spirit within each human life. As such, service to God seamlessly translates into service to other human lives and all creation. What becomes evident from this perspective is that service for others is a form of worship of God premised on the recognition of the immanent divine presence in all human beings—an integration of the principle of the unity of being, and that of Divine Oneness (*Tawḥīd*). Thus, the friends of God are friends to their people and serve the needs of their community at multiple levels, including—as many Sufi orders the world over have demonstrated—through material and social support responsive to the immediate needs of the society (Renard 2008, pp. 141–52). Accordingly, spiritual refinement is connected to the collective good, and thus intrinsically has socio-political implications.

### 5. Hierarchy, Power and Accountability

There is clearly a spiritual hierarchy embedded in the notions of *walāya* as signifying the highest form of refinement—the more refined a person becomes, the more intimate is their friendship with the Divine, and thus the more exalted is their spiritual station. Within Sufism, the teaching relationships between spiritual teachers and their students are contingent on a hierarchy of power. However, not all forms of hierarchy need to be intrinsically damaging or detrimental. Any cursory analysis of society reveals to us that some forms of hierarchy are in fact necessary and beneficial. In much of social life and learning, people occupy varied positions of knowledge, skill, and capacity, serving the diverse needs of a society.

From a certain perspective, all pedagogical relations are invariably hierarchical as teachers have greater skills or knowledge than their students, and in the process of education and instruction, they enable the growth and empowerment of the student in that particular sphere. This necessary, dynamic form of power wielded by skilled or learned persons in various sectors of a society has been described in social theory as a form of “competent authority” (Wrong 2017, pp. 52–59). Such forms of hierarchical power are not fundamentally problematic, in so far as they do not result in abuse, injustice, or exploitation.

Hierarchies in these relationships of learning are not meant to be static or fixed. Even in cases when the teacher is a competent authority, it is necessary to recognize that a pedagogical relationship also results in the teacher’s transformation and growth. Learning happens both ways in any teaching relationship; for example, most university professors will readily recognize that one learns most when teaching, not only through figuring out meaningful ways to communicate ideas to one’s students, but also from the rich experiential insights, questions, and perspectives of their students. This pedagogical dynamic is especially relevant within Sufism, where spiritual teachers and their students are not in stagnant relationships, nor are their internal states unchanging. A beautiful description of the dynamic, shifting roles between students and teachers is reflected in the work of the influential 13th century Sufi, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al- ‘Arabī on his relationship with Shaykh Yusuf Al-Kumi: “He assisted me and I assisted him...He was for me a master and a disciple

simultaneously, and I was the same for him".<sup>16</sup> Indeed, reciprocity and mutual impact in teaching relationships occur even when not explicitly acknowledged.

Generally, the Sufi shaykh–murīd relationship is premised on the assumption that power is invested in a trustworthy teacher who has achieved some success in scouring the dross of the lower self and the ego. Serving to mirror qualities of virtue, the teacher guides students to their own inner purification, reflecting a constructive, generative use of power. The hierarchical teaching relationship is thus meant to enable the optimal learning of the student from a teacher who embodies higher forms of knowledge, but who continues to also be in a state of internal growth and transformation for as long as the teacher is alive. Invariably, there are ebbs and flows in power that are contingent on the changing positions and relationships that people inhabit, as when the student becomes a teacher, or the ways that a teacher, through the teaching relationship, also grows, learns, and deepens her insights.

Nonetheless, these power differentials and hierarchies can be mismanaged and even abused due to the powerful position that teachers occupy. In this regard, Sufis have certainly not been immune.<sup>17</sup> In more benign cases, teachers—to the best of their own understanding and with sincerity—provide guidance that is sometimes inappropriate in a given context. Even the most developed spiritual teachers are fallible, socially-conditioned people with specific individual temperaments, as dimensions of selfhood do not simply disappear in light of spiritual refinement. While accomplished, receptive teachers might often overcome their very specific limitations, there are invariably instances and times when they will be unable to do so. This is simply the nature of the human condition—and indeed, in my view, a hidden gift that paradoxically enables and demands the cultivation of an internal discernment in the teaching relationship for both parties.

More problematic are cases of fraudulent spiritual teachers, manipulating their followers and abusing their positions of trust. Given the prioritization of the inner state, and the often opaque nature of these dimensions of power, Sufism is perhaps more vulnerable to unethical manipulation as reprobate charismatic teachers can justify their misconduct claiming that there is an inner, esoteric wisdom at work.<sup>18</sup> Here, it is necessary to also fully recognize the potential for malevolent abuse that can be part of all pedagogical hierarchies and that do not have the necessary checks and balances to ensure accountability.

The challenge in the context of Sufism is that it is not uncommon for a teacher to diagnose an inner imbalance and ask the student to do things that are uncomfortable for the latter. Here, a student's compliance with such instructions might be spiritually necessary; thus, experiencing discomfort or frustration at a teacher's directive or advice is not in itself a reason to reject a spiritual teacher's instruction. This is where it becomes tricky. It is challenging to navigate this ethical terrain because a student, in the process of self-formation, needs to make a judgement call whether, on one hand, a specific teaching or instruction by her teacher that makes her uncomfortable is, in truth, based on the teacher's deeper wisdom, and the agitation she is experiencing is due to the student's own limited state. In this case, it is important that the student overcomes her discomfort and complies with her teacher's instruction to enable her growth. On the other hand, there may well be substantive spiritual and ethical reasons that she is experiencing discomfort, and in this case, it is necessary for her to be attentive to feelings of inner dissonance. It is possible that there is some flaw or problem with the teacher's advice or instruction, either due to the latter's sincere but limited perception of a specific situation, or of the latter's ill-intent. Thus, there is a delicate balance between deferring to the wisdom of a teacher who can be trusted to safely enable one's growth as a student, and being attentive to one's own inner spiritual, ethical, and moral compass when a teacher's instructions bring discomfort.

It is of course easier for a student to resist teachings that violate fundamental aspects of one's dignity and personal integrity, especially if one does not have an enduring relationship of trust with a teacher. However, this is seldom how these scenarios unfold. In most cases, students stick with a teacher who has proven to be helpful, supportive, and effective in their lives over a period of time. It becomes more difficult for the student to resist an instruction if the teacher has served as an integral and positive part of her life trajectory and growth over a long period and has thereby earned her trust. It is in these cases that a student might more easily override his or her own internal dissonance or doubts and adhere to a teacher's misguided, or even exploitative, instructions that might ultimately be damaging to the self and others.<sup>19</sup> In order to encourage students to retain some inner vigilance and agency, it is necessary to critically engage with understandings of the shaykh–murīd relationship. In fact, the potential excesses of esoteric Sufi authority have been part of the impetus for internal reform and ongoing debates within Sufi movements at various points in Muslim history (Werbner 2013).<sup>20</sup>

In the contemporary period, while recognizing the power differentials between spiritual teacher and student, reformulating this relationship as a friendship might open a third space to animate healthier shaykh–murīd relationships. Friendship as a form of relationality might more easily promote engaged conversation, questioning, probing, reflection, accountability, and transparency as meaningful modes of engagement with, rather than unquestioning obedience to, a shaykh. While the shaykh–murīd relationship is embedded within clear forms of authority, friendship as a mode of engagement invites the possibilities for a more conscious awareness and ethical navigation of these power differentials.

Here, it might be valuable to distinguish between authority and authoritarianism. Given that the spiritual seeker/student actively invests power in the shaykh/teacher, either by deciding to take a formal oath of allegiance (*bay‘a*) or to establish a more informal connection, this form of authority rests on a form of power “granted from ‘below’” (Wilcox 2021, p. 3).<sup>21</sup> That is, respect and admiration are granted by the student, based on the teacher’s accomplishments—and in the case of Sufi teachers, their spiritual capacities, rather than the power that is exerted primarily from ‘above’ and unidirectionally. In seeking to establish and deepen ethical forms of authority, Melissa Wilcox (2021) incisively suggests that not only should it be clearly recognized that authority is granted from below, but the authority granted to a teacher should also be engaged with through attention to the *process*; that is, authority should be granted and accessed based on *how* the teacher engages (Wilcox 2021, p. 3). Such approaches to relationship dynamics in the shaykh–murīd dyad help to develop models of authority that are contingent on and answerable to ethically robust forms of power and authority. Invoking friendship as a model for constituting these forms of relationships would more easily enable conscious and critical attention to interpersonal dynamics, transparency, and accountability. Such attention creates openings for “friendship and ethical authority to co-exist, especially if that authority is by definition granted from below” (Wilcox 2021, p. 3). In my view, reconstituting forms of relationality within teacher–student dynamics can invite a deeper exploration of the processes that nurture and sustain ethical and accountable authority. Such explorations help us to resist forms of authoritarianism that position teachers and students in rigid, coercive relationships of power characterized by blind obedience and submission, and an absence of accountability, that collectively create fertile ground for possible abuses.

Furthermore, it is important to also recognize that any approach to friendship amongst human beings cannot ignore the broader power relationships within society. In an illuminating study of friendship in the context of Catholicism, Brenna Moore alerts us to the fact that as we focus on the interpersonal dynamic of friendship, social and political power do not drop off the map (Moore 2015). Friendship, she astutely notes, “is no safe haven from other kinds of power, no magic circle protected haven from race, gender, and class” (Moore 2015, p. 439). Friendships are always entangled in “discursive power”, which she argues,

shapes the desires of men and women, desires that come to see some people as more powerful or worthy of love and attention than others, and these become critical energizing forces for friendships. And yet, for the men and women caught up in these social forces, their life experiences are not entirely reducible to them. Personal relationships have their own specific power, particularly a power for cultivating religious sensibilities. (Moore 2015, p. 444)

Embracing the spiritually transformative potential of friendships, it is equally important to recognize that such friendships are also always situated in the real worlds of systemic inequalities. Zahra Ayubi (2019, p. 188) astutely explored how influential premodern Muslim philosophers and Sufis present friendship as valuable ethical spaces for elite, homosocial men, and they often employ the contrast of marriage to women as the lower or baser foil to help illuminate the deeper value of male friendships. Such elitist ideas were essentially premised on the exclusion of slaves, women, and lower-class men. Hence, friendships are always enmeshed in social networks of power that impose substantive boundaries and limits to the ways in which such relationships might unfold. In the contemporary period, the capacity to foster friendships based on mutuality demands an internal vigilance against the structures of sexism, homophobia, and racism, amongst others, that position individuals and groups in very different ways.

Friendship does not eliminate power differentials; however, when engaged with deliberation and discernment, it potentially invites a more horizontal, dialogical form of relationship. Opening spaces for engaged conversation might nurture the subtle but vital equilibrium needed between refining love and deference and healthy autonomous judgement in a shaykh–murīd relationship. This might be one way to deal with the potential danger of esoteric authority, where wisdom is



presented as opaquely cloaked in the realms of interiority, making ethical accountability and moral transparency more difficult.<sup>22</sup>

There is an interesting play between the inner and outer realms, within both Sufism and Islamic feminism, an intersection that requires some deeper probing. There is a positive side to the focus on interiority within Sufism: spiritual hierarchy in Sufism is not intrinsically linked to social identities. As I have argued elsewhere, patriarchy—premised as it is on gender-based hierarchy and essential male superiority—is spiritually detrimental to men and women alike (Shaikh 2015). In fact, Sufism focuses on the inner levels of refinement as a measure of value for human life—a measure that is intrinsically equally open to every person. Accordingly, no socio-biological or political construct of power can determine one’s fundamental human value. Every human being has equal access and inherent spiritual capacity and shares the same ultimate goals in this life. Herein lies the deep-rooted ontological and spiritual equality that is at the heart of Islam; a universal invitation that many Sufi teachings have foregrounded, as have Islamic feminist works.

Islamic feminists have provided rich and textured ideas on foundational ungendered concepts like primordial human nature (*fiṭra*) and moral agency (*khilāfa*) grounded in a matrix of Divine unicity (*tawḥīd*)—where the sole criterion for the distinction between human beings is a person’s state of God-consciousness (*taqwā*)—as central to Muslim theology (Wadud 2015; Lamptey 2018, pp. 157–66). Compellingly, they argue that such foundational egalitarian assumptions are potentially disruptive of other social-driven indices of value and prestige, and ground Islamic theology in a deeply rooted ontological justice. Yet these theological concepts, as affirming, emancipatory, and powerful as they might be, are immersed in specific lived contexts which varyingly shape how they are experienced (Hoel and Shaikh 2013; Lamptey 2018). Recognizing that human beings, particularly those who belong to less powerful social groups, are enmeshed in webs of power and relationality that often restrain their agency, Jerusha Lamptey astutely asks Islamic feminists to imagine creative engagements with systemic constraints in the work of social and spiritual transformation, what she calls “transformative taqwa”. In response to this incisive question, I suggest that consciously cultivating dialogical, transparent friendships that recognize the competent authority granted to a shaykh, while attentive to the inherent power imbalances within that relationship, can offer more transformative modes of relationality that address the process of how guidance and mentoring takes place.

At present, some Sufi orders appear to be engaging with more transformative pedagogies. Rose Deighton-Mohammed’s (2022) study of the contemporary Nur Ashki Jerrahi community in New York city, led by Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi, points to forms of Sufi authority that explicitly embrace egalitarian interpersonal dynamics and inclusive communal interactions. The Turkish female Sufi, Shaykha Cemalnur Sargut in Istanbul, similarly engages with her majority female disciples in ways that suggest more transparent, dialogical forms of authority (Neubauer 2016). The contemporary American Shaykh, Kabir Helminski of the Mevlavi order, offers some insightful reflections on the textured nature of the transformative relationships between shaykh and dervishes (Helminski n.d.).<sup>23</sup> These contemporary Sufi teachers who appear to embody forms of competent authority and sensitivity to questions of mismanagement and abuse, are inspiring. More broadly, contemporary online Muslim groups, like *In Shaykh’s Clothing* (<https://inshaykhsclothing.com>) and *Facing Abuse in Community Environment* (<https://facetogther.org/>), and the South African mosque, *Claremont Main Road Masjid* (CMRM\_SexualHarassmentPolicyFinal\_05May2019.pdf (accessed on 17 July 2023)), are creating critical awareness against religious abuse, and have produced valuable codes of conduct available globally to communities and organizations for self-regulation and accountability. Such models of power help to reimagine religious authority, spiritual guidance, and pedagogical dynamics. To summarize, I am suggesting that in a shaykh–murid relationship, the thoughtful, sensitive, and conscious cultivation of a friendship defined by openness, accountability, and transparency responds creatively to the inherent constraints of power imbalances in such pedagogical relationships. Moreover, developing such models of friendship as a broader mode of sociality offers the potential to deepen forms of recognition, mutuality, and congeniality between people coming from different social groups.

## 6. Conclusions

Combining Sufi ideas of *walāya* as friendship animated by a radical, critical fidelity within Islamic feminism enables a vigilance against iterations of tradition and community that are unjust or demeaning to any human being. Instead of seeking freedom and liberty only in an ineffable spiritual realm, an integral Sufi-inspired feminist approach encourages us to seek a continuity and congruence between the theological perspectives on human nature and practical demands for social equality.<sup>24</sup>

Truly discerning friends need to traverse the inner and the outer complexities of power to arrive at forms of relationality that are mutually vivifying and recuperative. A Sufi-inspired feminist approach must therefore demand that we reconfigure our paradigms of value, which enable us to call out all damaging forms of social hierarchy, including patriarchal approaches within Sufi groups and Muslim communities more broadly, as well as other structural inequalities that one may encounter in broader society.

In particular, Sufism, with a rich tradition of engendering radical love for the Divine, potentially fosters a receptivity within human beings for higher forms of consciousness, for embodying virtue, for recognizing every human being and all creation as embodiments of the Divine spirit, and a radical aspirational love that can potentially embody ever more encompassing respect for human dignity and justice. In foregrounding the foundational equality intrinsic to the human condition and the imperative of mutual refinement as the ultimate goal of human relationships, there is rich practical and theoretical potential for the category of friendship through drawing on a Sufi framework.

*Walāya* has traditionally been used to describe the attainment of (a relatively small elite group of) spiritually attained people; that is, the *awliyā* in Sufism. I suggest both rethinking the term and broadening its reach for the purposes of Islamic feminism. Expanding the imperatives and resonance of *walāya* as a form of relationality based on spiritually refining and refined friendships open to all Muslims is one way to imagine a socially transformative ethical landscape for our times. Indeed, gender-justice is an intrinsic form of contemporary self-cultivation, and the embrace of a ‘radical, critical fidelity’ enables modes of belonging and friendship that can be critical and constructive. Such friendship, as both a practical and theoretical category, has enormous potential to foster spiritually-imbued and socially engaged forms of relationality. The work of rethinking friendships as a conceptual category, a mode of relationality, and an approach to Islamic tradition through integrating a stance of ‘radical, critical fidelity’ within Islamic feminism is the primary contribution of this paper to the literature.

Proposing “friendship” is a way of imagining refining forms of relationality that reconfigure power and moving us away from static hierarchies and encouraging us towards forms of mutuality, love, respect, and accountability. There are productive and fertile spaces within Islamic feminism to think of friendship in encompassing ways that include friendships with tradition, friendships with current and past spiritual teachers, friendships with peers and cohorts, friendship with men and women, friendship as a mode of relation to the self, friendships with the Prophets, and, indeed, always and ultimately with the Divine Friend.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza (2019, p. 85) commenting on Talal Asad’s pioneering insights on secularism, state: “secularism is not secular. . .but functions as an unmarked and thereby naturalized form of white Protestantism disciplining (premodern, irrational, racialized) religion”. Melissa Wilcox (2021, p. 1) notes in this regard that “claims of, accusations of, and mandates for secularity in movements for gender justice are not only colonialist, white supremacist, and Islamophobic but also in a subtler sense Christian imperialist”.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that for some Muslims committed to gender justice there are broader political and epistemological reasons that they refrain from or reject being described as feminist. These scholars and activists politically resist the ways in which “feminism” has become the dominant discourse that can exclusively signal gender equality—a narrowing which they argue foregrounds western genealogies for gender justice (Barlas 2008). Instead, such scholars prefer to define their contributions as simply Islamic or Quranic. There is a strong resistance amongst some Muslim women to the imposed outsider description of their work as “Islamic feminism” when such labeling is primarily about rendering them transparent in terms of the western “other”, rather than in their own terms. It appears to me that these kinds of positions generally are more strongly asserted in

politically polarized and Islamophobic contemporary contexts, particularly when specific kinds of western feminist discourse are weaponized to represent “Islam as a misogynist religion” and as such, used to marginalise Muslims minorities. Assertions of epistemological purity often have a significant political freight and tend to be most acute where identities are conceived of oppositional and exclusive. While foregrounding important political concerns, assertions of feminism as a western discourse neglects the rich histories of African feminisms as well as diverse feminist movements in the larger Global South who claim, define and constitute the range of contemporary feminist positions. Singular narrow representations on the nature of feminism inadvertently and ironically center white and/or imperial feminisms as defining a discourse that in fact currently is constituted by diverse set of theorists and proponents from different parts of the world, and increasingly by scholars from the Global South. Moreover, there are in some contexts, strategic reasons that Muslim gender activists who draw on broader feminist frameworks, refrain from describing their work as “feminist” due to the ways in which such identification might alienate member of their community or be a mechanism of delegitimation by traditional religious figures. For some discussions on retaining distinctions between Islam and feminism, see also (Seedat 2013).

3 In this paper, I am *not* providing an overview of Islamic feminist scholarship as there is a robust literature on this body of knowledge that spans a variety of Muslim discourses. See Al-Sharmani (2014) and Ayubi (2020) for two succinct, sharp mappings of the debates. Jerusha Lamptey’s *Divine Words, Female Voices* (Lamptey 2018) provides a comprehensive review and lucid analyses of the contributions of some of the most significant works by Islamic feminists over the last few decades. For an anthology that presents critical and innovative feminist approaches to Islam and gender see Justine Howe’s (2020) edited collection entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*. All of these works provide detailed overviews of the contributions of Islamic feminists to various areas of Muslim thought.

4 I introduced some preliminary explorations of these ideas of Islamic feminism as a friendship within tradition in an earlier article (Shaikh 2021), which I draw on, develop and expand in more detail for this paper.

5 I first saw this phrase casually referred to by Prof Denise Ackermann (2003, p. 47) in describing her relationship to the church. It resonated deeply with my own positionality in relationship to Islam. Denise was also one of my early teachers and friends who taught me a set of feminist analytical skills that were deeply enriching. In honouring her scholarship, I am developing this phrase conceptually for my work.

6 My earlier work was equally inattentive to questions of sexual diversity, an absence that I have become aware of increasingly and am committed to redress.

7 Importantly this formulation enables one to assert the fullness of human agency in the contemporary period as constitutive of tradition—to echo the primary but critical insight by William Cantwell Smith (1962, p. 168) that each believer contributes to the nature of a living tradition which is continually unfolding.

8 In my previous work on the 13th century Sufi, Ibn ‘Arabī, I presented my reading of his work as a form of “feminist friendship”. (Shaikh 2012, p. 33).

9 Most premodern male Muslim thinkers conceptualized friendships in thoroughly patriarchal, androcentric, classist way, as explored by Zahra Ayubi (2019, pp. 175–207). While fully recognizing these patriarchal historical limitations on concepts of friendship, for my project I am invested in critically drawing on some earlier ideas, while simultaneously reconfiguring friendship in more relevant and gender-inclusive ways.

10 For discussions of how these tense and ambivalent gender discourses were engaged historically in Sufism, see Shaikh (2012, pp. 41–60). This book also provides a feminist engagement with elements of Sufi thought. For thinking about gender fluidity in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī, see Shaikh (2022).

11 While earlier scholars of Sufism often translated *walāya* as sainthood, a number of contemporary scholars of Sufism made a compelling case to translate the term *walāya* as friendship. Lawson (2016, pp. 19–24) astutely observes that the translation of *walāya* as sainthood represents an orientalist encroachment in the process of translation and that there is a compelling lexical and ethical argument for translating *walāya* as friendship. See also Aiyub Palmer’s helpful overview on historical usages of the terms *walāya* and *wilāya*, which were interchangeable in earlier usage but but later *walāya* came to signify spiritual authority while the term *wilāya* was used more so to designate political authority.

12 Lawson (2016, pp. 24–26) provides a detailed outline of the ways in which this term and its semantic range appears in the Quran, noting that the most frequent form is the nominal *walī*, (friend/ally/guardian/protector) occurring 86 times in either singular (*walī*) or plural form (*awliyā*). The abstract verbal noun of *walāya* appears twice in Q:8: 72 and Q18:44.

13 See Aiyub Palmer (2019) detailed and through discussion of development of the terms *wilāya* and *walāya*, and the evolution of these concepts in Muslim history ranging from political authority to spiritual authority.

14 For a range of detailed discussions on notions of *walāya* in Sufism see (Hakim 1995; Cornell 2010; Chodkiewicz 1993; Renard 2008; Palmer 2019).

15 Lawson noting that premodern Sufi conceptions of *walāya* were embedded in and reflective of hierarchical conceptions of the universe, insightfully asks what kinds of Sufi writing might emerge when “written and taught in the context of a relational cosmos rather than a hierarchical one” (Lawson 2016, p. 43). This generative and evocative question is one that I explore through this paper.

16 (Ibn ‘Arabī 1985, vol. 1, p. 616). See (Addas 1993, pp. 90–91) for a detailed account of this relationship.

- 17 There have been several controversies around abuse and spiritual grooming in a few contemporary Sufis communities. See for example Whitehouse (2018) and Waley et al. (2022).
- 18 For important first-person accounts of spiritual abuse and the misuse of charismatic religious authority see the website *In Shaykhs Clothing*. A particularly powerful contemporary account relevant to this discussion is found here: <https://inshaykhsclimbing.com/kashf-spiritual-experiences-and-corruption-lessons-and-reflections-from-my-tariqa-experience/> (accessed on 17 July 2023). Another Muslim organization doing trailblazing work against abuse by religious authorities is Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) found at <https://facetgether.org/> (accessed on 17 July 2023).
- 19 There is an increasing public awareness of how some male Sufi teachers have abused their positions to conduct secret marriages with their female students, and the overall ways in which some patriarchal ideas of spiritual authority are detrimental to women. See for example, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/05/784513111/navigating-the-fallout-of-alleged-abuse-and-betrayal-in-a-sacred-muslim-space> (accessed on 17 July 2023).
- 20 See also Sirriyeh (1999) for broader debates on *sharī‘a* and *ṭarīqa* between Sufi groups and other Muslim reformist groups.
- 21 I am deeply grateful to Prof. Melissa Wilcox, who was a respondent to an earlier version of this paper that I presented at a keynote address to a conference held in Vienna in 2021. I have drawn on her keen and lucid insights on ideas of power and authority in my paper.
- 22 Such abuses partially initiated a number of internal reforms within Sufi groups particularly in the modern period as documented in Sirriyeh (1999).
- 23 Shaykh Kabir regularly appears in many leadership fora with his wife Camille Helminski, who is an accomplished writer and practitioner of Sufism in her own right, creating a beautiful model of spousal friendship and shared authority that is noteworthy.
- 24 Rose Deighton’s erudite PhD dissertation (Deighton 2021) explores how contemporary Muslim women Sufi teachers draw on the Muslim tradition while cultivating transformative and egalitarian approaches to gender and human nature. Shaikh (2022) presents a creative reading of Ibn ‘Arabī to explore more expansive views of gender fluidity.

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Article

# Queering Jihad in South Africa: Islam, Queerness, and Liberative Praxis

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the theology and politics of queer Muslims in South Africa. Through a queering of the analytical lens of “struggle and praxis” or jihad, this essay traces the deployment of the term jihad by a collective of queer Muslims in Cape Town. In this articulation, queer Muslims play with their inherited traditions of liberation, challenging its presuppositions, and expanding its contours. This essay argues that these queer Muslims read liberation traditions through their experience and praxis which guide their orientations toward theological meaning-making and community practice. By doing so, they challenge the regulatory nature of hegemonic forms of queerness, which emerged in the Global North, resonating in the local posturing of South Africa as a safe space for queer people, ignoring the disparity between the law and public practice, and erasing the experiences of the margins of the queer community. By embracing this marginality, queer Muslims “reimagine” tradition by presenting an inclusive alternative theology and praxis, suggesting a queer possibility within Islam.

**Keywords:** Islam; queerness; liberation theology; jihad; struggle; praxis

## 1. Introduction

It is a Friday afternoon in March 2023. I am on my way to Masjid Al-Ghurabā to deliver the Jumu‘a khuṭba. I am running late. Stuck in the end-of-week school pick-up traffic, I finally make it to the mosque. Sweaty, nervous, and on the verge of energy over-drive, I walked into an unassuming office block, hosting a sacred space of a group of “compassion-centered” Muslims. Set aside from the hustle of a working and lower middle-class neighborhood, as a focal point for ritual performance, community-building, and religious meaning-making, the masjid was a humble but unique space. Greeted by the melodious recitation of the Qur‘ān by a mosque board member, I felt a bit more settled (perhaps because of the affective dimension of scriptural aesthetics). I sat down and readjusted. After the call to prayer, I ascended the pulpit, taking my time to pause on each step. “*As-salāmu ‘alaykum wa raḥmatu Allāh wa Barakātu*”. I began to feel the adrenaline of the moment and the expectations of my performance. I reflected on a parable in the “Heart of the Qur‘ān,” Sūrat Yāsīn (Q36:13–23), about a man on the outskirts of the city who spoke truth to power. According to tradition, Ḥabīb al-Najjar lived on the margins of Antioch because of his outcast status as a leper. (Lumbard 2004, p. 1074). However, despite his social position, he has firm convictions in God and the message of monotheism. He recognizes the truth claims of the apostles sent to his town and defends his belief until he is killed by his community, rewarded with the bliss of The Garden (Ibn Kathīr n.d.). Through the textual silences in the narrative, the Qur‘ān challenges its reader to connect the dots between marginality and spirituality. Extending this idea to include intersectional solidarity (a type of ethical intervention I was trying to make), I started to reflect on a notion of queerness emerging from the tradition and experiences of Islam. My experience and performance of the sermon were an experiential opening that led to a framing of tradition that embraces textual and material practices (Asad 2015) in which “queerness” is a point of orientation toward the workings of power (Ahmad 2006). My deployment of “queer” in

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this essay reflects a signification of sexual non-normativity (captured in the initialism of LGBTQIA+), a practice of anti-normative undoing (Cohen 1997), and a form of racialization (Puar 2007). In this essay, through the analysis of the “queer jihad,” or the struggle for sexual dignity and justice, I examine the theology of the margins (Kugle 2005). Katrina Daly Thompson presents this idea cogently when she says that Muslims on the margins of the global umma are often marginalized due to systems of violence supported by rapacious theologies or traditions. However, because of their marginality, these Muslims are trying to create inclusive support systems and sacred spaces based on a capacious understanding of the Divine–human relationship (Thompson 2023, pp. 5–7, xvii–xix).

This essay attempts to examine the ambiguous nature of queerness. Following Sa’ed Atshan (2020), I am employing an “auto-ethnographic” approach as my main research methodology. Trying to challenge the binary between “researcher” and “subject of research,” I deploy my own experiences in conversation with a textual and online archive of queer Muslims in Cape Town. Opting to protect my interlocutors, I have chosen to only report published data that are focused on the personality of the founding imam, Muhsin Hendricks. Despite this limitation, the imam’s ideas are not created in isolation. They are discussed and refined within the community. In this way, the data of this essay reflects a dominant position within a queer Muslim community. I, therefore, attempt to reflect on my positionality as queer “Coloured” Muslim middle-class man, my solidarity with marginalized Muslims, and my research on queerness in Islam in my place of birth, the city of Cape Town, and its impact on the grammar of this essay. Acknowledging my own positionality as a male “intellectual elite” from the Global South and based at a prestigious university in the Global North, I am trying to deploy the resources at my disposal to produce alternative narratives and determine alternative critical genealogies about Islam, religion more broadly, and queerness that breaks open normative binaries. Undertaking a project with intertwined boundaries is challenging because it destabilizes notions of self/other. Theorizing this destabilized binary, Indian American anthropologist Kirin Narayan deploys the concept of the “enactment of hybridity” to demonstrate the unsettling and multi-sited nature of research (Narayan 1993, pp. 671–86). Reflecting on her “hybrid” heritage and its impact on constructions of insider/outsider, she writes that scholars are “minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously to the world of engaged scholarship and the world of everyday life” (Narayan 1993, p. 672). She challenges the notion of a “native anthropologist,” explaining how power is dynamic and unstable influencing the configuration of self, which also tends to be dynamic, unstable, and queer (Narayan 1993, p. 676).

Focusing on the queer Muslim’s inflection of struggle, this essay analyzes an unsettling category of praxis and struggle by examining how queer Muslims represent a particular manifestation of the oppressed on the earth or *al-mustad‘afin fi ‘l‘ard*. Praxis is “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire 2000, p. 126). In the Freirean sense, praxis deconstructs the networks of power to reveal the ways in which structures are constructed by human beings to dominate some and uplift others. By reflecting on these structures, through a process called conscientization, marginal social classes can collectively work together to transform systemic patterns of exploitation and marginalization (Kamrudin 2018, pp. 144–46). Drawing on a Ḥadīth tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, queer Muslims deploy the concept of the marginalized, estranged, or queer (*al-ghurabā*) as a contemporary signifier of difference marked outside the fold of ethical care. Reading José Muñoz’s “disidentification,” alongside my experiences and research, I echo how this approach is used as a tool of survival, which various marginalized communities undertake, to subtly subvert normative semantic, conceptual, and ethical relations (Muñoz 1999, p. 8). The ambivalent disruption of this approach is that it does not entirely remove culture or tradition. Rather, it reworks the symbolic meanings of established myths and rituals for egalitarian objectives. Queer Muslims in this regard not only frame their queerness as a transgression of religio-cultural norms, but also embody those norms and repurpose their ethical meanings for their distinctive struggle as articulated through the figure of the stranger, marginalized, or queer. This approach to queerness extends beyond

the secularity demanded by a queer liberal secular nationalism or “homonationalism” as argued by Jasbir Puar (2007, pp. 12–14). I examine how queer communities “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 1999, p. 8). Queer Muslims “disidentify” with previous traditions of liberation; they do this by challenging heteronormative liberative interpretations, resisting homonormativity (Duggan 2002), and repurposing tradition for their distinct struggle for dignity and social justice. In this way, queer Muslims in Cape Town do not only reconstruct traditions, but they also “reimagine” the possibilities of tradition. As an alternative hermeneutical strategy, queer jihad is disruptive of some norms and presents an alternative beyond imposed binaries. Atalia Omer (2019) argues that the process of reimagining tradition involves a retrieval of the inherited wisdom that is creatively re-thought to explicitly link the political with the spiritual (p. 156). In this way, as religious activists draw on the tradition and reframe its ethical symbolism, they present new and inclusive ways of being human, and they reimagine religious anthropology and its implications for ethics. Omer’s analysis shows how religious “reimagination” is embodied by a community of engaged and queer practitioners through re-reading inherited narratives, discourses, rituals, and symbols.

This essay is divided into three sections. First, drawing on my experiences in Cape Town and an expanding archive of queer activism (Kugle 2014), I provide an account of the political economy of Islam in the Cape. Traveling from the material and discursive context to a religio-political mapping of a group of queer Muslims, I focus on how queer Muslims in Cape Town have come together to form community and try to cultivate a “compassion-centered” Islam attentive to the margins of society. Second, by texturing theology and activism, I attempt to provide an overview of how the Islamic tradition of jihad is embodied by “deviant” Muslims. Examining the embodiment of the queer jihad, as a form of queering, I argue that Muslims with non-normative sexualities and gender identities critically embrace, challenge, and reimagine Islamic tradition by deploying their lived realities as a re-orientation for religious meaning-making. Third, reflecting on how queer Muslims in Cape Town disidentify with traditions of liberation theology, I examine the potential of queering the analytical concept of praxis, a hallmark of liberation theology. Through a queer expression (*al-ghurabā*) of the broader signifier of the “oppressed on the earth,” or *al-mustad’afin fi’l’ard*, I contend that queer Muslims shift the underlying anthropology of traditional notions of praxis, by repositioning subjectivity to the margins of society.

## 2. Queer Muslims in Cape Town

In 1994, South Africa transitioned to a nonracial secular constitutional democracy from apartheid, a structurally violent Christian nationalist state which exploited Black people as laborers in a system of racial capitalism. From the emergence of the colonial regime in 1652 to the various forms of settler-colonialism and white domination (such as the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910) crystalizing in apartheid (1948–1994), race, class, and gender have driven the political economy of the country. During apartheid, the Afrikaans elite, drawing on earlier colonial regimes of control, constructed a socio-economic hierarchy that created “racial groups”: White, Indian/Asian, Coloured, and African Black with various ethnic and language sub-groups quadrillaging most of the population. Resisting these constructed markers of difference, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) created a unifying category of the politically Black, expressed through the experience of oppression (Biko [1978] 2002). While Whiteness was the ideal racial formation under apartheid, a white heterosexual pairing was highly desired to combat the challenge of its demographic minority (Leap 2004, p. 138). In this essay, I draw on the thought of the BCM noting also how there are, within South African Blackness, diverse experiences based on history, language, and geographic location. My focus therefore will be on Coloured inspired notions of queerness within the city of Cape Town (see Erasmus 2001). Initially a constructed identity of liminality, the “Cape Coloured” community has

cultivated diverse expressions of sexuality, race, class, and gender often signified in the ambiguous figure of the “moffie,” the non-normative drag entertainer, dressmaker, or hairdresser tolerated for their usefulness to straight society (Pacey 2014).

As the country developed its secular constitutional framework in the 1990s, the elites of the liberation movement also decided to protect several marginalized social classes including women, queer people, and trans communities. As a form of nation-building, the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu called South Africa a “rainbow nation” (Livermon 2015, p. 15). However, despite progressive ideals, there are many limitations to the promise of freedom and the practice of agency for people with non-normative gender expressions or sexualities. For instance, the adoption of same-sex marriage in 2006 outraged traditional religious sensibilities. In response, Muslim clergy, or the ‘*ulamā*’ elite class, responded to this Bill by affirming the dominant legal (*fiqh*) position prohibiting same-sex acts (Hendricks 2009; Kugle 2010). The biggest ‘*ulamā*’ body, the Cape’s Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), opted to remain authentic to a particular vision of Islamic tradition that ignores the legacies of gender and sexual diversity in precolonial Islamic societies (El-Rouayheb 2005; Kugle 2016; Peletz 2009). The willful ignorance of the MJC of this diversity in Islamic history shows their unwillingness to expand the circle of compassion to marginalized Muslims.

In July 2022, following the release of a trailer for a local documentary on queer Muslims, the MJC reaffirmed its normative legal position. Taking this position further, they also stated that any legitimization of sexual non-normative desires, such as the one adopted by many queer Muslims and some allies, affirming an acceptance of the practice of queer sexualities within the context of an ethical relationship, is outside the fold of Islam. Through their process of vehement othering, or *takfir*, they opened the door to violence and exposed queer bodies to death—a figurative and lived reality (Judge 2018). By producing a necro-theology, the MJC tussles between the politics of life and the casting out for death (Muslim Judicial Council 2022). As Puar writes, between the “interstices of life and death” is the “differences between queer subjects who are being folded (back) into life and the racialized queerness that emerge through the naming of populations” (Puar 2007, p. 34). Through this dual process, queerness operates not only as an act of creation calling subjects into being, but it is also a framing of deviant populations marked for death (Puar 2007, p. 24). Despite the MJC’s life-affirming ethos, as expressed in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and their attempts at warding off extremism (Muslim Judicial Council 2020; Herman 2015), there are some bodies who do not warrant the legitimization of theology and are cast out for the violent embrace of death (Puar 2007, p. 33).

As Muslims with non-normative sexualities embody differing orientations to queerness, they not only confront homophobia within the Muslim community but also struggle against hegemonic forms of queerness that position the figure of the queer Muslim outside the folds of queerness (Rahman 2015; El-Tayeb 2012). The discourses around Islam and sexual diversity are often prefabricated by the civilizational discourses of late modernists (Islam is oppressive towards queers) and the fraternal patronization of traditionalists (queers can be Muslim only if they are celibate and silent). Echoing Orientalist (Islam as sexually promiscuous and liberal) and neo-Orientalist tropes (Islam as sexually repressed), Muslims with queer desires often have their experiences, voices, and theologies elided. This discursive midfield is further complicated by competing claims of the “indigeneity” of queerness in African contexts (see Livermon 2015, pp. 18–20; Van Klinken 2019). This traveling Orientalism (and racism!) is not only discursive but also materially impacts political policy by continuing the idea that Muslims are inherently queerphobic and violent toward “deviance” (see Butler 2010, pp. 105–6). Moreover, as queer Muslims assent to their public presence, their agency is often curtailed by traditionalists and modernists who expect queer Muslims to perform orthodox piety or a regulatory form of queerness (Peumans 2017). By fashioning Islam as the ultimate boogeyman of modernity, discourses originating in the Global North show how racist and xenophobic scholarship can impact policy (Omer 2023). Despite these discursive and material hegemonies, queer Muslims

celebrate their intersectional identities by forming community and imagining a different egalitarian future (Rahman 2010).

In 1998, Imam Muhsin Hendricks, along with a group of fellow gay Muslims, founded a small community of LGBT Muslims initially called Al-Fiṭra. Imam Muhsin grew up in a traditional Cape Muslim family and describes his childhood as being closely intertwined with Islam through the *masjid* where his grandfather was an imam and his mother a schoolteacher (Gregory 2022; Piraino and Zambelli 2018). His father was also a spiritual healer and would prescribe a *ruqya*, or healing recommendation from the Qurʾān treating illnesses, a common profession in colonial and apartheid South Africa (see Morton 2018, p. 89). Imam Muhsin studied Arabic and Islamic Sciences (law, scripture, theology, philosophy) at the University of Islamic Studies (Jamia-Dirasat Al-Islamiyyah) in Karachi, Pakistan (1990–1994). After ending a heterosexual marriage, he went into social seclusion (*khalwa*) for over 80 days engaging in acts of worship. These acts of *ibādat* included fasting (*ṣiyām*), ritual prayers (*ṣalāt*), invocations of God (*dhikr*), and introspection (*muḥāsaba*). After this intense period of inner cultivation, Imam Muhsin publicly “came out” about his sexuality. He describes his journey guided by a “compelling need to be authentic” (Hendricks 2020; Gregory 2022). “I felt . . . I can’t say it was a dream or *wahy* [revelation] that I was getting or anything like that. It was just this overwhelming sense that I am okay with who I am now” (Hendricks 2020). Imam Muhsin’s spiritual cultivation radiated outwards and gave him the strength and conviction to be public about his sexual identity. He founded Al-Fiṭra (which later became The Inner Circle in 2006 and then Al-Ghurabā in 2018) in 1998 to provide support and community to people struggling to reconcile their faith and sexual identity by organizing a community for pastoral care (psycho-spiritual counseling, ritual community, performance of civil unions), public education (training for imams), and archive-building (Tofa 2014). While trained in Islamic Sciences, Imam Muhsin embraces all forms of knowledge (Gregory 2022). In his interpretation of the Lot story in the Qurʾān, for example, he uses contemporary archeological and religious studies knowledge to create a broader setting in which he presents his interpretation. In his empowerment course, he uses contemporary spirituality through astronomical archetypes to explore notions of human personality, a point that we bonded over (we are both Geminis!) during the community lunch served after the Friday service.

In the beginning, queer Muslims congregated for prayers and social support in the homes of early congregants. The figure of the home as a place of prayer and congregation has resonances in sacred and local Islamic history. Before it was a global religion, Islam started with a small local band of social outcasts in the *Bayt al-Arḩam*—the House of Arḩam – where the marginalized and persecuted Muslim collective met in secret in the early days of Islam in Mecca. Named after the companion, Al-Arḩam b. Abi al-Arḩam (d. 675), the *Bayt al-Arḩam* was the ideal space because of its secret location. It thus became the first space of congregation for the early Muslims. Manifesting in the local history of Islam in the Cape, the home as mosque, became the first site of prayer and congregation in colonial Cape Town. Enslaved and free Muslims came together for prayers, spiritual education, and community in the homes of land-owning free citizens, such as the home of Saartjie van der Kaap, which eventually became the first mosque space in 1798 (Davids 1980, pp. 93–94). The contemporary sacred space of these queer Muslims strives towards egalitarian ethics by encouraging the participation and leadership of women and queer Muslims in ritual and admirative activities such as leading ritual prayers, delivering sermons, or serving on boards. As a congregant said:

I came to this mosque to be able to pray in a space that is not gender segregated, to be able to stand in the front row, behind the imam, to sometimes be asked to lead the prayer, just to be in a space where women are in the front lines, are included as much as possible, are real, actual participants, and not on the sidelines and forgotten about (recorded in Dougan and Davis 2018).

The space that this group creates is a place where marginalized Muslims from positions across matrices of identity and ideology gathered to engage in religious meaning-making



through their acts of worship or social solidarity (Hoel 2013). Rejecting the idea of a “gay mosque,” Imam Muhsin encourages all Muslims who are committed to the notion of a compassion-centered Islamic tradition to join the community, because queerness, for Imam Muhsin, can be expressed through a socially just and compassionate Islam (Hendricks 2012). I witnessed this practice at their 2023 Queer *Iftar*, the meal that breaks the fast during the month of Ramaḍān. The community that gathered was diverse and varied. People (mainly Coloured and Indian, with a few White folks and very few African Black people) from all over the city came to open the fast. Despite its ethical commitment to an egalitarian space, this community of queer Muslims, like many other marginalized groups, has not fully lived up to its ideals, especially in terms of gender justice. Afshan Kamrudin comments:

Breaking from the strict indoctrination of the larger Muslim community was challenging even among marginalized communities. In a conversation with Imam Hendricks about gender-neutral prayers at [The People’s Mosque], he recounted: “At first, there were many gay men who rejected the idea of praying behind a woman. When I asked why, they responded ‘because she will invalidate our prayer’ when I asked them to explain [and] they responded, ‘she will distract us.’ This response is generally given by Muslim men to mean that women distract them sexually to keep men from concentrating on their prayers, so I responded, ‘but you are gay’” (Kamrudin 2018, p. 145).

This common response to the call for woman’s ritual leadership reflects a pervasive androcentric religious anthropology, an understanding of the male form as the normative human model from the perspective of the Islamic tradition (Shaikh 2012, pp. 6–10). In tracing this sexist notion, Fatima Mernissi comments on the circulation of a ḥadīth, narrated by the companion Abū Hurayra, in which the Prophet is reported to have said that three things—a donkey, a woman, or a dog—invalidate the prayer if they get between a person and the orientation of prayer (Mernissi 1991, pp. 70–81). Presenting a more nuanced tradition attributed to the Prophet’s wife, Ā’isha, Mernissi challenges the dominant circulation of Abū Hurayra’s account with a counter-narrative by a companion with greater access to the Prophet. Without investigating the intimate relationship between heteronormativity and androcentrism, this worshiper’s response shows how deep forms of sexist and patriarchal prejudice can be embedded in a collective hermeneutical resource. Despite the social location, sexist or racist ideas can manifest in theology and politics. My experiences over the years in this space suggest that the mosque largely replicates the racial politics of Cape Town (see Osman and Shaikh 2017). Dominated by Coloured and Indian men, this community needs to re-evaluate its commitment to racial justice in the city by purposefully breaking down racial barriers in the city. Despite these challenges, Imam Muhsin attempts to conscientize his community, challenging them to be attentive to all forms of social hierarchy and its spiritual perils. This is indeed a big task for a group dominated by queer Coloured men. However, I have witnessed the practices of this community (as signified by their current board makeup and arrangement of the sacred space) trying to challenge gender and racial hierarchies with some success.

In August 2018, Imam Muhsin announced on his Facebook page that he would be leaving Al-Fitra/The Inner Circle. He later went on to continue his work with queer Muslims through the work of the non-profit Al-Ghurabā Foundation, which was established in September 2018. After Imam Muhsin left, his position was temporarily filled by several local scholars and activists invited to perform the Friday (*Jumu’a*) congregational service or to facilitate educational workshops on Islam and sexual diversity. The imam’s exit from the organization was not without public scandal. The board sent a communication stating that impending financial audits were part of the reason for Imam Muhsin proactively leaving the organization. In January 2019, the board informed members of the shift in focus from Muslim-related issues to broader issues of care for queer youth in Cape Town. Imam Muhsin was cleared of the charges of financial impropriety by an external committee (Gregory 2022). His splinter community, Al-Ghurabā Foundation, is a grassroots community-based organization (now based in the same space as The Inner Circle) that

provides religio-political conscientization through a critical investigation of the structures producing marginality and spiritual care, nourishing the souls of marginalized Muslims (Freire 2000, p. 32). After recently securing external funding (much of which comes from European countries or liberal human rights organizations), Al-Ghuarbā Foundation continues to grow and provide compassionate care for non-normative Muslims. The Islamic traditions that inform this activism are the focus of our next section.

### 3. Jihad and (Queer) Embodiment

Through the reimagination of theology and tradition, the queer jihad deploys gendered and sexualized ideas to articulate an alternative understanding of the human subject beyond heteronormative boundaries. Showing the ability of a queer experience to expose the ubiquity of heterosexual scripts within society, it also proposes alternatives based on a different reading of tradition. This reading not only looks for an archive of “sexual and gender deviance” within the tradition but also examines queer possibilities derived from tradition. The Arabic verb *ja-ha-da* means to endeavor, to strive, or to exert oneself. In the contemporary period, jihad has come to signify several interconnecting layers of violence producing the figure of the terrorist Muslim: a queer “other” of secular modernity (Puar 2007, p. 76). However, Islamic discourses have framed jihad around a different point of orientation – God. As the Divine becomes the objective of jihad (*al-jihād fī sabīl Allāh*), it frames the telos not only at the arrival of material goods but also in spiritual success, blurring the imposed binaries of secularity. As jihad is placed in the path of God, it operates in relation to a cluster of ethical terms, such as patience or forbearance (Afsaruddin 2013, p. 11). As Asma Afsaruddin (2013, 2022) notes, earlier commentators of the Qurʾān and contemporary activists understood jihad as both an inner process of ethical cultivation and an external process of physical struggle against injustice. These scriptural and ethnographic insights resonate with a contested ḥadīth report which establishes the various valences of the term for Islamic imagination. Found in the collection of al-Bayḥaqī (d. 1066), a group of victorious Muslim fighters had returned to the city from battle. Alerted to the pride of his companions, the Prophet is reported to say: “We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad.” The two struggles are not disconnected. His bewildered companions ask: “Prophet of God, what do you mean by the lesser jihad?” To safeguard against the rise of hubris and pride (the original “sin” of Iblīs) in his companions, the Prophet makes an explicit link between struggle, both in its manifest and subtle forms, replying “That is to struggle with swords against an enemy who oppresses you.” They answer by asking what could be greater than the fight against the pagan Arabs, who oppressed the early Muslims. The Prophet Muḥammad answers them, “To struggle against the enemy who resides here. . .” as he holds his hands up on either side of his chest, “that is the greater jihad” or *al-jihād al-akbar* (Neale 2017, pp. 6–8).

As one of the chief villains in the creation myth, Fazlur Rahman Malik discusses Iblīs as the “anti-human” force, that “whispers” into the hearts of humans (Q.114), leading them down the path of oppression (Fazlur Rahman Malik 2020, pp. 25–27). Mahmoud Muḥammad Taha explores Iblīs as the archetypical wrongdoer who was not only prideful but also in a state of loss, “hopelessness and utter despair” (Taha 1987, p. 98). In that experience of alienation, they decide to seduce the Children of Adam as an unhealthy coping mechanism because of their lack of receptivity to the Divine. Iblīs’s downfall was their pride, veiling them from their Lord. Translating this cosmological myth into social action, Azizah al Hibri develops the concept of “Iblisi logic” to account for this primordial moment of arrogance based on perceived differences in outward form (Hidayatullah 2014). The social manifestation of Iblisi logic is thus a system of discrimination based on external markers of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, ethnicity, or nationality. Because Iblīs only saw the materiality of the Adamic form, they did not see with an inner eye, showing the potential of the Adamic form, revealing the Divine breath residing in each human life (Q15:29). By attending to moments of “Iblisi logic” in his community, the Prophet wanted to prevent manifest and subtle oppression (*zulm*).

Toshihiko Izutsu writes that the meaning of the verb *za-la-ma* is to put something in its wrong place, to transgress, to oppress, or to be unjust (Izutsu 1966, pp. 164–65). While fighting against an unjust enemy (such as the oppressive pagan Arabs) is a powerful form of jihad, it can also lead one down a path of self-righteousness whereby the self is inflated with self-grandeur (*istikbār*) which is a common manifestation of *zulm* (Kugle 2021). Making an intervention about the nature of the self (*nafs*), the Prophet warns his community about the treacherous path of the *nafs*, which can mislead travelers to forms of egoism that feeds the self that incites one towards evil, *al-nafs al-ammāra bi sū*. By creating this distinction between the greater jihad and the lesser jihad, the Prophet demonstrates how oppression can disturb the human subject at multiple registers of being human (Fazlur Rahman Malik 1980, p. 25). According to many patriarchal theologies, the sexuality of human beings is often seen as a sign of an unrefined *nafs*. This point was localized for me when I spoke to queer Muslims about their journeys of discovery and authenticity. My comrades referred to a common trope in which the practice of homosexuality was seen as a battle of the *nafs*, with the projected outcome of a life of celibacy, removing the possibility of romantic and sexual fulfillment. This limited view ignores the desires and needs of many human beings and restricts the practice of Qur'anic ideals of compatibility, mutuality, love, and tenderness for a group of people because of their God-given disposition (Mir-Hosseini et al. 2022). However, the charge of an unrefined *nafs* has been imposed on women and queer people who call attention to the unequal practices within Muslim communities and spaces (Shaikh 1994). Furthermore, it fails to account for sexuality as a healthy expression of human dignity and part of Islamic anthropology (Kugle 2010).

An anti-sex reading of Islam does an injustice to rich literary and material legacies which intertwine sex, (non-normative) sexuality, and spirituality (Zargar 2011). This is also a limited reading of the human person, as it does not capture the importance of the material body in the production of religion. It is only through the human body that the Divine can be manifested in a complete and holistic form (Shaikh 2012). As the human body holds the breath of God in each human life, it is through the body that religious meaning is experienced. Such an approach does not recognize the multiple ways in which the body becomes the site of meaning-making and knowledge production. The body, from a queer perspective, is both “the foundation for and the product of the coming into being of a meaningful world, which is human being. By using the abstraction “embodiment,” theorists stress that the body is not a thing, as if its materiality made it a simple logic. It is instead a concatenation of actions, affecting and affected by culture” (Kugle 2007, p. 13). As queer Muslims have put their bodies on the line for their objectives, they also deploy their bodies as a site of meaning-making. The queer jihad proposes to challenge normative notions of the correct comportment and attached beliefs and traditions of the “good” Muslim body. Agents and structures of normativity view their claim to authenticity as the only claim. However, they often miss the boat by disregarding all bodies as a central site of theological making. In some Islamic discourses, the human body has the unique ability to be a complete manifestation of the Divine regardless of socially constructed markers of difference (Kugle 2007, p. 30). The embodiment of the queer jihad is not only the activism for sexual dignity but also the slow shifting of a sexual economy. While forms of queerness have become regulatory and normative, the “others” of the queer community suggest a remaking of the political economy of bodies. Through their embrace of the lived experiences of queer marginality, this community expands the hermeneutical orbit of the term. In the contemporary period, for Muslims on the margins of society, jihad has become an Islamic term that captures their emerging theology of liberation. As different forms of jihad are extracted from sacred history or post-Prophetic battles and struggles, jihad’s hermeneutical orbit expands in meaning and political symbolism. We now turn to this extended orbit as non-normative Muslims queer the contours of traditional liberation theology.

#### 4. Toward a Queer Praxis

The Prophets mentioned in the Qurʾān come from Biblical and Arabian traditions (Q42:13). While scripture only mentions a few by name, Islamic tradition is open to the possibility of multiple people (regardless of gender) acting in the capacity of a messenger or prophet across history and space (Q16:36), culminating with the emergence of Muḥammad in Arabia of Late Antiquity (Q33:40). Before Muḥammad, prophecy was fluid, and with his arrival the final message in a greater tradition of emissaries was presented to humanity. As a defining feature, these prophetic figures were selected and extolled as ideals from their communities because of their belief in God, and their witness to social justice (Esack 1997, p. 99). Despite their different struggles, they represent various aspects of the ideal human deployed as hermeneutical inspiration for liberation. An Islamic queer liberation theology is a theology for the marginalized, a reimagining of Islam that embraces *al-ghurabāʾ* as a living embodiment of the general prophetic message, inspired by forms of monotheism, and of standing up for justice. However, the difficult struggle for justice demands a confrontation of our own privileges and complicities in global configurations and structures of violence and inequality, a point I tried to make during my sermon by asking congregants to think about struggle and justice as intersectional. The Qurʾān exhorts its believers to “Stand up firmly for justice as witnesses for God even if that testimony is against yourself or your parents and those closest to you” (Q4:135). This sign recognizes that being a witness for God could mean a scrupulous account of what is considered to be equitable and fair. The Al-Ghurabā community grapples with this Divine challenge in overlapping ways in their theology and praxis with queer Muslims.

By naming his new community Al-Ghurabā, Imam Muhsin repurposes a ḥadīth of the Prophet and suggests that a contemporary manifestation of the tradition’s figure of the strangers is potentially found through the praxis of queer Muslims. From the Arabic verb *gha-ra-ba*, *al-ghurabāʾ* denotes a sense of strangeness, marginality, and even queerness. Al-Ghurabā, a fitting name, indicates a sense of queerness and a produced force at odds with society. Drawing on a ḥadīth, the imam reads his queerness into this tradition by suggesting that sexual marginality is a social manifestation of strangeness and marginality: “Islam started as a strange thing, and it will return to a strange thing. So, give glad tidings to the strangers (*al-ghurabāʾ*).” It also has the spiritual potential to act as an opening into a deeper receptivity with the Divine. Recorded in the collections of Imam Muslim (n.d., Ḥadīth 145) and Ibn Majah (n.d., Ḥadīth 3986) this ḥadīth is interesting. Located in the Imam Muslim’s “Book of Faith,” and in Ibn Māja’s “Book of Tribulations,” this tradition offers us some insight into the link between social marginality and spiritual cultivation in the Meccan phase of the Prophetic mission. As the first Muslims experienced great persecution, boycott, and violence, they also show how Islam emerged from the margins of Arabia society, attracting non-normative people such as women, slaves, social outcasts, and the poor. As Islam emerged in Late Antiquity, it disrupted the logic of *jāhili* Arabia. The religio-political implications of Muḥammad’s message critiqued “those in power precisely because the teachings of a universal God were intimately linked to an understanding of a unified humanity and a shared way to value human beings” (Claassens et al. 2019, p. 155). Muhammad’s message thus undercut the circulations of wealth, therefore presenting a great threat to the economic interests of the Meccan elites, who supported practices of tribal hierarchy and slavery (Claassens et al. 2019, pp. 155–56). Muslim tradition has called the pre-Islamic Arabian period as a time of ignorance or *jāhiliyya*. It is interesting to note how its legacy still haunts Muslims today. Rooted in the verb *ja-hi-la*, the term signifies a sense of ignorance or a lack of knowledge. For Izutsu, the *jāhili* period was before the coming of Islam which represented a distinct episteme regime that was separated by the spiritual act of *aslama* (Izutsu 2002, p. 222). While Islam presented the possibility of an alternative episteme, its objectives were often curtailed by the limitations of history. The movement of Islam disrupted the *jāhili* order of Arabia without completely erasing older patterns of prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization (Mernissi 1991, pp. 85–180). Despite this

haunting legacy, marginal Muslims have struggled to illuminate and uproot the legacies of the *jāhili* order.

This new sense of being (read as Islam) would be based on ethical values such as tending to the orphan, caring for the sick, upholding the equality of women, and embracing the sexual diversity of creation, according to Imam Muhsin. By grounding his understanding of Islam within the “tradition,” he draws from the collective resources of the constructed past to derive an authoritative claim from its wisdom for his contemporary project. As queer Muslims have taken up various resources from the “discursive tradition” to articulate their overall struggle, or their jihad, they expand the contours of lived materiality (Asad 2015, p. 166). As the Islamic tradition grows, adapts, and transforms because of the work, activism, and embodiment of queer Muslims, we see various contestations over the claim to the authority of tradition. Talal Asad, therefore, suggests “that tradition can accommodate rupture, recuperation, reorientation, and splitting—as well as continuity” (Asad 2015, p. 169). As queer Muslims read tradition in dialogue with their experiences, they present a “reoriented” notion of tradition that embraces just and compassionate aspects of the inherited legacy of the “turāth” and deploys them for their contemporary manifestations (Moosa 2020, p. 79). Following in a modernist trend, Masjid al-Ghurabā endeavors to re-engage the sources of tradition to present a renewed discourse and practice attending to the local and global configurations of Islam (Moosa 2020, p. 85). This “double movement” approach to tradition echoes Fazlur Rahman’s theory of scriptural hermeneutics and ethics (Fazlur Rahman Malik 1984, pp. 6–8). As the “turāth” is presented to Imam Muhsin he draws on selective aspects, in dialogue with contemporary epistemes, and personal experience, to present an engagement with the discursive and practical legacy. By approaching tradition as an “embodied moral argument,” this community animates teachings of the past with contemporary notions of sexual and gender identity (Tareen 2020, p. 13). Imam Muhsin’s “Tik-Tok Tafsīr” is a particularly interesting example, whereby during the month of Ramaḍān he presents a summary of each part or  *juz*  of the Qur’ān. Drawing on his broad-ranging spirituality and classical Islamic knowledge, he conveys a message of fun, hope, and empowerment to queer Muslims as they attempt to live out their religiosity in authentic and meaningful ways during a sacred period.

“Folk of tradition,” Ebrahim Moosa says, also makes a “claim to do ontology: an investigation into the nature of being” (Moosa 2009, p. 429). Through an engaged commitment to working with the inherited tradition, queer Muslims show how they contested some aspects of the “turāth” that, according to them, is based on limited exclusive anthropology. By expanding the boundaries of Muslimness, this community contests the underlying scriptural politics that establish hegemonic readings of the story of Prophet Lot, for example. In doing so, they provide queer readings of tradition that reject heteronormativity within the “turāth” responding to the pervasive forms of homonationalism locally and globally and its undercurrents of (neo)liberalism, intersectional violence, and secularity. Through a re-reading and embodiment of ḥādīth of marginality, this community presents an embodiment of the queer potential of liberatory praxis and theology. Through his empowerment programs for queer Muslims and imams, Imam Muhsin attempts to increase religious literacy and cultivate holistic hearts. In the struggle against apartheid, Muslims called their activism a form of jihad (Esack 1997, p. 107). While Islamic liberation theology has framed praxis through the term jihad, the struggle has been expressed through the experiences of the signifier, *al-mustad’afīn fi’l’arḍ*. Kugle’s assessment of the linguistic nuance suggests that the oppressed are “deemed weak” because other human beings have created systems of structural exclusion causing suffering, hardship, and indignities for precarious social classes (Kugle 2010, pp. 34–36).

Giving body to this abstract notion of *al-mustad’afīn*, queer Muslims re-examine the analytical category of “the poor,” through deviant, “indecent,” or queer embodiment. Marcella Althaus-Reid unsettles the silent and insidious forms of gendered and sexualized structural and cultural violence embedded within liberation theology. Althaus-Reid demonstrates that the notion of “the poor” should be grounded in the queer, strange, indecent,



and unstructured nature of what it means to be a precarious social class. Althaus-Reid's queer critique of an earlier generation of theological insights offers a corrective: theology needs to be based on capacious religious anthropology because structures of hierarchy and violence are interconnected in an assemblage of identities and experiences (Althaus-Reid 2000, pp. 6–8). In Althaus-Reid's reading, liberation theology must undertake a process of self-reflexivity (echoing Segundo 1976). Through a lens of the "indecent" Althaus-Reid engages the process of "unmasking and unclothing of the sexual assumptions built into liberation theology during the past decades but also today when confronting issues of globalization and the new neo-liberal world order" (Althaus-Reid 2000, p. 168). By challenging the underlying assumptions set within a traditional interpretation of the story of Prophet Lot and suggesting that the "crime" of the people of Lot was not an orientation toward an object of desire (sexual orientation), but rather an abuse of power, signified by a lack of belief, expressed partly through sexual acts of violence such as rape, and partly through non-sexual violence such as highway robbery. Imam Muhsin provides some insight into the textual silences by connecting the tradition to contemporary knowledge showing archeological evidence of the structural violence in Sodom. He takes up the emerging archive of non-normative expression in premodern Islamicate communities as an example of a precolonial tolerant (and possibly celebrated) sensibility. He presents these as hermeneutics in which to read the sources. This queer reading of the tradition does not resist religion. Rather, it embraces religion as an intersectional part of human experience.

As Puar argues, the regulatory workings of secular queerness make the figure of the queer Muslim an impossibility (Puar 2007, p. 13). However, queer Muslims are advocating for a re-definition of their ontologies and present alternative approaches to tradition, rejecting the confinement of regulatory queerness and the limitations of heteronormativity. Reading Puar's assemblage alongside the figure of the queer Muslim, I suggest that through an engagement with the radical locality of experience and struggle, a queer Islamic theology can contest power away from the "core" and to the "margins" of society. By continually centralizing the category of praxis as the bedrock for a theology of liberation, queer Muslims engage in a "constant reinvention of text and context in liberation theology" contributing to its emergence as a "mode of theological engagement that always oscillates between action and reflection-based praxis, which in turn makes its theoretical foundation unstable," so argues Ashraf Kunnunmmal (2020). Simply put, because praxis is an unstable theoretical category, it also leads to theology being dynamic, unstable, and attentive to the experiences of marginality (Kunnunmmal 2020). Praxis can thus be a queer category of knowledge that examines the configurations of power that produce oppression and injustice as an interconnected social and spiritual condition.

## 5. Conclusions

In Sūrat Al-Qaṣaṣ (The Story), many liberation theologians found support in the seductive words of the Qur'ān (28:5–6): "We wanted to grace the oppressed in the earth, so We made them leaders and inheritors of it. We established them in the land to show Pharaoh, Haman [his minister], and their supporters/allies, that which they feared." Power becomes alluring as the oppressed are given "great strength and resilience" because they firmly believe that "God is on their side" (Kugle 2010, p. 35). Refining the valence of *al-mustad'afīn*, queer Muslims suggest that marginality and queerness should be an orientation to the world. By reading the hadīth of the Prophet from the perspective of their sexual marginality, this community contends that *al-ghurabā'* are those who follow the "Sunnah and lifestyle" of the Prophet Muḥammad which espouses to protect the downtrodden, care for women and orphans, and tend to the natural environment as manifestations of personal piety (Hendricks 2018). As queer Muslims survive, challenge, and adapt to various intersections of violence, they "recycle" the inherited traditions of wisdom by "injecting into the normative a creative commotion that both increases its longevity while altering its shape. The result, while derived from norms, is no longer entirely normative" (Mack 2017, pp. 60–61). These discursive moves allow queer Muslims



to make a claim to the Islamic tradition, challenging the (hetero)normative human person as the ideal marker of Muslimness. This process also materially disrupts the preservation of heteronormativity within Muslim society because it presents an alternative practice that are slowly being embraced by Muslims on the margins of society.

In this essay, I explored the use of an “auto-ethnographic” method. I drew on my personal (both political and spiritual) experiences and my secular training as a scholar of religion. I hoped to wrinkle the established separation between subject and object in knowledge production. Through this method, I examine this case study of theological or religious anthropological, blending the discourses from Islamic scholarship and insights from the “field.” Through my religio-social mapping of Islam in Cape Town, a context informed by the broader Indian Ocean diaspora, I presented the case of queer Muslims in Cape Town who have come together to form community, critically embrace tradition, and live authentic lives, blending their Muslimness with their queerness. The mapping provided the foundation into a theological reflection based on an analysis of the queering, through “disidentification,” of the ethical term jihad from liberation theology. By tracing how jihad has been read in scripture, and prophetic history, I examined the queer possibility of an embodied notion of jihad. Going beyond this move, this essay also argued that queer Muslims “reimagine” tradition, expanding its boundaries through creative hermeneutical strategies based on the lived realities of Muslims on the margins of society. Tradition is also embodied in a context shaping the contours of ethical cultivation. As Muslims battle against prejudice and persecution they do so with their beings on the line. In the documentary, *The Radical* (Gregory 2022), Imam Muhsin says that he did not only find God in the tradition of the past, but he also found God in his own experiences. Through his experience as an openly queer imam, he found his *Rabb* (Nourisher and Sustainer). The Islamic tradition is replete with examples of embodied and experiential knowledge production as openings to the Divine. The embodied experiences of people need to be embraced as a site of religious meaning-making and not cast out because of its supposed lower status in the hierarchy of producing knowledge. Rather, the binary that holds up this lower status needs to be cast out because it limits the possibilities of God’s expression through the creation. Indeed, Allāh knows best.

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Article

# Islamic Liberation Theology and Decolonial Studies: The Case of Hindutva Extractivism

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**Abstract:** Decolonial studies define the coloniality of power as a complex assemblage of dominance and hegemony that emerged during the modern era or the era of colonialism, which stretches from the conquest of the Americas to the present. This article argues that, as part of the critical dialogue between decolonial studies and Islamic liberation theology, the latter should position itself in a decolonial political praxis around the preferential option for the poor that takes both a decolonial turn and a decolonial option seriously. There is a tendency to appropriate certain brands of decolonial studies to engage with forms of nationalism, such as Hindutva, to build a “decolonial option” in the global South by undermining the key insights of the “decolonial turn”. This article specifically engages with the claims of “decolonial Hindutva” to critique the nationalist appropriation in decolonial studies, thereby marking its divergence from decolonial Islamic liberation theology.

**Keywords:** Islamic liberation theology; decoloniality; coloniality; Hindutva; India; Empire

## 1. Introduction

The University of South Africa in Pretoria hosted its third annual Decoloniality Summer School between 11 and 22 January 2016 (Segalo 2020, p. 47). This summer school coincided with the first mass protest against the Narendra Modi government seeking justice for the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula<sup>1</sup> (17 January 2016) at the University of Hyderabad in India. The Pretoria Summer School, which was mainly focused on the critical theories of African liberation and building solidarities across liberatory movements, came out in solidarity with the student protestors in India against the ascendance of Hindutva nationalism, declaring that “to debrahmanize<sup>2</sup> is to decolonize, decolonization is debrahmanization” (Maktoob Staff 2016).

Decolonial studies have gained popularity worldwide, leading to the organization of various summer schools and teach-in programs in different regions of the world. Introduced under the title of “Critical Muslim Studies: Decolonial Struggles and Liberation Theologies” in 2011, Islamic liberation theology has now become an important critical decolonial pedagogy at the Granada Summer School (Spain).<sup>3</sup> The summer school brought together decolonial thinkers and activists, critical Muslim studies<sup>4</sup> projects, Islamic liberation theology, and Islamic feminism<sup>5</sup> (Ingleby 2017). The emerging consensus is that decolonial<sup>6</sup> Islamic liberation theology enables Muslim politics to think about the positionality of the oppressed and, simultaneously, locate Muslim questions in the global context of coloniality and epistemic hegemonies of racial–capitalist modernity<sup>7</sup> at the national and global level (Abbasi 2020, pp. 1–31; Ali 2017, pp. 287–305).

This article attempts to locate the limits and potentials of decolonial studies in the context of the ongoing resistance against Hindutva nationalist politics in India by demarcating its points of divergence and convergence with Islamic liberation theology. While the immediate antagonist of decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India is the aggressive nationalist politics of Hindutva, concurrently and ironically, Hindutva has also been

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mobilizing decoloniality as a frame for their political articulation, especially after the ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014 (Upadhyay 2020, p. 465). The position of decolonial Islamic liberation theology, as articulated here, is not merely a theoretical abstraction of the relevance of a decolonial critical project (Kunnummal 2017). It is a political praxis borne out by the experience of Islamophobia against Muslim minorities in postcolonial India, rooted in their resistance against nationalist and fascist Hindutva programs of exclusion and annihilation. However, the Indian context provides valuable contextual understanding for the advancement of decolonial Islamic liberation theology while also considering its points of convergence and divergence with decolonial studies.

This article examines the challenges that arise from the selective implementation of decolonial frameworks in Hindutva's use of decolonial studies. Its primary focus is on a critical analysis of how Hindutva actors strategically deploy decolonial language to advance their nationalist objectives. Importantly, this critique extends beyond cautioning Islamic liberation theology against Hindutva's extractivism of decolonial studies. The argument emphasizes the imperative of resisting Hindutva's co-optation of decolonial studies, which undermines the struggle for justice and liberation that decolonial studies seek to promote. The larger objective of this article is to investigate the intersection and divergence of Islamic liberation theology and decolonial studies, with a particular focus on Hindutva's appropriation of decolonial frameworks.

This article<sup>8</sup> is divided into four sections. The first section of the article presents a concise overview of the historical background surrounding the emergence of Hindutva in India, recognized as the planet's most populous postcolonial democracy, emphasizing the circumstances experienced by Muslim minority groups. The second section explores the relationship between decoloniality and liberation theology, highlighting the two-tier structure of theoretical and practical methods known as the decolonial turn and the decolonial option. The third part discusses how Hindutva appropriates the decolonial option, reducing the critical importance of the decolonial turn. As a case study, it examines J Sai Deepak's text, *India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization, Constitution* (Deepak 2021), which presents three problematic aspects of the oxymoron "Hindutva decoloniality". This section also discusses alternative possibilities for decolonial politics in India beyond Hindutva's appropriation. Finally, the fourth section discusses the convergence of the decolonial turn and the decolonial option in the development of a new future for decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond.

## 2. Hindutva, Muslim Minority, and Marginalization in India

The origins of Hindutva<sup>9</sup> can be traced back to the colonial era, and it gained institutional power with the emergence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 (Bhatt 2001, p. 81). The RSS formed as a reactionary nationalist movement in response to the growing anticaste<sup>10</sup> and minority religious movements, with Muslims as their primary target (Bhatt 2001, pp. 115–19). The rise of Hindu nationalist street groups promoting Hindutva in the 1960s and their violent acts against Muslims, along with the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)<sup>11</sup> as a political platform for Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and the subsequent demolition of the Babri Masjid<sup>12</sup> in 1992, represented a major political transformative moment in postcolonial India (Muralidharan 1990, pp. 27–49). Hindutva emerged as a dominant social force in the early 21st century, especially after the Gujarat carnage<sup>13</sup> in 2002 when Narendra Modi held the position of Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat (Spodek 2010, pp. 349–99). The global proliferation of post-Cold War Islamophobia and the War on Terror discourse further contributed to the changing character of the Indian state, with Hindutva gaining even more power, leading to the political expansion and consolidation of the BJP (Jones 2009, pp. 290–304). The culmination of these developments resulted in the Hindu nationalists gaining power over the Indian state, leading to the election of Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister in 2014.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the political climate in India, it is crucial to examine the ascent of the Hindutva movement to state authority and its potential



consequences for the Muslim minority. Muslims are the largest religious minority in India, comprising around 14% of the population of its 1.2 billion people. Muslims in India have never had fair and equal representation in the Indian Parliament since the first parliamentary election in 1952 (Farooqui 2020, p. 157). Although Muslims achieved their highest representation in the upper house at 9% between 1980 and 1984, the 2019 Indian parliamentary elections saw Muslims holding only 5% of the seats, reminiscent of the 1950s (Buchholz 2020). The Indian Parliament's representation issue resulted in legal discrimination against Indian Muslims through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of December 2019, which grants citizenship solely to "non-Muslim illegal immigrants". In addition, NDTV's hate speech tracker in India has shown an 1130% increase in hate speech by politicians, including chief ministers and parliament members, during Modi's tenure, with the BJP accounting for 80% of the hateful rhetoric (Jaiswal et al. 2018).

The judiciary is often seen as the last bastion of hope for protecting the constitutional and legal rights of minorities. Yet a study examining the "in-group bias" in Indian criminal courts<sup>14</sup>, which analyzed data from over 80 million legal cases between 2010 and 2018, found that Muslims account for only 7% of district court judges (Ash et al. 2023). Similarly, a 2019 study by Tata Trusts revealed that only 3–4% of the Indian police forces are Muslims (Mandhani 2019). According to a 2019 report by "Common Cause" (NGO), 50% of the police officers surveyed showed a bias against Muslims, resulting in their reluctance to prevent crimes committed against the Muslim community (Maizland 2022). Interestingly, Muslims are over-represented by 3% in criminal charges in general (Ash et al. 2023). The Prison Statistics of India in 2021 further show that more than 30% of all detainees in Indian prisons are Muslims (Radhakrishnan and Nihalani 2021).

The political and legal representation of Indian Muslims (or lack thereof) is intrinsically linked to broader concerns of cultural, social, economic, and educational representation. This is exemplified by the fact that Muslim leadership positions only account for 3% of top media positions (Mujtaba 2022). A Twitter data review from 2019 to 2020 shows India, the UK, and the US are responsible for 85% of global Islamophobic tweets due to the elimination of conventional media gatekeeping. Indian Twitter users contributed 55.12% of these tweets (Butler 2022). Due to a lack of media representation and widespread misinformation, the Muslim community has faced a surge in fascist propaganda, exemplified by the India Today—Karvy Insights Mood of the Nation survey that revealed 54% of respondents strongly believed in the "love Jihad"<sup>15</sup> conspiracy theory (Malji and Raza 2021).

In the realm of socioeconomic development, the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) conducted a study in 2021 to create an "Access (In)Equality Index" and found that Indian Muslims faced greater inequality in accessing basic services compared to other highly marginalized groups (Mohan 2022). Based on the 2019 Periodic Labor Survey data, it is evident that approximately 85% of Muslim wage workers operate without written contracts (ibid). Additionally, over half of the Muslim community's workforce is self-employed, while 25% work in casual employment (ibid). Muslims had lower attendance ratios and the highest proportion of nonenrolment in formal education among all communities aged 3 to 35, as per the National Sample Survey Report of the 75th Round (2018), with the most significant gap being observed at the higher secondary level (Khan 2021).

Modi's ascension to the position of India's Prime Minister in 2014 has garnered global attention, with concerns expressed by Gregory H. Stanton, President of Genocide Watch, over the possibility of genocide against Muslim minorities and Jason Stanley, a scholar in fascism studies, drawing attention to the ideological parallels and genocidal tactics between Hindutva and Nazi movements in Germany (Stanton 2023; Bhatia 2022). For instance, in 2022, the Indian National Congress released a report card on Modi's tenure, citing 10,000 incidents of inter-religious violence and expressing concerns for Muslim minorities (Masoud 2022). There has been a concerning surge in mob lynching incidents of Muslims disguised as cow vigilantism<sup>16</sup>, with about 90% of these violent acts occurring since 2014 (Raza 2022). The politics of minorities and the issue of margins in India have reached a critical juncture due to the violence, annihilation, and exclusion perpetrated by



the Hindutva regime, requiring urgent interrogation from the perspective of decolonial Islamic liberation theology.

### 3. Decoloniality and Liberation Theology: The Decolonial Turn and the Decolonial Option

Ivan Petrella (2004), an Argentinian liberation theologian, identified two fundamental principles that guide the practice of liberation theologies: firstly, the preferential option to align with the oppressed, and secondly, the need to adapt social analysis and theoretical approaches to address evolving sociopolitical circumstances. As different expressions of marginalization, otherness, and oppression emerge across diverse sociohistorical and geopolitical contexts, the process of identifying the oppressed experiences continual transformation and adaptation. Decolonial studies, as a tool of social analysis, were not a part of early forms of liberation theology.<sup>17</sup> The decolonial turn in liberation theology can bring about a renewal of the politics of marginalization and oppression, extending beyond the postcolonial milieu.

There are at least three levels to the critical project of decoloniality: power, knowledge, and being. The political praxis of decoloniality is about the power of thinking and acting from the underside of the global South and postcolonial world (Quijano 2000). It is a critique of the racial and imperial political organizing of the world in its totality, i.e., the coloniality of power (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 219). Decoloniality, as the politics of knowledge, is a conscious move from the northern colonial paradigm of knowledge to a pluriversal decolonial epistemic horizon (Castro-Gomez 2002, p. 217). Decoloniality is also a new critique of being, which argues that coloniality is about the colonization of the human by the dominant colonial self that relegates the “other” to the level of the subhuman through the racialization<sup>18</sup> of the world (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 242).

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011, p. 3) posits that the decolonial turn has been present since the fall of Al-Andalus in the fifteenth century and continues into the twenty-first century. The colonized world has made numerous attempts to resist the effects of colonialism, but the events of the twentieth century, including the world wars and subsequent decolonization, caused a significant shift towards a decolonial horizon of freedom and self-determination, particularly for Africa, Asia, and South America. The global rise of Islamophobia, concurrent with the end of the Cold War and the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas, marked a third significant event in the decolonial turn, critical to the formation of decolonial Islamic liberation theology (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 121).

The decolonial option, on the other hand, refers to the practical and contextual application of decolonial principles and perspectives in various fields of knowledge and power, such as education, politics, culture, and social movements (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 112). It is an attempt to actively resist and challenge the ongoing legacy of colonialism and promote alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the world. According to Maldonado-Torres (2017, p. 112), “the decolonial turn introduces decoloniality fundamentally as an imperative, a need for survival, and as a project, from which then can also be taken up as a possibility or an option.” In short, the decolonial turn is a shift in discourse as a form of knowledge and power. In contrast, the decolonial option is the active contextual application of decolonial methods in various fields. There is no decolonial option without a decolonial turn.

To clarify,<sup>19</sup> “colonialism” refers to political and social structures of domination, while “neo-colonialism” denotes the persistence of economic colonial structures without the same level of formal political control. However, the conception of coloniality goes beyond this dichotomy, recognizing the power of colonialism as discourse and knowledge. Decoloniality thus becomes a discursive and epistemological project aimed at creating a decolonial future. It must necessarily encompass the political, economic, and discursive dimensions of the power, being, and ontology of coloniality, making the decolonial turn a praxis-based approach to social change. Without this decolonial turn and political commitment to anti-colonial liberation, any decolonial option risks becoming a disembodied, praxis-lacking

appropriation of decolonial language, perpetuating coloniality and maintaining material, epistemological, and political power over marginalized groups.

A critical problem that has arisen since the popularization of the decolonial paradigm is the application of a decolonial option without the decolonial turn. While decoloniality initially arose as a fundamental critique of postcolonial elites' coloniality, these elites have since subverted the *ethical* imperative of the decolonial turn. Instead, they have replaced it with an *identitarian* logic of authenticity and nativism and now use the decolonial option solely for neocolonial political purposes. The prophetic task of decolonial Islamic liberation theology in its opposition to Hindutva fascism, as it emerges from the margins of Muslim minorities, is to further reconfigure decoloniality as the political praxis of the oppressed of the world (decolonial turn) rather than only as a politics of positions or ideas (decolonial option).

#### 4. The Extractivism of Hindutva: In the Name of Decoloniality

Several groups and individuals within the fold of Hindutva use the language of "decolonization" for various purposes. For instance, Koenraad Elst's (2001) *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind: Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism* was one of the early articulations of a decolonizing movement within the fold of Hindutva (Deepak 2021, p. 11). Even though Elst's work does not bear the language of decoloniality, it has been used within Hindutva circles to justify the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Elst (1990, p. 30), writing as an outsider to the Hindu tradition, argued that the Babri Masjid was built on what some people believe to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, a deity who lived in Ayodhya during the early first millennium B.C.

Hindutva politics in India and worldwide are increasingly appropriating the discourse of decoloniality to normalize Hindu nationalism, especially after the BJP's rise to power in 2014. This co-option and appropriation of decolonial language, which erases anticaste politics, projects Islamophobia, and appeals to Euro–American social justice discourses to posit Hindutva as a new form of "indigenous" decolonial politics, has a long history even before the ascendance of Modi. The erasure of Hindu caste politics that effectively pits lower caste and Indigenous outcaste groups against Muslims and other minorities is Hindutva's most successful tactic that gave rise to its power, especially after the formation of the BJP in 1980 (Nigam and Menon 2007, p. 49). Rather than caste, the alleged religiosity of the Muslims became the master signifier in the fascist ascendancy of Hindutva. In the world at large, the alleged global excessiveness of Islam, rather than race in the colonial/modern world, is an enduring problem for the global Hindutva project. In both cases, the contradiction of caste is displaced into the religion of Islam for the racial politics of Hindutva.

After Modi came to power in 2014, the Hindutva camp started using the language of decolonization with enthusiasm, especially in social science and humanities, to search for a space for their nationalist project (Rajaram 2015). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat spoke about the "decolonization of the Indian mind" at a program organized in Karnawati (Ahmedabad, Gujarat) on 15 and 16 April 2017 (VSK Telangana 2017). Of the Hindutva propagandists who deploy decolonial studies, J. Sai Deepak is the only one who has written substantively on it.

Deepak, who was originally a mechanical engineer, is now practicing law in the Supreme Court of India. He has gained a significant following on social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, where he actively promotes Hindutva ideology. Deepak strongly advocates for the establishment of a "Hindu State", considering his Brahmin caste Hindu heritage as the "missionary arm of the Hindu society" (Deepak 2022a, 2023). Additionally, he opposes secularism as an imported Western ideology (Deepak 2022a). Furthermore, he takes a firm stance against the import of the "woke left" ideology from the United States to India (ibid). Deepak has also discussed Israel's approach to physical aggression, speaking about the "SIP principle", which stands for "Spiritually fit, intellectually fit, and certainly get physically fit" (ibid). Furthermore, Deepak has attributed the

perpetuation of the caste system to intracaste violence within lower-caste communities, placing the blame back on the oppressed castes (Deepak 2023).

Although he lacks formal academic credentials in decolonial studies, Deepak has utilized the language of this field to defend Hindutva ideology. He has published two books, *India, That is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization and Constitution* in 2021 and a sequel titled *India, Bharat and Pakistan: The Constitutional Journey of a Sandwiched Civilizations* in 2022 (Deepak 2021, 2022b). The former work campaigned for inclusion in the syllabi of 24 National Law University branches across India, particularly those under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In this section, I am focusing on *India, That is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization and Constitution* due to its significant role in promoting Hindutva ideology and contributing to the development of fascist propaganda in India vis-à-vis the language of decolonial studies.

Before jumping into Deepak's work, let me clarify what I mean by Hindutva's "extractivism". Extractivism refers to the systemic process of natural resource extraction in the global South as part of neocolonial social relations, whereby resources and wealth are appropriated by wealthy corporations for their sole benefit while also causing environmental, political, and economic destruction. Epistemic extractivism is a parallel concept to denote how marginalized and oppressed epistemologies have been superficially appropriated or extracted by theorists from the global North or in elite academic/political spaces without due acknowledgement or political commitment and responsibility (Grosfoguel 2020, pp. 203–18). In the course of our discussion during the writing of this article, Ramón Grosfoguel introduced the term extractivism as a means of characterizing the Hindutva endeavor to appropriate the discourse of decoloniality. Hindutva extractivism is the extraction of the epistemologies of the marginalized in the global South for the Hindu nationalist elite (also situated, paradoxically, in the global South) to undermine the struggles of the marginalized in postcolonial India. Deepak draws upon the writings of pioneering scholars in decolonial studies, such as Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter D. Mignolo, and Sylvia Wynter, in his propagation/defense of Hindutva throughout the book. It is worth noting, however, that these very authors are decidedly critical of the Islamophobia propagated by the Hindutva movement that Deepak champions.

#### 4.1. Entanglement of Religion and Race: Construction of the Religious "Other"

Deepak departs from existing scholarship on decoloniality with his notion that decolonial thought emerging primarily from Latin America and Africa has focused on race, not religion, as the primary contradiction, despite the entanglements between Christianity and the Western colonial project (Deepak 2021, p. 31). The reason, according to Deepak, is that Latin Americans and Africans have converted to either Christianity or Islam and have lost their Indigenous traditions, while Asians have managed to retain their precolonial religions as living civilizational projects. His idea is primarily of Bharat<sup>20</sup>—India as a millennia-old Indic<sup>21</sup> civilization, surviving despite the colonization projects of both Christianity and Islam (Deepak 2021, p. 32). Next, he argues that the focus on race emerged from Critical Race Theory, that, according to him, was not taking religion seriously. He writes (ibid):

*the preoccupation of decolonial scholarship with race and its reluctance to address religion with the same degree of candor may be attributed to the fact that the regions that have produced much of the scholarship on coloniality so far, follow the religion of the colonizer, namely Christianity.*

The development of decoloniality through Asia, according to Deepak (2021, p. 34), specifically Bharat, would be to think through the negation of coloniality as an affirmation of Indigenous religions against the dominance of colonial civilizational theologies.

As Junaid Rana (2007, pp. 150–51) commented, the historical analysis of race assumes a critical framework that emphasizes religious difference not as a simple form of cultural prejudice or irrational religious discrimination, thereby deploying it towards a systemic analysis of the power of racism. Deepak's project is not about the entanglement of religion and race in the modern world; it is an essentialism of the religion-only framework of

Hindutva. Deepak's argument that religion has been ignored in decolonial scholarship remains unsupported by the existing body of work, which has long accented the systemic entanglement between religion and race and the transformation of religious and racial differences under colonial modernity.

For instance, in his conceptualization of the progression of racial and religious differences between the Old and New Worlds, [Maldonado-Torres \(2014, p. 657\)](#) marks a sharp shift from what he calls the religious difference of the Old World to the racial difference between the New World; that is, from the Old World religious polemic (between Christianity and the Islamicate) to the New World racial rhetoric inaugurated in Al-Andalus and South America ([Maldonado-Torres 2014, p. 653](#)). In other words, Christopher Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors did not view South American Indigenous people merely as people with the wrong religion, as they did with Muslims and Jews in the Old World, but as people with no religion, hence, soulless ([Maldonado-Torres 2014, p. 646](#)). For Maldonado-Torres, this shift to a people with "no religion" and "no soul" means that the First Nations people of South America were treated in a fundamentally new way that makes for an unprecedented break in relations from the "Other" as known to the Old World. Maldonado-Torres' arguments are mainly based on two central claims: one, following from the works of Aníbal Quijano, is that First Nations people were seen as people without souls, which is assumed to be novel in the formation of modern racial hierarchies and the coloniality of being ([Maldonado-Torres 2014, pp. 652–53](#)); and two, the Indigenous people were not simply those with the wrong religion, like the Muslims and Jews of the Old World, but those of no religion, establishing the racial and secular difference of the New World (*ibid*).

Maldonado-Torres' treatment of religion in coloniality demonstrates far more complexity than Deepak's argument of religion as the sole contradiction of coloniality. The former performs an important operation for decolonial thought as it showcases the ways in which racial difference is constructed through historical encounters rather than as a continuation of age-old religious differences. Unthinking coloniality, thus, cannot emerge out of simply reviving religious differences but by undoing race itself in the formation of racialized religion.

#### 4.2. Locating the Muslim Question: Construction of Middle Eastern Coloniality

Another crucial aspect of Deepak's work is his refusal to locate (that is, to erase effectively) Islam and the Muslim question in formulating decoloniality. [Deepak \(2021, p. 29\)](#) marks Columbus' voyage in 1492 and the subsequent colonization of the Indigenous people of the Americas as the beginning of coloniality. However, decolonial scholarship has given critical importance to the colonization of Granada in the same year as the simultaneous and global emergence of coloniality as a logic of power ([Grosfoguel 2015, p. 29](#)). Significantly, Deepak ignores this crucial link with Islam and its consequences in thinking about both the racialization of religion and the transnational problem of the Muslim question in the construction of coloniality. He further ignores South Asia's colonial encounter from the moment of Vasco De Gama's arrival in South India in 1498, which also introduced the Muslim question as a form of Indigenous resistance to the matrix of coloniality ([Choudhary 1985, pp. 63–64](#)). Although commissioned by the Portuguese King Emmanuel for trade and commerce, Da Gama was also tasked with locating the legendary Christian king of the East, Prester John, capturing Muslim trading routes, and participating in a crusade to reconquer the Holy Land ([Ghazanfar 2018, p. 16](#)). The rationale behind Da Gama's expedition to find Christians in India may appear unclear, yet it is crucial to understand the ideological and epistemic world inhabited by individuals like him, which was molded by religion and later by biological theories of racial character, historical theories of civilizational achievement, and socioeconomic theories of institutional development ([Chatterjee 2011, p. 29](#)). After such omission of the Muslim question from decoloniality—not undertaken, significantly, by any of his decolonial interlocutors—Deepak goes on to

construct “Middle Eastern coloniality” as a *parallel problem* to European coloniality and as an antagonist of the Indian/Bharat civilization and its decolonial future.

While the Sultanates of India primarily emerged from Central Asia, Deepak argues that “Middle Eastern coloniality” is the appropriate term as the logic of its coloniality emerged from the Middle East through the birth of Islam. He claims that Middle Eastern coloniality differs from European coloniality in at least two aspects (Deepak 2021, pp. 161–62). For one, it has a much longer history than European colonialism, where European coloniality started in the fifteenth century, while Middle Eastern coloniality began in the eighth century. Secondly, he believes it was a project of annihilation as opposed to the European project of co-option. But despite preceding European colonialism, Middle Eastern coloniality continues to disrupt the Bharat civilization. Therefore, he attributes problems in places like Kashmir, Bengal, and Kerala—in other words, the Muslim question—to an expression and persistence of Middle Eastern coloniality (Deepak 2021, p. 163).

Deepak subverts the Muslim question equivalent to coloniality by saying it is “Middle Eastern coloniality.” After omitting the anticaste works of Bhim Rao Ambedkar,<sup>22</sup> which regard caste as a critique of the unification drive of Bharat, Deepak returns to Ambedkar as a pre-eminent critique of Middle Eastern coloniality (Deepak 2021, pp. 169–73). In an interesting move, Deepak sidesteps Ambedkar’s collection of work on caste as a Dalit<sup>23</sup> intellectual by arguing that he accepts Ambedkar’s experience of caste but not his scholarship on caste. In effect, this allows for the rejection of Ambedkar’s anticaste challenge while selectively appropriating Ambedkar as a critic of “Muslim colonialism.” Hence, using the works of Ambedkar, Deepak omits the racialization of Islam under the colonial project to create an “Islamic threat” to India. At its core, Hindutva’s weaponization of coloniality against Islam is not meant as a decolonial critique of the world but to legitimate the further marginalization of Muslim minorities within the Indian nation-state. The “decolonial” project of Hindutva is to portray Islam and Christianity as civilizational threats to the so-called civilizational landscape of India/Bharat.

#### 4.3. Hindutva: Beyond Nationalism and towards Civilization

One of the aims of Deepak’s “decolonial” project is to propose Bharat as a civilizational state, as opposed to being a nation-state formed through its encounter with European and Middle Eastern coloniality/modernity. Deepak’s project believes that India was (and is) a civilizational state encompassing all its current territories and beyond (including Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) before it was interrupted by Islamic and Western Christian colonialism (Deepak 2021, p. 225). This framework is curiously used to dismiss the criticism (coming from postcolonial scholars and Marxists) that this is a project of Hindu nationalism or majoritarianism, as such criticism, he claims, emerges from the colonial consciousness of the critics unable to address Bharat as a civilizational entity capable of its self-determination and Indigenous consciousness (Deepak 2021, p. 163).

Unlike Islam and Christianity, which follows the logic of religion in order to organize diverse faiths and practices as a civilization entity, Deepak (2021, pp. 183–84) argues that there is no such thing as a Hindu *religion* in the Abrahamic sense (which, on its own, is an accurate point). Instead, he relies on Bharat as a land mass, which forms the logic of the Hindu civilization with its pious attachment to a land-based culture of worship and pilgrimage in order to tease out a distinct positionality for Hindu religion and Bharat civilization (Deepak 2021, p. 184). He (ibid) posits that the Bharat civilization and Hindu spiritual ontology do not have the concept of an out-group (as, say, “kafir” for Muslims) that the religion needs to be professed to, as it is primarily a relationship to land encompassing various traditions of Bharat. Moreover, Hindu nationalism is not about territorial nationalism based on material expansion, as proposed in the European colonial model. However, it is the “cultural veneration of the Indic native” as a spiritual project within the Hindu Dharmic fold (Deepak 2021, p. 211).

Deepak maintains that there was indeed a precolonial spiritual identity in Bharat, which he dubs as “Dharmic Unity”, that traverses formations like Hinduism, Buddhism,



Jainism, and other Indic faith systems. Hence, the existing categories to understand religion vis-à-vis coloniality, such as priesthood, text/scripture, and law, are insufficient to approach the truth of the Dharmic system (Deepak 2021, p. 292). Instead, colonial categories and their dissemination through law and (secular) state unduly destroy the true meanings of categories like Brahmin<sup>24</sup> by its translation to the colonial category of the priesthood. Anti-Brahmin orientation in India is thus attributed to (that is, rescripted as) the colonial influence of Christian missionaries and their understanding of religion (Deepak 2021, p. 309). In a similar vein, he argues that caste and tribe are colonial constructions that obscure the precolonial realities of “jati”<sup>25</sup> and “varna.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, before understanding these from the standpoint of their own realities, a “decolonization”—as delinking from such categories—must be initiated for the recovery of Bharat as a civilization. By attributing the caste question to colonial consciousness, Deepak (2021, p. 309) insidiously sidesteps one of the biggest challenges to the construction of Bharat-as-civilization in the form of anticaste critique and non-Brahmin life worlds, as any attempt to empower Bharat as a “pseudo decolonial standpoint” requires ignoring the interior challenge to its claim to unity, which is achieved by erasing Indigenous scholars of caste and religion.

However, a cursory glance at the early twentieth-century writings of Hindutva ideologues shows a different picture. Zaheer Baber (2022, p. 161) argues:

*Even though in the case of India, the twin lenses of caste and religion rather than “race” are salient when it comes to demarcating group identities, it does not necessarily follow that the processes of racialization and racism—understood here as the attribution of certain allegedly inheritable cultural characteristics that are deemed to be negative and inferior for the purposes of claiming and monopolizing material and non-material resources—do not exist.*

The meanings of race, caste, and religion in India were transformed during colonial times (Slate 2011, p. 63). According to Baber (2022, pp. 158–59), a part of the early fascination of modern Hindutva nationalism was with claims of racial superiority and the thesis of race as “purity of blood” along the lines of German Nazis and the European Aryan racial project. V.D. Savarkar, a major proponent of the idea of the “Hindu race”, drew inspiration from social Darwinist thinkers like Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley, and German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who had previously supported racial domination (Baber 2022, p. 158). In 1923, he used their works to create the influential text *Hindutva—Who is a Hindu?* which set the agenda for the RSS-led Hindu nationalism (ibid). Savarkar defined Hindus as the same race, culture, and civilization or, in other words, the same “race-jati” (Baber 2022, p. 159). The Hindus as a modern secular racial project were developed through the imagination of a single people of Bharat with its identification of “sacred” geography (Chatterjee 1992).

In an ironic twist to Deepak’s claim of Bharat as an Indigenous identity, the original proponents of Bharat civilization and Hindu nationalism have argued that they were not of the inferior Indigenous races of India but Aryan colonizers from *outside* India (Thapar 1996, p. 6). This was a parallel argument to the European colonial argument. European racial superiority was the reason for the colonization of the “natives” of India. Similarly, early ideologues of Hindutva argued that the Aryan colonization of the natives of India was made possible because of the superior status of Brahmins (Thapar 1996, p. 7). Through the appropriation of Sanskrit symbols, placed out of context, the myth of Brahmin and white supremacy and the idea of a racially superior Aryan were created, sidelining the issues of caste in India (ibid). According to Romila Thapar (1996, p. 7):

*The Aryan theory also provided the colonized with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same stock as the colonizers. However, the separation of European Aryans from the Asian Aryans was in effect a denial of this status. Such a denial was necessary in the view of those who proposed a radical structuring of colonial society through new legislation and administration and in accordance with the conversion of the colony into a viable source of revenue. The complexities of caste*



*were simplified in its being explained as racial segregation, demarcating the Aryans from others.*

The history of “India”, understood as a superior civilization, was appropriated into the paranoiac Nazi nationalist upsurge in Europe (specifically, Germany) through the imagination of Europeans as the civilizational brothers of Aryan Brahmins (Birkvad 2020, p. 62). The recent upsurge of white supremacist right-wing groups in Europe has revived this notion and found its allies within the Hindutva groups (Birkvad 2020, p. 78). Therefore, the Nazi model of Hindutva mobilization has a close theoretical affinity to the Aryan civilization rhetoric of the European Far Right, which develops through the twin axis of white supremacy and Islamophobia rather than decoloniality (Birkvad 2020, p. 78). This rhetoric uses the decolonial option, without the decolonial turn, to conceal the racist mythologies of the twentieth century.

### 5. Decolonial Islamic Liberation Theology in India and Beyond

In summary, there are two practical proposals for the future of decolonial Islamic liberation theology. The first proposal stresses the importance of decoloniality in the political resistance of Islamic liberation theology, specifically in the global South and even more specifically, in India, where Hindutva is a crucial nodal point of the contemporary coloniality of the Empire. The second proposal involves a call for further research into the global political outlook of Islamic liberation theology, with a consideration of the framework of decoloniality.

The decolonial turn identifies the racialization of Islam as one of the organizing principles of modern coloniality (Abdou 2022, p. 43). Decolonial Islamic liberation theology takes the decolonial turn as a first step in articulating the practice of decolonial options in any given context. It is essential to contextualize Deepak’s arguments to their unsaid epistemic foundations in Hindu nationalism and Hindutva, which is a movement led by “upper” caste men that attempts to impose its hegemonic casteist political theology on India’s subaltern masses and exclude, or indeed, outright eliminate, its minorities through new forms of racialization (Omvedt 2011, pp. 3–4). The problem of the racialized entanglement of caste and religion—in the context of the Dalit, minorities, gender, and Islamophobia questions—must define the notion of India’s subaltern identity, viz., the vast majority of the Indian population. As such, a decolonial Islamic liberation theology must resist any attempt to recast(e) Hindutva as a decolonial standpoint for at least two reasons. Firstly, Hindutva has historically been a manifestly genocidal political program that targets India’s Muslim minorities directly, maintains the caste hegemony indirectly, and continues to frame Muslims as invaders and colonizers, thereby excluding Muslims from the intersection of colonized people. Secondly, by systemically ignoring and sidestepping the anticaste challenge from subaltern classes, Hindutva is also attempting to fabricate a unified cultural nationalist Hindu Indian identity. In the case of the former, decolonial Islamic liberation theology is part of an existential political struggle of Indian Muslim minorities. In the latter instance, the anticaste movements are the site of political and ethical solidarity and convergence for such liberation theology.

While Hindutva nationalists have used decoloniality to support their exclusionary claims, many scholars have dismissed decoloniality as vulnerable to right-wing nationalist appropriation (Gopal 2022). On the other hand, Aditya Nigam’s (2020) recent volume on Indian postcolonial engagement with decoloniality ignores the complexity of the decolonial question, specifically the connection between decolonial Islam and the larger global decolonial conversation. This article argues that rather than dismissing or appropriating decoloniality, it is important to preserve and fortify its critical dimension in naming and confronting the destructive legacies of colonial modernity through a pluriversal framework. In India, this means the solidarity and political praxis between oppressed castes, religions, genders, regions, minorities, and nations.

This article highlights the potential issue of the decolonial project becoming merely a decolonial option (ideas without praxis) without a decolonial turn (praxis with ideas).

Nevertheless, to ensure the future of Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond, a shift from postcolonialism to decoloniality is necessary.<sup>27</sup> In conjunction with Islamic liberation theology, the postcolonial critical project took the lead in challenging the politics of Islamic reform. However, a fundamental shortcoming of the postcolonial project was its failure to provide a positive vision for articulating the Muslim political self, despite critiquing the othering of Muslims by the dominant self-narratives of the Empire. Islamic liberation theologians such as Farid Esack (2018) and Hamid Dabashi (2011) warned against the adoption of liberal theology<sup>28</sup> by “progressive Islam”<sup>29</sup> and challenged the co-option of reformist Islam<sup>30</sup> for serving the interests of the Empire without necessarily utilizing postcolonial critique. The essence of the postcolonial critique and Islamic liberation theology was that Muslim reformers sought to improve the bodies and communities of Muslims through observation, analysis, and cataloguing, leading to disciplinary societies of Muslims following 9/11 (Azad 2017). The reform of Islam was pursued through both liberal–secular interpretative frameworks and old forms of repressive colonialism through war (Mahmood 2006).

However, the Empire has undergone a transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar world, and in this postliberal order, it is using its influence to conceptualize traditional Islam as an alternative to reformist Islam, especially after the Arab uprising in 2011 (Warren 2017). This new manifestation of traditional Islam aims to achieve self-mastery through tradition without the need for reform. There is an increasing trend in the social engineering projects of the Empire to prioritize adherence to tradition through hierarchy while still upholding the concept of warfare, as opposed to earlier disciplinary techniques that were based on reforming tradition and the logic of warfare. For instance, Muslim soft power politics attempt to appeal to Muslim culture and traditions at the national level through tactics such as interfaith dialogue, spirituality, infotainments, sports, and capital-intensive development projects, and these efforts do not fundamentally alter the neocolonial dynamics of global neoliberal warfare (Douai 2017, pp. 297–304). In contrast, Muslim popular culture exemplifies the fusion of modern cyber Islam with new traditionalism through the Muslim spiritual quest, which uses both smartphones and a traditional rosary to evoke tradition and a reimagined version of Muslim masculinity based on conventional social hierarchy (Birt 2017). An Indian example of this is the four-day World Sufi Forum held in New Delhi in 2016 from 17 to 20 March, where even Narendra Modi lauded the importance of traditional Islam (Kunnummal 2016). In this context, decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond requires a critical perspective on the Empire’s changing nature while rekindling a dedication to a liberatory Islamic praxis that transcends the secular reformism–religious traditionalism binary.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a detailed engagement on the politics of higher education and the movement for justice for Rohith Vemula, see Sukumar (2022).
- <sup>2</sup> The Hindu caste system was organized based on the social identity of the Brahmin priestly and scholarly class. Consequently, a resistance movement against the caste system emerged in India that was directed at the dominant power of Brahminism. In the Indian context, the process of decolonization is synonymous with debrahmanization, according to an anticaste decolonial framework proposed by Braj Ranjan Mani (2005).
- <sup>3</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado Torres, and Santiago Slabodksy form the core faculty of the Granada Summer School, along with Salman Sayyid, Houria Bouteldja, Asma Barlas, Ella Shohat, Farid Esack, and Hatem Bazian, among a number of others.

- 4 Salman Sayyid's proposed Critical Muslim Studies is a recent research field that centers on the relationship between Islam and Muslims with the contemporary world, emphasizing critical decolonial perspectives.
- 5 One of the central lectures of the summer school featured Houria Bouteldja (2017), who provides a decolonial perspective on Islam, racism, and feminism.
- 6 For a recent engagement on the connection between decoloniality and various liberation theologies, see Medina et al. (2021).
- 7 Decolonial thinkers use the concept of modernity/coloniality to assert that the two categories are mutually interdependent and reinforce each other and that in order to confront colonialism, it is necessary to confront its continued influence on modernity's views on humanity, rationality, and economy (Quijano 2007).
- 8 I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of Ramón Grosfoguel and Shadaab Rahemtulla, which have helped to improve the arguments and structure of this article.
- 9 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar or V. D. Savarkar, an upper-caste Hindu Brahmin male from Maharashtra, coined the term Hindutva in colonial north India, which defined Hinduism as a religious way of life and distinguished it from the political and racial superior ideology of Hindutva, and the RSS drew ideological inspiration from Savarkar's early writings. However, anticaste critics resist the politicization of Hindutva as an analytical category by Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS, as it obscures the recent construction of Hindu/Hinduism through census politics in the late colonial era.
- 10 The traditional Hindu caste system assigns people to a particular caste based on their birth, which determines their occupation, social status, and interactions, with the four main castes being Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (servants and laborers), while the Dalits, considered outside the caste system, face social discrimination and exclusion.
- 11 The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) established in 1980 is the political wing of the RSS.
- 12 The Babri Masjid was a mosque located in the city of Ayodhya, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was built in the 16th century by the Mughal emperor Babur and was considered to be one of the oldest mosques in India.
- 13 The Gujarat riots of 2002 were a series of violent incidents and mass killings that took place in the Indian state of Gujarat, resulting in the deaths of several thousand Muslims.
- 14 There are 1 Supreme Court, 25 state High Courts, and 672 district courts below them, in addition to approximately 7000 subordinate courts in India.
- 15 Hindutva groups perpetuate the discredited conspiracy theory of "love Jihad", which alleges that Muslim men in India lure Hindu women into marriage and convert them to Islam.
- 16 Cow vigilantism refers to violent actions carried out by individuals or groups who self-appoint themselves as protectors of cows, an animal considered sacred in Hinduism, against Muslims and lower castes who are involved in the beef industry or are accused of cow slaughter, often leading to incidents of beatings, lynchings, and even murder. Cow vigilantism is associated with the Hindu nationalist movement in India, which advocates for upper caste Hindu values and beliefs and considers cow protection to be a critical aspect of its agenda.
- 17 For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez's work did not consider the coloniality of the global South since the sixteenth century, while the decoloniality paradigm in liberation theology is more sensitive to the issue of the preferential option of the poor by defining it as the "other" in the colony since the fall of Al-Andalus and the discovery of the Americas (Arce-Valentín 2017, pp. 46–47). Enrique Dussel's concept of the "other" is a broader decolonial category of the preferential option of the poor than previous liberation theology projects (Vuola 2000).
- 18 Racialization refers to how social, cultural, and economic systems construct and maintain racial categories and their meanings, which lead to the concepts of race and racism.
- 19 I am indebted to the inputs and comments provided by Shadaab Rahemtulla for the writing of this section.
- 20 Bhārata, or Bharat, is a term used to designate the Indian subcontinent in ancient epics like the *Mahabharata*.
- 21 Indic is a term used in both academic and political contexts to refer to the specific nature or formation of the religious and cultural landscape and logic in the Indian subcontinent.
- 22 Bhim Rao Ambedkar is recognized as an anticaste revolutionary and the most prominent subaltern intellectual in India. He formulated a theory that identified the persistence of caste as an organizing principle in the Indian subcontinent, going beyond the conventional binary of colonialism versus nationalism and religion versus secularism, in order to understand the politics of the Indian state.
- 23 Dalit as a term refers to a group of people rendered as untouchables and out of the organization of the caste system. In the Marathi language and associated vernacular languages, Dalit was translated as "split or broken" and was politically mobilized as an affirmation of the resistance towards the caste order.
- 24 The term Brahmin refers to the highest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system, composed of priests and scholars.
- 25 Jati refers to the birth-based social groups in Hindu society. These groups are usually associated with a particular occupation or profession and are believed to have their own distinct culture and traditions. The Jati system is often referred to as the sub-caste system.

- <sup>26</sup> Varna refers to the four main social groups in Hindu society. These classes are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (manual laborers). The Varna system is often referred to as the caste system.
- <sup>27</sup> Postcolonial studies have extended the concept of imperialist domination beyond economic determinism to encompass culture while also acknowledging the effects of colonialism (Grosfoguel 2011). However, decolonial studies have critiqued postcolonial studies for their epistemic bias towards poststructuralism and postmodernism, which reproduce colonial power/knowledge structures (ibid). As a result, decolonial studies advocate for a broader canon of thought beyond the Western (including the Leftist Western) canon and a universal perspective that emerges from diverse epistemic, ethical, and political projects towards a pluriversal world (ibid).
- <sup>28</sup> According to Farid Esack (2018, p. 87), liberal theologians placed significant emphasis on the value of reason and critical thinking as fundamental elements of religious belief. However, Esack has expressed criticism towards liberal theology, citing its tendency to undermine the significance of social and political factors, specifically the impact of the US-led Empire, in influencing religious beliefs and practices.
- <sup>29</sup> Farid Esack (2018, p. 80) recognizes that there are diverse interpretations of progressive Islam across the various regions of the Muslim world. Esack considers the terms “Progressive Muslim” or “Progressive Islam” in the North Atlantic region as a political mobilization in the soft war waged by US-led imperialism to influence Muslim communities and organizations after the 9/11 attacks.
- <sup>30</sup> While acknowledging the different streams within reformist Islam, this article positions the emergence of reformist Islam in the aftermath of the Cold War and 9/11 attacks as the primary subject of the postcolonial analysis.

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Article

# Decolonising Islam: Indigenous Peoples, Muslim Communities, and the Canadian Context

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**Abstract:** The problem of empire has been a key theme in Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT). However insightful, ILT's engagement with empire has presumed a particular colonial configuration, in which Muslims are on the receiving "end" of power, being occupied by an external, non-Muslim force. But what about the presence of Islam within settler colonies, in which voluntary Muslim migrants are structurally complicit in the ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples? Focusing on the Canadian context, I ask: How can we decolonise Islam in the settler colony? That is, how can Muslims address their own complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with native peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that praxis? I argue that decolonising Islam entails three hermeneutical moves: (I) gaining a critical understanding of the socio-historical context, namely, the history of empire on the land; (II) deconstructing the boundaries between "migrant" and "settler", which actually serves to vindicate the former group, releasing them of accountability and responsibility; and (III) engaging in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition. This final theological step, I maintain, is a two-fold dynamic: expounding Islam as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation.

**Keywords:** Islam; empire; decolonisation; settler colonialism; Indigenous people; Canada

## 1. Introduction

This article places Islamic liberation theology (ILT) in conversation with settler colonialism and Indigenous rights. As in contemporary Islamic thought in general, the problem of empire has been a key theme in ILT. Examples in the literature include (but are not limited to) US imperialism and resistance to it in Muslim contexts (Dabashi 2008); racial apartheid, as the structural legacy of Afrikaner settler colonialism in South Africa (Esack 1997); and the study of select Islamist movements as grassroots forms of liberation theology, such as Hizbullah in southern Lebanon (Marusek 2018) and Hamas in Occupied Palestine.<sup>1</sup> However insightful, ILT's engagement with the category of empire has generally presumed a particular colonial configuration in which Muslims are located on the receiving "end" of power, being colonised by an external, non-Muslim force. But what about the presence of Islam, I ask, *within* settler colonies in the Americas? Today there are large, established Muslim communities in Canada (~1 million) and the United States (~3.5 million). Migrant Muslim communities in North America are entering their third and even fourth generations, and, in the case of the US, there is a rich Black Muslim legacy that goes back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In this paper, I focus on my own home context of Canada as a concrete case study to grapple with, and provide insights into, the complex relationship between (Muslim) migrants, settler colonialism, and Indigenous dispossession.<sup>2</sup> Centrally, I argue that the case of Canada (and parallels can easily be drawn with the US or Australia) challenges the field of ILT to revisit the category of settler colonialism in a more nuanced, layered manner. For in these settler colonial settings, voluntary Muslim migrants are structurally complicit, *as* settlers, in the ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, despite the established presence of Canadian and American Muslims, there is little critical awareness of the lived realities of native suffering, past and present.

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At worst, Muslims may buy into dominant discourses that “blame the victim”—a phrase first used by the psychologist William Ryan in terms of anti-Black racism in the US (Ryan 1971)—representing Indigenous peoples as lazy, irresponsible, and prone to alcoholism and violence. This was the representation conveyed to me as a Muslim growing up in a devout community in Vancouver/Unceded Coast Salish Territories. At best, Muslims may see the fate of native peoples as a grave historical injustice, but one that is ultimately unconnected to “our” problems and concerns: accountability, so the line of thinking goes, lies solely on the shoulders of European settlers from times past.

Putting ILT in reflective dialogue with Indigenous struggles in the Americas, I raise the following questions: How can we decolonise Islam in a settler colonial setting, in which Muslims are not the occupied but themselves implicated in the continued settlement of the land?<sup>4</sup> That is, how can Muslims address their complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that liberating praxis? These are, admittedly, big questions that require long-term, collective, and multi-disciplinary scholarly work; my aim here is simply to spur, to kick-start a larger conversation.

In this article, I argue that decolonising Islam in Canada (or the US or Australia) entails three hermeneutical steps, of which “theological” work is actually the last. Firstly, we must gain a detailed understanding of the socio-historical context, that is, the long history of empire on the land and resistance to it, and how that history has shaped the present. Liberation theology, after all, is never abstracted but always begins with praxis (Bennett 2007, p. 39). Learning that social reality and history, therefore, is not simply “background information”; it cannot be alluded to in a quick, lazy manner merely to “set the stage” for discussion. Rather, it is the very first hermeneutical step in decolonising Islam, and must be teased out with a careful eye to the particularities of, in this case, the Canadian context. Secondly, in order to critically (re)position the Muslim community *within* that socio-historical context, we need to deconstruct the (colonially constructed) boundaries between “migrant” and “settler”, which actually serves to vindicate the former group, releasing them of complicity and responsibility. Indeed, it is the presence of this problematic ontological divide between migrant and settler that allows Muslims to evade—if not outright deny—an innate responsibility that we, as settlers living on stolen land, have towards Indigenous peoples. Thirdly, in the light of the first two steps, we need to engage in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition and its complex history. This final theological step of decolonising Islam, I argue, is a two-fold dynamic: expounding Islam as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation. I conclude the article with a concrete example of what decolonising Islam can look like. Focusing on the Qur’an and commentarial tradition (*tafsir*), I re-read the Conquest of Canaan through a decolonial framework in solidarity with Indigenous rights. In sum, this article builds on, and contributes to, a longstanding, anti-colonial tradition within ILT of challenging empire. At the same time, it departs from the existing literature by engaging a very different context and subject positionality, in which Muslim communities are not on the “receiving end” of settler colonialism but enmeshed, in complex but nevertheless complicit ways, within settler colonial structures.

Before embarking on the first hermeneutical step—unpacking the socio-historical context—let me first define some key terms. In this paper, I use the US terminology “Native American” and the Canadian terminology “First Nations” interchangeably. The US and Canada, after all, are socially constructed national entities with artificial, and often arbitrary, borders that cut across Indigenous lands and communities. These terminologies—“Native” and “First”—carry both a chronological and ethical dimension which recognises that the peoples in question were present, living, and thriving on the land long before the arrival of European settlers (Muckle 1998, p. 2). Moreover, the latter part of the Canadian term—“Nations”—acknowledges the great diversity (cultural, linguistic, and ethnic) of native communities, who tend to be reduced in the Western (and Muslim) imaginary into a singular, monolithic bloc. Settler colonialism is the next term which requires clarification.

Settler colonialism denotes a particular mode of colonialism in which an external force not only occupies another people's territory, but, over the course of time, injects their own population (settlers) into that territory. Land, understood in a fluid, holistic sense as "land/water/air/subterranean earth," thus takes on added significance in settler colonial contexts as the most prized, and contested, form of capital (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 5). And this settler relationship to the land, as the postcolonial scholar Patrick Wolfe has observed, is simultaneously "negative" (destructive) and "positive" (productive), entailing, as an ongoing structural process, the decimation of native societies and the erection of a new society (Wolfe 2006, p. 388).

## 2. Socio-Historical Context

Today, Indigenous peoples are arguably the most marginalised social group in Canada. The poverty levels within First Nations communities are alarming: 25% live under the poverty line, and this number increases to 40% when it comes to child poverty (Canadian Poverty Institute 2023). Similar to African Americans in the US, Indigenous peoples in Canada are disproportionately represented in the prison system. Despite comprising only 3% of the broader national population, they make up 19% of the prison population (Gorelick 2023). Perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of anti-Indigenous racism is the mass disappearances of Indigenous women. Over the past three decades, roughly 4000 women have either been killed or gone missing in Canada (Cecco 2022), and the actual, unreported numbers are likely higher. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has shown that Indigenous females in Canada are 16 times more likely to be murdered or to go missing than Caucasian females (Reclaiming Power and Place 2019, p. 55). Such racist misogyny, moreover, not only manifests in homicide and abduction, but also in routine acts of violence in everyday life. Native women and girls face considerably higher rates of physical assault, sexual abuse, and robbery. For example, the National Inquiry notes that they are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than non-Indigenous women and girls (Ibid.).

Native peoples have never passively accepted such marginalisation, and have consistently resisted and exercised agency in various ways. Idle No More is a compelling example of First Nations' mobilisation. Founded by four women (three Indigenous and one White ally) in 2012 in the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, the movement advocates for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, focusing on the Canadian government's systematic dismantling of various environment protection laws, which have jeopardised the safety and wellbeing of native communities living on the land (Idle No More 2023). The six-week hunger strike of Chief Theresa Spence—the elected leader of the Attawapiskat Nation in northern Ontario—in December 2012 to January 2013 became a unifying symbol for the Idle No More movement. Staging her hunger strike near the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, Spence was protesting the deplorable living conditions in the Attawapiskat reservation, including "a long-standing housing shortage on the reserve, a boil water advisory, pollution from nearby mining activity, and extreme economic depression" (Barker 2015, p. 48). Similar to Black Lives Matter in the US, Idle No More quickly became a national phenomenon, with demonstrations and protests spreading across Canada.

The naming Idle No More is admittedly problematic, and the movement itself acknowledges that First Nations people have never been "idle" in the face of Canadian colonialism, explicitly positioning itself as part of a wider legacy of native resistance. To quote the Idle No More activist and Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson: "Idle No More is the latest—visible to the mainstream—resistance and it is part of an ongoing historical and contemporary push to protect our lands, our cultures, our nationhoods, and our languages." (Ibid., p. 49) The so-called "Oka Crisis" (1990) in Quebec, as it was dubbed in the mainstream media, is perhaps the most well-known example of Indigenous resistance in modern Canadian memory. The Mohawk Nation had been protesting the seizure of their ancestral lands—The Pines—for decades, when the Municipality of Oka confiscated land in the late 1950s to build a nine-hole golf course. In 1989, the municipality announced it

would seize more of The Pines to expand the golf-course (by a further nine holes) and to build a new condominium complex (Gabriel 2010, p. 345). Mohawk protestors challenged the municipality and, deploying direct action, set up a barricade to block access to their ancestral lands. This led to a heated, 78-day standoff between the protestors and the Quebec police force. The Canadian Army intervened and lay siege on the Mohawk blockade for 26 days, eventually bringing it down. To this day, the army and the police force (Sûreté du Québec) have refused to apologise for various human rights violations perpetrated against the Mohawk protestors, including the denial of food and medicine, physical beating, and torture (Ibid., p. 346).

The dire state of First Nations peoples cannot be understood in isolation of the legacy of empire; this present reality is a direct outcome of a longer, structurally embedded process of settler colonialism and native dispossession. The rest of this section unpacks that historical context. While the first recorded Indigenous encounters with Europeans took place with the arrival of the Norse or “the Vikings” in what is now Newfoundland in the eleventh century (Dickason 2002, p. 67), these were scattered and isolated encounters. Systemic, mass-scale European colonisation began in the late sixteenth century. The French and the British, as the two principal imperial players, were in fierce competition to carve out their own economic spheres of influence, based on the lucrative fur trade, but with the Treaty of Paris (1763) the French formally ceded their colonial territories in North America to the British, which included the heart of “New France”: the modern-day province of Quebec (Walker 2008, p. 15). The establishment of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, as politically independent from, but also loyal to, the British Crown, was a cumulative process of colonial expansion. When Canada was formally created, it comprised of only four provinces (Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, or “New Scotland”). In the coming years, these borders would expand considerably to include, in the far north, Rupert’s Land—bought from the Hudson’s Bay Company—and the Northwest Territories, both in 1870; Manitoba and British Columbia (BC) in the west in 1870 and 1871, respectively; and Prince Edward Island in the east in 1873 (Dickason 2002, pp. 237–38). BC itself was an amalgamation, in 1866, of two administratively separate colonies: the Mainland Colony of British Columbia and the Colony of Vancouver Island (Duff 1997, p. 84).

The land was, of course, anything but “empty,” waiting to be colonised and populated; on the contrary, it was teeming with peoples and cultures. The Native American scholar George “Tink” Tinker notes that when Europeans first arrived in the Americas, there were approximately 100 million people living on the land (Tinker 2008, p. 6). Moreover, while native peoples are frequently portrayed in the national imaginary as a monolith—the aboriginal people of X country—it is important to underline just how culturally and ethnically diverse these communities were, and continue to be. In BC alone there are over 30 ethnicities and 200 First Nations groups, including the Haida, Nootka, Coast Salish (in whose territory the City of Vancouver was established), Athapaskan, Interior Salish, and Bella Coola (Muckle 1998, pp. 6–7). Like colonial formations across the non-European world, the Canadian and US nation-states showed little respect for the historic, territorial boundaries of Indigenous communities, who had stewarded specific swathes of land for centuries. The western end of the Canada-US border, for instance, cuts right across Coast Salish Territory—the cities of Vancouver and Seattle are both located within them—and, on the east coast, the border permanently split the Blackfeet Nation. The US side would remain the Blackfeet while the Canadian side would become the Blood, and today the two identify as distinct peoples (Ellerman and O’Heran 2021, p. 25).

The arrival of European colonialists, across the Americas, led to the destruction of Indigenous populations and a sharp decline in their numbers. The Spanish colonisation of Latin America is the most notorious example of mass genocide. The Conquistadors almost exterminated the entire population of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), numbering about seven million, and killed twenty million people in the immediate decades following the conquest of Mexico (Tinker 2008, p. 11). The transmission of foreign diseases, to which native peoples had no prior exposure and thus immunity

to, also played a key role in the rising death toll. In the context of BC, diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza, measles, scarlet fever, and especially smallpox, described as the “most devastating of all diseases,” wreaked havoc: between the early 1800s and 1920s, the native population of BC dropped by a shocking 75% (Muckle 1998, p. 60). Unlike the Spanish model of mass extermination, the Canadian settler state approached its relations with native peoples through the treaty system, seeking to “extinguish the Indian [*sic*] rights to the soil by treaty” (Duff 1997, p. 98). Building on British colonial practices in North America, a treaty entailed government ownership rights to the land in exchange for other (less desirable) parcels of land as part of reservation plots, as well as gifts, annual payments, services, and other forms of compensation (Ibid., p. 91). Native leaders were often unaware of what they were signing up to or even what ownership, as a Western concept, entailed. Indeed, the very idea of ownership was non-existent in Indigenous languages and cultures. Rather, there was “a firm sense of group filial attachment to the particular places that comes with a responsibility to relate to the land in these places with responsibility” (Tinker 2008, p. 9).<sup>5</sup> Consider the Canadian government’s relations with the Cree Nations of the Plains (the modern-day Prairies). The Plains are often seen, in Canadian history, as a shining example of how the government dealt fairly with First Nations peoples through the signing of treaties. Yet, in its dealings with the Cree Nations, the government’s unequivocal goal was to “establish control over them, and Canadian authorities were willing to and did wage war upon the Cree in order to achieve this” (Tobias 1983, pp. 519–20). Well aware of the government’s interests, Big Bear—the legendary Cree chief and resistance fighter—became a fierce opponent of the existing treaties, calling for a significant revision in order to secure greater autonomy and independence for his people (Ibid., p. 524). It is important to note that, unlike the rest of Canada, no treaties were negotiated in BC. In the nineteenth century there were fourteen land purchases signed in what is now BC, amounting to less than 3% of the land mass of Vancouver Island (Harris 2002, p. 21). Although the treaty system adopted in the rest of Canada is hardly unproblematic, BC offers the rawest example of European empire, wherein Anglophone settlers simply walked in and unilaterally claimed the land for themselves. This is why First Nations activists and their allies routinely refer to the lands of BC as “unceded” territory. Due to the lack of negotiated treaties, for many years the BC provincial government denied any obligations to recognise and settle land claims brought forward by Indigenous peoples—a position the government held until 1990 (Dickason 2002, p. 418).

Canada often juxtaposes itself to the US and South American experience, posturing as a more enlightened, humane expression of state-building and settler–Indigenous relations. In addition to various examples of native resistance and Canadian state suppression, such as the famous 1885 Northwest Rebellion headed by the Metis leader Louis Riel and the Plains resistance led by the Cree chief Big Bear, it is important to note that the two longest intermittent wars with Indigenous tribes took place on what would become Canadian state territory: namely, the Mi’kmaq War (1613–1761) with the British and the Iroquois War (1609–1701) with the French (Ibid., p. 127). Furthermore, just because the Canadian state did not pursue a Conquistador model of mass extermination, this does not mean the underlying objective of state policy was not to eradicate Indigenous people. Rather, it was eradication by different means. Wolfe has argued that although settler colonialism subscribes to a “logic of elimination,” that logic does not necessarily manifest as outright genocide (Wolfe 2006, p. 387). The logic of elimination can surface in a variety of modes, such as

officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools. . . all of these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism. (Ibid., p. 388)

The Canadian nation-state, from its inception, pursued assimilation as its principal logic of elimination. European settlers had little respect for Indigenous cultures and spiritual



traditions, which they saw as essentially inferior to Christianity and the West. They thus presumed it was only a matter of time before native peoples assimilated into superior European ways, and state policy was premised on this core assumption of native inferiority. To quote the first Prime Minister of Canada, John A. Macdonald, in 1887:

The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change. (Macdonald, as cited in [Dickason 2002](#), p. 237)

The government waged a war on native culture, especially on collective, community-based traditions. The festival of the potlach, for example, was a pillar of native life in Westcoast Canada, and in the 1880s laws were introduced criminalising the potlach, with threat of imprisonment, and it was not until 1951 that the potlach was decriminalised ([Muckle 1998](#), p. 72). Similar state legislation, in both the US and Canada, outlawed the Sun Dance (*Ookan*)—the central ceremony of the Plains' Nations, such as the Blackfoot ([Tovias 2011](#), pp. 40–42)—and this prohibition remained until 1959. Yet colonial legislation did not necessarily translate into practice on the ground; Indigenous peoples did not simply accept these laws but continued to celebrate these ceremonies, often underground. One historian of the Blackfoot has argued, with reference to legislative attacks against the Sun Dance, that the very passing of such laws should be “viewed against the many Blackfoot acts of resistance and myriad reports of the continuation of the practice” (*Ibid.*, p. 189). Hence, just as with sovereign colonial power and organised Indigenous resistance to it, cultural colonial power—in particular assimilationist legislation—was also contested by First Nations' peoples.

The boarding school, more commonly known as “the reservation school,” was one of the most important institutions of assimilation for the Canadian government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which was active 2008–2015, has unearthed the sheer scale of violence, pain, and (continuing) trauma that the reservation schooling system has inflicted on over 150,000 Indigenous children over a period of roughly a century ([Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 1 2015](#), p. viii). The schooling system was established in the 1870s and 1880s as a partnership between the federal government and Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, who ran the day-to-day operations of the schools. In the 1880s there were three large residential schools, and by 1930 the system had grown to 80 residential schools across the country (*Ibid.*, p. 4). By the 1980s most schools had been shuttered, although “the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the 1990s” (*Ibid.*). In these schools, Indigenous languages were banned and spiritual traditions demonised. Generations of children were separated from their parents, communities, and cultures, and forcibly enrolled into a system of national indoctrination. Recall Wolfe's discussion of the logic of elimination, which includes “child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions and boarding schools.” ([Wolfe 2006](#), p. 388). All three apply to the predatory actions of the Canadian state. Indeed, in its final report the TRC refers to the reservation schooling system as “a key component of a Canadian government policy of cultural genocide” ([Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 1 2015](#), p. vii).

This institution of cultural genocide, moreover, was not just violent discursively or existentially, that is, in its attempted erasure of Indigenous identity and heritage. It was also violent in the most literal sense of the term. Physical and sexual abuse were widespread in the reservation schools, and alarming numbers of Indigenous children died. The TRC has found that 3200 children died in the residential schools, which is far higher, proportionately, than the death rate of White school children in Canada in the same period ([Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 4 2015](#), p. 1). For example, in the early 1940s the death rate in residential schools was a staggering 4.9 times higher than the average death rate of school-attending children, lowering in the 1960s to (only!) twice as high as the average school death rate (*Ibid.*, p. 18). About a third of child deaths were never recorded by name; parents were rarely informed, either of sickness or death; and most of the children

were buried in unmarked, mass graves near the schools (Ibid., p. 134). What explains this disproportionately high death rate in the reservation schools? It seems that disease was a principal cause, with tuberculosis being cited 48.7% of the time, at least for reported deaths (Ibid., p. 138). This shows that the living conditions in these underfunded schools were deplorable and that most children were, to quote the TRC, “malnourished, quartered in crowded and unsanitary facilities, poorly clothed, and overworked” (Ibid.). Alongside disease, children died due to accidents, especially fires (which were a frequent occurrence, given the poor living conditions); suicide was not uncommon; and many children tried to escape and run away, only to go missing (Ibid., p. 3). In sum, the residential schools did not just attempt to discursively kill Indigenous identity, language, and culture; they also inflicted brute, physical violence on the bodies of Indigenous children, in many cases killing them. Even in terms of assimilation, then, settler colonialism’s logic of elimination must be understood both figuratively and literally.

### 3. On Migrants and Settlers

Having sketched out the colonial history of the land, and, in so doing, *recognising* the injustices meted out against native peoples, the next hermeneutical step is to critically (re)position, to contextualise Canadian Muslims within that painful history. Like other communities of colour in Canada, Muslims—I am speaking emically here as a member of this national community—often see themselves as migrants, or as the grand/children of migrants, but rarely as what we are, collectively and across generations, within the broader frame of Canada’s colonial past: settlers. There is a divide, an enduring gulf, which is too often presumed to separate *us*, as migrants, from *them*: European settlers, that is, Anglophone and Francophone “pioneers” from centuries prior. But settler colonialism, as Wolfe presciently notes, is not a historical “event”—a thing of the past—and therefore something that is over, but rather an ongoing “structure” which reflects a “continuity through time” (Wolfe 2006, p. 390). The passage of time, after all, does not erase crime. This is a key principle in international law. Canada, or the US, or Australia are no less settler colonies today than they were yesterday. And yet, the manifest settler-hood of these states continues to be rendered invisible. Consider the discipline of migration studies. While migration scholars have been admirably attuned to questions of racism and xenophobia against migrants and refugees, they have

remained largely silent on the constitutive role of settler colonialism in the social, economic and political development of these states. While migrant scholars may acknowledge settler colonialism as an event in the distant past, few regard it as relevant to the study of contemporary immigration and citizenship. (Ellerman and O’Heran 2021, pp. 21–22)

On the contrary, comparative migration research tends to celebrate countries such as Canada and the US for their relatively open naturalisation and citizenship schemes, such as acquisition-by-birth and acceptance of dual, even multiple, nationalities (Ibid., p. 27). In doing so, migration studies has failed to properly situate these immigration policies within the history of empire and its vested, structural interests in settler population growth and legal enfranchisement. Immigration, let us not forget, was (and continues to be) a major tool in the colonisation process (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 1). What is needed, therefore, is to deconstruct the ontological borders between the (modern) migrant and (historic) settler, thereby recasting settler coloniality more accurately as, recalling Wolfe’s phrasing, a “continuity through time.” This deconstruction is essential in order for migrant communities to recognise that supporting Indigenous rights and land struggles is not an act of charity—a progressive struggle, amongst others, to be a good ally with—but rather a solemn responsibility (*amana*, to use an Islamic term) that addresses our own existential complicity, as migrant settlers, within the Canadian settlement project.

Acknowledging this complicity is particularly acute in the Canadian context. I think the case of African Americans in the US, as the descendants of slaves who were forcibly shipped to the Americas, is still different as there was no element of volition or choice

in the movement across the Atlantic. But the Muslim community in Canada is largely a migrant, and thus voluntary settler, community. Indeed, the very first registered Muslims in Canada, dating back to 1863, were Scottish settlers who had converted to Islam: namely, the Love family (Waugh 2018, p. 1). As the historian Baha Abu-Laban has documented, although the vast majority of Muslims arrived in Canada after World War II, the first wave of migrants arrived between the 1880s and World War II, hailing mainly from the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, in particular modern-day Lebanon (Abu-Laban 1980, p. 2). While including Muslims, these first-wave migrants were predominantly Christian (Ibid.). Alongside Arab Muslims, there was also a burgeoning community of Turkish Ottoman migrants (Abu-Laban 1983, p. 76). Socioeconomically, these first-wave migrants came with little capital, labouring as peddlers and unskilled workers (Ibid.). My aim here is not to provide a history of Islam in Canada; rather, I gesture to that history to underline the broader settler context in which the community lived and grew. Consider the country's first purpose-built mosque: the famous al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, Alberta, built in 1938. The construction of this mosque was made possible through the fundraising efforts of Lebanese women involved in the Arabian Muslim Association, especially Hilwie Hamdon (Kurd 2018, p. 181). That they went door-to-door and were able to successfully raise the required funds—no less than CAD \$5000 (Waugh 2018, p. 31)—in the context of the Great Depression is remarkable, and speaks to the seminal role women played in establishing Islamic institutions in Canada. But that history is also deeply imbricated with the legacy of settler colonialism. Fort Edmonton, which would later become the City of Edmonton, was “one of the most important outposts for the Hudson’s Bay Company’s monopoly on the fur trade” (Kurd 2018, p. 182). Hilwie’s husband—Ali Hamdon—had moved in 1900 from Lebanon to Canada, first settling in Manitoba, then Saskatchewan, and ultimately relocating to Alberta. Hamdon began as a peddler, but was able to rise through the ranks to become a prominent businessman and eventually setup his own fur trading post (in partnership with his brother) at Fort Chipewyan in northeast Alberta, commuting back and forth between “Fort Chip” and Edmonton, where Hilwie and the children were based (Waugh 2018, p. 30). The Hamdon family and their involvement in the fur trade, therefore, are a compelling example of just how entangled (ensnared?) the histories of Muslims and settler migration are in the Canadian landscape.<sup>6</sup>

First Nations peoples themselves have called on migrants to become more cognisant and aware of their own privileged positionality as settlers. This should not be misconstrued as a reactionary or “anti-immigration” position. Indigenous peoples in Canada, as a socially marginalised community with historic ties to the land, have been consistently supportive of, and in solidarity with, other marginalised communities, such as refugees and asylum seekers. To give just one example: in 2010 when 492 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees arrived at the coast of BC on a cargo ship and were immediately detained by the Canadian government, First Nations activists and elders staged weekly demonstrations in support of the refugees (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 8). But Indigenous people have emphasized that migrant communities must acknowledge their own positionality on stolen lands and the structural privileges, and concomitant responsibilities, that come with that positionality. “Decolonising Antiracism” (2005)—co-authored by the First Nations (Mi’kmaw) scholar Bonita Lawrence and South Asian Canadian scholar Enakshi Dua—was arguably the first article to point out and reflect upon the settler positionality of immigrant communities in Canada (Lawrence and Dua 2005),<sup>7</sup> and, as we will see below, its implications within anti-racist circles. The Cree scholar Harold Johnson writes that settlers, including new settlers (that is, immigrants), need to learn about and honour the numerous treaties that were signed by Indigenous leaders “in line with indigenous understanding and interpretation” of those treaties, recognising that “prior Indigenous sovereignties were never extinguished by the treaties” (Johnson, as cited in Ellerman and O’Heran 2021, p. 30). It therefore behoves all migrants to seek out and educate themselves about the *history* of the land. Learning (from) that history must be a requirement for all newcomers—a point also underlined by Kwakwaka’wakw chief Bill Wilson (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 9). Indeed, this is one of the

reasons why socio-historical context plays such a prominent role in this article, constituting the first hermeneutical move in decolonising Islam in the Canadian context. Solidarity with native communities, moreover, cannot be restricted to discourse and language, to verbal pronouncements such as land acknowledgments, as important as these are. In their now classic article—“Decolonization is not a Metaphor” (2012)—Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang stress that the decolonial project cannot be reduced to decolonising “the mind”, that is, decolonisation as an essentially discursive and cultural exercise—“metaphor,” as they put it—including awareness-raising and curriculum reform; rather, the heart of decolonisation is thoroughly “material,” entailing concrete land struggles to support Indigenous rights, life, and sovereignty (Tuck and Yang 2012, pp. 19, 28).

A point of clarification is in order. Recognising the settler status of racialised migrants in no way takes away from the injustices of racism and social exclusion that they (we) have faced. Today Canada is a diverse and multi-racial society, and becoming more so each year. In the 2016 census, people of colour accounted for 22% of the wider population (Block et al. 2019, p. 4), and this number is significantly higher in major cities like Toronto and Vancouver. However, the visual tapestry (if I can put it thus) of the Canadian landscape masks enduring, structural inequalities between racialised and non-racialised people. Consider unemployment. In 2016, the unemployment rate amongst people of colour was 9.2%, while it was 7.3% for White Canadians (Ibid.). Labour discrimination, like all forms of discrimination, is acutely intersectional, cutting across race and gender lines. In 2015, it was found that women of colour earned 59 cents for every dollar that White men earned, as compared to men of colour, who earned 78 cents (Ibid., pp. 4–5). These structural inequalities are also present within the Muslim community, which is overwhelmingly coloured. In 2011, the Canadian Muslim population passed one million, comprising just over 3% of the national population (Hamdani 2015, p. 24). Going back to the question of employment: despite the fact that Canadian Muslims are proportionately more educated than Canadians in general—44% of working-age adult Muslims have a university degree, as compared to 26% of the general population—the unemployment rate amongst Muslims is significantly higher than the national average: 13.9% versus 7.8%, respectively (Ibid., pp. 26–27). There is also considerable income disparity between Canadian Muslims and the wider population, with Muslims making, in 2010, “three-fourths of the median income of all Canadians.” (Ibid., p. 27).<sup>8</sup>

The visual tapestry of contemporary Canada can also produce historical amnesia; it becomes all too easy to forget how White, and how proudly White, Canada was before the 1960s. Like the US and its passing of the Hart–Cellar Act in 1965, which “expunged racist immigration quotas” from earlier legislation (Curtis 2009, p. 72), Canada’s immigration policy moved to a colour-blind, qualification-based approach in 1960. Before this point, English Canada was basically a “monocultural, monolingual, single-nation state” (Day 2000, p. 178) and crudely unapologetic that “desirable” immigration presumed a European point of origin. To quote Prime Minister William Mackenzie King in 1947:

Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. . . It is not a “fundamental human right” of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege. (Ibid., p. 178)

Racism against non-Indigenous coloured peoples has a long history in Canada. For example, much is made of the Underground Railroad and Canada as being an enlightened safe haven for Black people trying to escape the horrors of US slavery. During the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 40,000 Black fugitives arrived in Canada vis-à-vis the Underground Railroad (McLaren 2008, p. 69). Yet what is often glossed over, if not ignored altogether, is the fact that once the fugitives arrived they faced deep-seated racism. Most White parents in Canada West (modern-day Ontario) were opposed to Black children attending schools, as were the school trustees themselves. By and large, Black children were barred from enrolling in publicly funded elementary schools, and in the few cases where they could enrol, they were made to sit on separate benches (Ibid., p. 72). In other words, Black fugitives managed to escape US slavery not for equal and dignified treatment in Canada,

but racial segregation and exclusion. Coloured groups in other parts of the country faced similar discrimination, such as Chinese labourers who came to work in BC's mines and railways in the nineteenth century (Anderson 2008, pp. 90–92).

But despite such experiences of dehumanisation, racism cannot be used as a justification mechanism to deflect from the reality and responsibilities of being a settler—whether White or Brown—on stolen land. Drawing on Janet Mawhinney's notion of “moves to innocence,” which refers to the discursive ways in which White people obfuscate and escape their own racial privilege and complicity, Tuck and Yang have coined the phrase “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012, pp. 9–10). By this, they refer to

those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. (Ibid., p. 10)

When discussing Indigenous issues with fellow North American Muslims, and with North Americans of colour in general, I have routinely encountered settler moves to innocence—“Oh, how can we be settlers? We experience racism all the time.” But subject positions are complex, nuanced: it is entirely possible to be structurally excluded and, simultaneously, to benefit from exclusionary structures. As Lawrence and Dua eloquently put it: “Individuals are often involved in a “race to innocence,” in which they emphasize only their subordination and disregard how they may simultaneously be complicit in other systems of domination” (Lawrence and Dua 2005, p. 139). Characteristic of settler moves to innocence is flattening out the specificities, the contextual particularities, of what are actually distinct social justice struggles. This is a critique that Tuck and Yang wage against progressive coalition politics in coloured circles, wherein various struggles (queer, anti-racist, class-based, Indigenous) are all lumped together under a totalising rubric of solidarity: as simply “decolonizing” (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 17). Due to such flattening, not only is decolonisation abstracted from the concrete, material contexts of colonised native communities—decolonisation thus devolves into “metaphor”—but experiences of racism amongst people of colour, however violent and traumatic, obfuscate their own status as settlers and the structural advantages they accrue within that colonial system, even if as second-class (Brown) beneficiaries. Intersectionality in resistance work is necessary, of course, but the problem, as Lawrence and Dua note, is when native decolonial struggles are scripted into a liberalised “pluralistic framework”—a plurality of resistive options—where decolonisation becomes one option amongst others (Lawrence and Dua 2005, p. 131). But if *all* these sites of oppression and resistance are situated on stolen land in the first place, then decolonisation must, they argue, become “foundational” in how antiracism, and resistance work in general, are approached (Ibid., p. 127). The underlying point here is that being a settler is not a choice but rather an honest recognition of one's own existential subject position on ethnically cleansed land. As the Canadian sociologist Sunera Thobani succinctly puts it: “migrants become implicated whether wittingly or otherwise, in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples.” (Thobani, as cited in Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 6). So rather than debating whether migrants are settlers or not, the more pressing question is: do we, as coloured migrants, look into the mirror of power with transparency and accountability, or continue to live in denial of the settler colonial structure that we inhabit, benefit from, and indeed contribute to?

#### 4. Decolonising Islam

Now that we have unpacked the broader socio-historical context of Canadian settler colonialism (step 1) and properly situated diasporic Muslims within that settler context (step 2), we can address the question of religion more explicitly. How can religion, that is, the religion of the migrant settler, be decolonised? And in the more specific case of Muslim migrant settlers, how can Islam be decolonised? The first point to be made is that Islam occupies a very different history in the Americas than Christianity. The latter played a pivotal role in legitimating European conquest of the land and the exploitation of Indigenous labour and seizure of natural resources (Tinker 2008, p. 11). Much is often



made in contemporary Christian circles—liberal and liberationist—of the protest of the priest Bartolome De Las Casas (d. 1566), who documented and challenged the Spanish genocide of the Indigenous peoples of South America. Yet, as Tinker notes, Las Casas, while opposing outright genocide, was still committed to Spanish empire, calling instead for “a gentle conquest” through missionary conversion of the native populations (Ibid., pp. 11–12). A similar pattern of Christianisation was pursued in colonial North America, becoming a government-sponsored policy in the nineteenth century. In 1819, the US government passed the Civilization Act. This law

provided \$10,000 to support the work of “benevolent institutions” which would teach Indians [*sic*] to read, write, farm, and generally live like their white neighbours. The benevolent institutions were primarily missionary organisations whose objective was to convert Indians to Christianity. . . (Treat 1996, pp. 7–8)

In the case of Canada, the TRC explicitly acknowledges the historic role that Christianity and Christian missions played within the residential schooling system. As noted earlier, from the formative years of this system in the early nineteenth century, missionary churches were actively involved, and the partnership between the churches and the government lasted until 1969 (Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 4 2015, pp. 4, 126). Whereas the government provided funding for the residential schools and passed key legislation such as mandatory attendance, different church denominations—from Roman Catholic and Presbyterian to Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist—ran the daily operations of the schools (Muckle 1998, p. 68).

This history has resulted in a complicated, indeed turbulent, relationship between Christianity and Indigenous peoples, even for those who identify as believing Christians. Many Native Americans are at least nominally Christian, maintaining some connection with historically missionary churches (Tinker 2008, p. 14). Later in this article we will see that the Native American scholar Robert Warrior (paralleling the Palestinian scholar Edward Said) critiques the Exodus paradigm of liberation,<sup>9</sup> which is a staple paradigm in liberation theology. Warrior, however, points to the other side of the narrative, namely, the Israelite genocide of the Canaanites (Warrior 1989, p. 262). In offering this critique of the Exodus, Warrior is not calling for a hermeneutical rereading of Christianity, but challenging Christianity itself as an inappropriate and problematic theological framework for native liberation (Ibid., p. 261). He explicitly identifies his position as “post-Christian” (Warrior 1996, p. 102); Christianity is thus a tradition that he, as an Indigenous person, has parted ways with, opting instead “to go home to the drum, the stomp dance, and the sweatlodge” (Ibid., p. 103), that is, Native American spiritual traditions. But even Indigenous people who remain devout Christians and are committed to operating within a Christological framework have found great difficulty in navigating the history of missionary colonialism and the complicity of Christian leaders in the dispossession of Native Americans (Treat 1996, pp. 9–10). The Cherokee scholar William Baldridge is a case in point. A professor of pastoral ministry and an ordained Baptist minister at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas, Baldridge has wrestled with the colonial legacy of Christianity. In a fascinating exchange with Warrior, Baldridge concedes that Warrior’s critique of the Exodus sparked “an intellectual and spiritual crisis” within himself (Baldridge 1996, pp. 100–1), but one that he was ultimately able to resolve by re-reading the Old Testament story in the light of (his reading of) the Gospel narratives, focussing on Jesus’ encounter with a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 (Ibid., p. 101). Osage scholar George “Tink” Tinker, who is Professor Emeritus at the Iliff School of Theology in Colorado and an ordained member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, is also sharply critical of the history of Christianity. Tinker argues that any serious Native American liberation theology must recognise, unapologetically, Christianity’s historic role in the land as “the religion of the colonizer” (Tinker 2008, p. 130).

And this brings us to the complex place of Islam. I must first clarify that decolonising Islam is not simply about extrapolating basic ethical “teachings” from the Qur’an or hadith literature or the works of classical Muslim thinkers, systematically putting together, for



example, a “theology of justice.” While social justice is certainly a major theme in the Qur’an (Q. 90:12–18; 107:1–7), and belief in God’s justice and compassion (Q. 49:9, 45:22) is central to ILT, speaking about justice alone is too sweeping and abstracted. The theme of justice (*’adala*), after all, could be invoked for a diverse array of causes, from women’s rights to class struggle to religious pluralism. Recall, moreover, Tuck and Yang’s cautionary note about equating decolonisation with social justice work in general, and the erasure involved in that flattening process. Instead, the project of decolonising Islam has to be explicitly attuned to questions of empire, and must also involve critical, unapologetic rereadings of the Islamic tradition in the light of anti-colonial politics, rather than simply “finding” or “discovering” the answers in the tradition. In this section, I argue that the project of decolonising Islam is a two-fold dynamic, as Islam acts as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation. Let me explain.

When it comes to the legacy of Western Empire, there is so much in common that Muslims and First Nations peoples share. Over the past two centuries, Muslim-majority lands have been brutally occupied by European powers, most notably the French (in mainly North Africa and West Africa, as well as select parts of the Middle East) and the British (mainly in the Middle East and South Asia)—the two very powers that carved out Turtle Island between themselves. And the legacy of Western Empire in Muslim-majority lands is not just a historical phenomenon but, of course, acutely contemporary, such as the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the ongoing, US-backed Israeli Occupation of Palestine. And in these various historic contexts, from Algeria and Egypt to India and (Dutch-controlled) Indonesia, Muslims mounted massive scales of anti-colonial resistance. Indeed, Western empire and resistance to it has been a defining theme—if not *the* defining theme—in Islamic intellectual thought over the past two centuries. Anti-colonialism, therefore, does not sit on the margins of contemporary Islam; it is central, indeed constitutive, of it. Furthermore, there are important contextual synergies between (settler) empire at home and empire abroad. US foreign policy is, in many ways, the intuitive, structural extension of its own violent settler colonial formation, during which time it created an “efficient agency of statecraft for the ingestion and privatization of the country’s vast and pluralistic Indian Country [*sic*]” (Hall 2003, p. xxix). While not focusing on the Muslim world *per se*, Tinker has been a leading Native American voice calling for stronger ties of transregional solidarity and exchange between Native American activists and liberation theologians in the Global South, such as in Latin America, arguing that isolationism between the two is, itself, a lingering legacy of empire and strategies of divide-and-conquer (Tinker 2008, pp. 33–34).

To be sure, while there are certainly shared colonial histories (and presents) between Muslims and First Nations peoples, there are also critical differences that should not be elided and glossed over. Colonialism and settler colonialism are not the same thing, and the term “Fourth World” has sought to highlight the distinctive settler colonial circumstances and challenges that Indigenous peoples face. The Fourth World was first used by the Indigenous activist George Manuel. Hailing from the Shuswap Nation in the interior of BC, Manuel was a towering figure in First Nations mobilising in the 1970s, leading the National Indian Brotherhood—the most powerful native organisation in Canada at the time (Hall 2003, p. 238). Manuel also played a pioneering role in forging international solidarity networks between Indigenous groups at home and comrades in the Global South. It was actually during a trip to Tanzania where he first heard the phrase “Fourth World” from a Tanzanian diplomat, who casually remarked to Manuel: “When the Indian peoples come into their own, that will be the Fourth World” (Manuel and Posluns 1974, p. 5). A fluid and somewhat ambiguous term, the Fourth World basically seeks to shift native politics and self-expression beyond the constraints of Eurocentric nation-state frameworks—frameworks that were pursued, often to great detriment, by postcolonial states in the Global South—drawing instead on more organic modes of self-determination in line with native cultures and traditions (Hall 2003, p. 238). In envisaging Fourth World alternatives, Tinker stresses the importance of spirituality and enchanted worldviews, as it was these very spiritual worlds that settler colonialists disparaged, attacked, and sought to eradicate

(Tinker 1996, p. 116). Recall that the erasure of Indigenous culture and identity was the driving, assimilationist objective of the Canadian residential schooling system. A devout Fourth Worldist, Tinker has criticised Latin American liberation theologians for playing into Eurocentric, post-Enlightenment discourse and assumptions. He writes:

Indian people want affirmation not as “persons” (the language of Gustavo Gutierrez) or as individuals but rather as national communities with discrete cultures, discrete languages, discrete value systems, and our own governments and territories. To put it in straightforward language, Indian people do not aspire to be recognised in terms of class structure or as workers, the proletariat, peasants, or even as ethnic minorities, but rather as peoples. We should add that “production”, the Marxist category, is of little interest to Indians for whom the land is primary. (Tinker 2008, pp. 136–37)

Here Tinker is questioning the neutrality, the presumed ahistoricity of the grammar of liberationist discourse—from “class” and “workers” to “peasants” and the individual (“persons” over “people”)—and trying to introduce a new, Fourth World language that is spatially embedded in settler colonial contexts, committed to political sovereignty, and firmly rooted in Indigenous traditions and social identities.

But while contemporary Islamic thought has been shaped by resistance to empire, the classical Islamic tradition (“the canon”) emerged in the context of empire, and this, I argue, is the critical moment of Islamic history that we need to decolonise. The history of Islam is replete with wealthy, transregional, and multi-ethnic empires, including the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), and the Safavid Empire (1501–1722). Though Muslims are generally aware, and often proud, of the existence of these empires, we have not fully appreciated the lasting impact of (Muslim) empire on the Islamic intellectual tradition.<sup>10</sup> This point is particularly salient in the classical period—that is, the Umayyad Empire (661–750) and Abbasid Empire (750–1258)—as the Islamic tradition came into being in this timeframe, such as the creation of the canonical schools of law. Consider the imperial effects on the doctrine of *jihad* during the Umayyad period. In the Qur’an, *jihad* simply means “struggle” or “striving.” This refers to social struggle, including both non-violent and violent forms (*qital*, or armed combat), as well as internal, spiritual struggle and moral development. From the European imperial era up to the present time, *jihad* (like contemporary Islam in general) has taken on an acutely anti-colonial expression, with resistance movements routinely framing their political cause as a *jihad* (Peters 1979, p. 6). But *jihad* played a very different hermeneutical function in the pre-modern period. During the Umayyad era, the Muslim state went from being a relatively modest regional entity to a massive global empire. To quote the Umayyad historian Khalid Blankinship:

Starting from small beginnings in Western Arabia, the Muslim state grew enormous, uniting a territory stretching from Spain to China and from Yaman [*sic*] to the Caucasus under the rule of the Muslim caliph within a single century. As a result of this expansion, the Muslim caliphate surpassed the Roman and Chinese empires in land area, perhaps being exceeded only by that of the Mongols in pre-modern times. (Blankinship 1994, p. 1)

In comparison, the succeeding Abbasid period saw little further expansion. The height of Muslim empire, at least geographically speaking, was attained during the Umayyad regime. And during this phase of radical expansion, the theological language of Islam was re-serviced in the interests of empire. Over the course of the Umayyad conquests, *jihad* was divorced from its original Qur’anic usage and recast as an ideological imperative for “the establishment of God’s rule in the earth,” thus theologically justifying Muslim conquest and expansionism (Ibid.). This recasting of *jihad* was so central to Umayyad state-building and foreign policy that Blankinship, in the very title of his monograph, refers to the Umayyad Empire as “the Jihad State”.

I would like to conclude this article by offering a concrete, in-depth example of what decolonising the Islamic intellectual tradition might look like in the specific context of

Indigenous rights and settler violence. As noted earlier, the Exodus—the liberation of the ancient Israelites from Pharaonic bondage—is a recurring paradigm in Christian liberation theologies, including Latin American liberation theology, Black theology, and Minjung theology in South Korea (Gutiérrez [1971] 1973, pp. 159–60; Boff and Boff [1986] 1999, pp. 34–35, 99; Cone [1970] 2010, pp. 48–49; Wielenga 2007, pp. 63–64). The Exodus, however, has been challenged by Indigenous scholars, namely, the Palestinian Edward Said and Native American Robert Warrior (Said 1986, p. 91; Warrior 1989, p. 262), who point to the *other* side of the narrative: the Israelite entry into the land of Canaan and the subsequent massacre of its Indigenous population. Said and Warrior naturally dis-identify with the invading Israelites and, instead, read the narrative with “Canaanite eyes” (Ibid.). Through their critical intervention, the preferential theology of the Exodus paradigm is problematised, as the God of the oppressed in Egypt effectively transforms into the God of the oppressor in Canaan. The Old Testament narrative has a number of texts in which God explicitly orders the destruction of the local Canaanites (Deut. 7:1 and 20:16), and the Book of Joshua relates various atrocities perpetrated against the Indigenous population, such as the destruction of the city of Jericho and its people (Josh. 6:21–24).

But is this simply a Christian theological discussion? Do the “Canaanite” criticisms of Warrior and Said only apply to Latin American liberation theology or Minjung theology, and not to Islamic liberation theology as well? My previous work—“The Qur’an, the Bible, and the Indigenous Peoples of Canaan: An Anti-Colonial Muslim Reading” (Rahemtulla 2020)—has put Warrior’s and Said’s interventions into conversation with the Islamic tradition. The Exodus, after all, also plays a prominent role in ILT, such as in Farid Esack’s *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Esack 1997), which focuses on the South African apartheid context. The African American Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson even prefaces his two books on Black theology—*Islam and the Black American: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Jackson 2005) and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Jackson 2009)—with Q. 28:5, which refers to the Exodus and God’s preferential option for the oppressed. Hence, given the importance of this paradigm for Muslim liberationists, I ask if the same colonial problematic also applies to the Islamic account of the Exodus: “Does the Qur’anic account mirror the biblical one? Did a mass genocide take place and, if so, was this a result of divine sanction?” (Ibid., p. 215).

Through close textual analysis, I show that while Warrior’s and Said’s critiques can indeed be levelled against the millennium-old Qur’anic commentarial tradition (*tafsir*), the Qur’anic account itself does not have genocidal content and can be cogently reconciled with decolonial politics and a commitment to Indigenous rights. Drawing on eight major *tafsir* works spread across the pre-modern and modern tradition—including those of Abu Ja’far al-Tabari (d. 923), Isma’il ibn Kathir (d. 1373), Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli (d. 1459), Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), and Abul ‘Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979)—I demonstrate that the commentarial tradition not only mirrors the biblical account, but openly draws on it. For example, al-Tabari, arguably the most influential figure in the commentarial tradition, portrays the Israelite encounter with the Canaanites in a violent, genocidal manner, and one that is divinely sanctioned. For “the command of God” (*amr Allah*), to quote al-Tabari, was “to fight the mighty people” (*qital al-jabbarrin*) and “to attack them in their land” (*wa hujumihim ‘alayhim fi ardihih*) (al-Tabari, as cited in Rahemtulla 2020, p. 224). Al-Tabari, by his own self-admission, draws on the scriptures of “the People of the Torah”, that is, the Old Testament, to inform his understanding of the Qur’anic account (Al-Tabari, as cited in Ibid., p. 228). Furthermore, other influential commentators, such as Ibn Kathir, al-Mahalli, and al-Suyuti, also reproduce violent, pro-war readings and, in the contemporary period, Mawdudi even goes so far as to include extensive, direct quotations from the Book of Numbers (Ibid., p. 225).

In contrast to the *tafsir* tradition, the Qur’anic account does not license violence against the people of the land. Rather than offering a detailed narrative, the Qur’anic account is comprised of two “snapshots”: (a) the initial Israelite encounter—post-Exodus but before the Wilderness years—with the borders of Canaan (Q. 5:20–26) and (b) the second Israelite

encounter with the land, which takes place after the Wilderness years (Q. 2:58–59 and 7:161–62). Significantly, the divine command to the Israelites in both snapshots (Q. 5:20–26 and 2:58–9) is simply “enter” (the imperative *udkhul*), with the word “entrance” (*dukhul*) being used in a variety of grammatical forms in the text. Moreover, the possibility of fighting (*qital*) is actually introduced by the Israelites, not by God or Moses. That is, the Israelites assume that entrance (*dukhul*) into the land must necessarily entail combat (*qital*), but the Qur’anic text itself does not make any such assumption (Ibid., p. 223). Nor does the Qur’an presume a binary “either/or” territorial logic: that only one people (a conquering, victorious people) can live on the land, at the expense of a vanquished Other (Ibid.). Within the Qur’anic account, it is entirely plausible for both peoples—the Canaanites as the respected Indigenous inhabitants, the Israelites as refugees fleeing Pharaonic Egypt—to co-inhabit the land. In terms of Q. 7:161–62, which is part of the second snapshot, the verb “to live” or “to dwell” (*sakana*) is used, and neither “entrance” nor “dwelling” carry explicit connotations of violence. They can, of course, be interpreted violently, and indeed have been so by Muslim exegetes for over a millennium, but there is a crucial difference between reading violence into a text and the language of the text itself explicitly using violent terms, as in the case of the Old Testament narrative.

I think my findings are significant not because they *prove* that the Qur’an is morally superior to the Bible (as a liberation theologian committed to religious pluralism, I have little interest in such polemics) but because they vividly demonstrate the lasting, discursive effects of Muslim empire on the *tafsir* tradition and, by extension, on the Islamic intellectual tradition as a whole. Is it mere coincidence, after all, that the Qur’an has a non-colonial account of Canaan and is itself a pre-colonial text? Recall that the Qur’anic revelations ended with the Prophet’s death in 632, well before the Arab conquests took off. Empire, therefore, was not the immediate, historical backdrop of the Qur’an. In contrast, this was precisely the socio-political milieu in which the Islamic intellectual tradition emerged, took shape, solidified. The *tafsir* tradition certainly drew on biblical literature (*isra’iliyat*) in general, but the question, I ask, is why in this particular case—that is, why did the conquest story in the Old Testament *appeal* to Qur’anic commentators in the way that it did? What was it about the Conquest of Canaan, as a gripping narrative of warfare, invasion, imperial victory, and land acquisition that Muslim exegetes, especially pre-modern exegetes, could relate to? The wider historical backdrop of Muslim empire and the enduring legacy of Umayyad empire in particular, I believe, is key to understanding the hermeneutical appeal of this narrative. This is what it means to decolonise the Islamic tradition.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to chart out new decolonial futures for Islamic liberation theology by placing it in conversation with Indigenous rights and land struggles, focusing on the Canadian context. While ILT, like contemporary Islamic thought in general, has been shaped by (resistance to) Western empire, scant attention has been paid to systems of colonial power in which Muslims are not the occupied but are themselves, as settler migrants, complicit in the continued dispossession of native lands and peoples. Indeed, despite the extensive scholarly attention that Islam in North America has received, surprisingly little has recognised and addressed the ethical implications of being a migrant settler community living on (off) stolen land and calling it “home”. The question, then, is how can we decolonise Islam in the settler colony, in which Muslims themselves are implicated in the continued settlement of the land? That is, how can Muslims address their complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that liberating praxis? In this paper, I have argued that decolonising Islam entails three hermeneutical steps, of which “theological” work is actually the last: (I) gaining a critical understanding of the socio-historical context, namely, the long history of empire on the land and its lasting impact on Indigenous peoples; (II) (re)positioning Muslims within that colonial history by dismantling the ontological divide between “migrant” and “settler”, as such a distinction

serves to release Muslims, and migrants in general, of responsibility and accountability; and (III), in light of the first two steps, engaging in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition and its complex history. This final theological step, I have argued, is a two-fold dynamic, for Islam has a complex historical relationship to empire, operating as both a radical subject that decolonises (the modern history of Islam *under* empire) and a problematic object requiring decolonisation (the pre-modern and early modern history of Islam *as* empire).

At the beginning of this article, I acknowledged that the project of decolonising Islam is a considerable one, entailing a collective, multi-disciplinary undertaking. My objective in this article has simply been to start a conversation in Islamic studies which, I believe, should have begun a very long time ago. And in this spirit, I concluded by giving a concrete example of what decolonisation might look like in the field of Qur’anic studies, revisiting the Conquest of Canaan narrative with an eye to Indigenous rights and liberation. What might similar decolonising efforts look like in the discipline of Islamic law—how, for instance, were the juristic categories of “property” and “private ownership” developed over the course of the Islamic conquests?—or in hadith and sira (prophetic reports and biography), or even in the mystical tradition? After all, while Sufi tariqas (orders) have certainly received patronage from the state, and while Sufism is often touted in the public sphere as a “neutral” and “good” Islam,<sup>11</sup> tariqas also played a pioneering historical role in mobilising anti-colonial resistance to European armies. This is a radical history that needs to be unearthed and accented. In sum, this article is a provocation—an invitation addressed specifically (though not exclusively) to Muslims living in settler colonies to theologically confront the problem of empire, to wrestle with their own positionality within it, and to do so across the full, disciplinary spectrum of the millennium-old Islamic tradition.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While not identifying as a study of liberation theology per se, there has been extensive scholarship on political Islam in Palestine, seeking to contextualise Hamas as a popular resistance movement against the Israeli occupation, as opposed to being a “terrorist organization”. See, among others: Gunning (2007), Hroub (2000, [2006] 2010), Roy (2011) and Ababneh (2014). There is also significant work on Christian liberation theology in Palestine, such as Ateek (1989), Raheb (2012, 2014), and Kuruvilla (2013).
- <sup>2</sup> I draw on John Gerring’s instrumentalist understanding of the case study approach, which he defines as “an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units” (Gerring 2004, p. 341). In terms of this paper, the broader set of units would refer to settler colonies in general that have significant Muslim migrant populations.
- <sup>3</sup> The case of African Americans, as the descendants of slaves forcibly shipped to the Americas, as well as the category of refugees and asylum seekers, are more complex.
- <sup>4</sup> I define decolonisation comprehensively, as both a material struggle against colonial systems and structures (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 28) and, just as importantly, a wider discursive project that resists the universal hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, pp. 1–2), charting out new ways of thinking and being.
- <sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that the word “stewardship” is often used to describe Indigenous *relations to the land*, which is treated as a living, breathing entity, as a fellow partner in life, rather than a capitalist-inflected discourse of *ownership over* the land, and thus something inanimate—dead—that can be commodified, bought, exchanged.
- <sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Siavash Saffari for pointing out the Hamdon family’s commercial ventures.



- 7 The postcolonial scholars Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright wrote a response—“Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States”—which challenged Lawrence’s and Dua’s arguments (Sharma and Wright 2008–2009). This exchange set off a heated debate within postcolonial circles. The contours of that complex debate, however, lie outside the scope of this article.
- 8 The reasons for this disparity, indeed contradiction, between educational credentials and employment status are complex. One reason is the fact that the educational qualifications of first-generation migrants are routinely ignored and dismissed within the Canadian labour market. This leads to now ubiquitous scenarios in which taxi drivers and Walmart employees were, back in their countries of origin, highly trained engineers and physicians.
- 9 While Said’s and Warrior’s critiques emerged quite close to each other (1986 and 1989, respectively), it is important to note that they are addressing very different audiences. Said (1986) is criticizing the American political theorist Michael Walzer and his book *Exodus and Revolution* (1985), which selectively represents the Exodus as a “paradigm of revolutionary politics” (Walzer 1985, p. 7). Far from being revolutionary himself, Walzer is a major status-quo figure and a supporter of the State of Israel and its occupation of Palestine. For an analysis of the Said-Walzer exchange, see (Veracini 2023). Warrior, on the other hand, is addressing Christian liberation theologians, particularly Latin American and Black theologians, and thus kindred spirits—comrades—in progressive politics.
- 10 Someone who was sharply mindful of the legacy of empire was the Iranian revolutionary Ali Shar’iati (d. 1977), although his argument engaged a much earlier timeframe, from pre-empire (that is, the Prophet’s time) to the Muslim imperial period. Shar’iati famously distinguished between “Red Shi’ism” and “Black Shi’ism,” the former being the protest-oriented religion of the Prophet’s family (*ahl al-bayt*), the latter reflecting the institutionalisation of Shi’ism, under the Safavid Empire, as a religion of “the Palace” (Shar’iati n.d., p. 10). Interestingly, Shar’iati made a similar, and lesser-known, distinction between an insurrectionary “Muhammadi Sunnism” (that is, Sunni Islam during the Prophet’s life) and a reactionary “Umayyad Sunnism” (Rahnema 2000, p. 301). I thank Saffari for pointing out these hermeneutical parallels in Shar’iati’s thought.
- 11 Sufism (the Anglicised form of the Arabic *tasawwuf*) refers to the Islamic mystical tradition.

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