Article

Muslim, Not Supermuslim: A Critique of Islamicate Transhumanism†

Syed Mustafa Ali

School of Computing and Communications, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK; s.m.ali@open.ac.uk
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Abstract: Informed by ideas drawn from critical race theory and decolonial thought, in this paper, I mount a critique of Roy Jackson’s proposal for an Islamicate philosophical and theological contribution to the Transhumanist goal of forging a posthuman successor to humanity. My principal concern is to draw attention to the assimilatory nature and status of Islamicate Transhumanism within the broader context of Transhumanism, understood as a technological articulation and refinement of global white supremacy in a technoscientific register.

Keywords: Transhumanism; racism; white supremacy; critical race theory; decolonial thought; Sufism; Islam; Islamicate

1. Introduction

For over a decade and a half, there has been a mounting body of literature exploring the relationship between various religious traditions and the contemporary phenomenon known as Transhumanism, although precedents go back somewhat further. Most such explorations tend to assume the form of contributions to collections and include those edited by Tiros-Samuelson and Mossman (2011), Sorgner and Jovanovic (2013), Mercer and Maher (2014), Mercer and Trothen (2015), and Trothen and Mercer (2017), among others. Importantly, with the exception of two essays appearing in these collections—those of Mahootian (2011) and Mavani (2014)—and a few more recent articles by Mobayed (2017), Hijazi (2019), Ferrero (2022), and Al-Kassimi (2023), all of which engage with Transhumanism from various Muslim, Islamic, and Islamicate perspectives, the bulk of such literature tends to focus on other traditions—specifically, Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist. It is for this reason that Roy Jackson’s Muslim and Supermuslim: The Quest for the Perfect Being and Beyond (2020), a book-length work that attempts to set out the case for an Islamicate philosophical and theological contribution to the Transhumanist goal of forging a posthuman successor to humanity—a project which he frames in terms of the progressive transformation of the Muslim into what he refers to as the ‘Supermuslim’—warrants attention and critical interrogation.

Building on earlier work interrogating Transhumanism through lenses of critical race and decolonial theory (Ali 2019a, 2021b), in what follows, I mount a critique of Jackson’s project with a view to drawing attention to the assimilatory nature of Islamicate Transhumanism within the broader context of Transhumanism, understood as a technological articulation of white supremacy.

To motivate my critique, I need to begin by briefly explaining what is meant by ‘Transhumanism’ and describe who the Transhumanists are in terms of their demographic constitution and where they tend to be located within the modern/colonial world system.
2. Transhumanism

According to its proponents, Transhumanism is a scientific and philosophical movement informed by yet extending European Renaissance and 18th century Enlightenment commitments to rational humanism and scientific empiricism aimed at transforming—that is, progressively enhancing and transcending—human beings through the deployment of convergent developments within technoscience, specifically those associated with so-called GRIN/NBICS technologies. Crucially, philosopher Nick Bostrom maintains that “the ‘transhuman’ refers to an intermediary form between the human and the posthuman [emphasis added],” the latter designating “possible future beings whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards.” (Bostrom 2014, pp. 3–4). Statements such as these have led some commentators to suggest that Transhumanism’s concern is not with enhancing or perfecting man as he currently exists but rather with the pursuit of constructing “a new race” (Sombetzki 2016, p. 173), the emergence of the latter constituting what has been referred to as a technological ‘Singularity’ wherein mind is ‘virtualised’ (that is, rendered into information) and uploaded to a technological substrate, thereby attaining immortality.

3. Transhumanist Demographics

As to the demographic constitution of the Transhumanist movement in terms of its racial composition, a survey conducted by Pellissier and Dal Santo (2013) presented some interesting statistics regarding the ‘ethnic’ self-classification of Transhumanists, viz. 85.4% white, 3.3% Asian, 1.0% black and 10.0% multiple races. Further evidence of the whiteness of Transhumanism is readily provided by quantitative analysis of the demographics of leading Transhumanist organisations such as the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) and Singularity University (SU)—in 2017, 82% of faculty speakers were identifiable as white. In short, and notwithstanding the international nature of Transhumanism, it is empirically demonstrable on demographic grounds, both quantitative and qualitative, that Transhumanism is hegemonically white, male, and ‘Western’ (Euro-American), with non-white advocacy of Transhumanist ideas—for example, by postcolonial proponents located within India, a former periphery in the modern/colonial world system (Geraci 2018)—constituting the exception that proves the rule—and moreover exceptions that are perhaps better understood as regional dialects within a global language of white Transhumanism (Ali 2021a).

4. Transhumanism and the Modern/Colonial World System

While it might be argued that the whiteness and Western-ness (and maleness) of the Transhumanists is insufficient in terms of determining the body-political and geopolitical orientation of its proponents, I want to suggest that thinking about Transhumanism and whiteness, as well as reframing Transhumanism as whiteness, in relation to historical processes of re-articulation of the latter (that is, whiteness), enables us to theoretically and better understand how Transhumanism can—and arguably does—function as a techno-scientific articulation of whiteness during a period of ‘White Crisis’ wherein white supremacy is subject to increasing contestation by its historically subordinated ‘others’. On my reading, it is precisely such a crisis that contributes to engendering what I have referred to elsewhere as the ‘algorithmic’ transformation of humanism into posthumanism via Transhumanism as iterative shifts within the historically sedimented onto-logic of Eurocentric racialization—shifts that are engineered to maintain structurally asymmetric power relations between the (formerly) human (as white, Western, male, etc.) and the subaltern, sub-human ‘other’. I suggest that the contemporary moment is marked by a relational shift from the distinction between sub-human (non-European, non-white) and human (European, white) to that between human (non-European, non-white) and Transhuman (European, white), such a shift being prompted, at least partly, by various non-European/non-white contestations of Eurocentric/West-centric/white-centric conceptions of the human (Ali 2019a, 2021b).
5. Critique

Informed by the above framing of Transhumanism as an articulation of political whiteness, in what follows I question—and more precisely, critically interrogate—Jackson’s Muslim and Supermuslim (Jackson 2020), along various lines, with a view to effecting a disavowal of his project, and emphatically asserting ‘Muslim, Not Supermuslim’. I suggest that from a perspective informed by critical race theory and decolonial thought (among other currents such as Sufism), a close reading of Jackson’s text readily evinces that it constitutes a project of assimilation into a hegemonically white Transhumanism, irrespective of whether this was intended or otherwise.

5.1. Assimilation

Regarding the specific issue of assimilation, it should be noted that, at the very outset, Jackson’s concern is to make the case for an Islamicate contribution to Transhumanist debate on the future of the human (p. 2), since in his view, “Islam, for its part, can and should be playing a key role in engaging and helping to determine [the Transhumanist] future.” (p. 175) In this connection, Jackson offers the following four “suggested Affirmations for a future Muslim Transhumanist Association: (1) We believe that the purpose of Islam involves the revival (ihya) and renewal (tajdid) of creation, including humanity, and that we should work towards the elimination of pain and suffering, poverty, injustice, and death; (2) We seek growth and progress along every dimension of our humanity, whether this is spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and at all levels; individual, communal, social, and global; (3) We understand that the Islamic tradition is compatible with and complementary to many cultures, religions, and philosophies that likewise seek transformation and renewal of creation; and (4) We believe that the intentional use of technology will empower us to transcend our current state and move towards perfectibility, guided by the example of the Prophet Muhammad as the Perfect Human (insan al-Kamil).” (pp. 175–76).

For Jackson, however, Muslims have thus far contributed ‘very little’ due to what he views as ‘the problem’ of engaging with Transhumanism via “the prescriptive paradigmatic religious sources of, primarily, the Qur’an, and its kin, the hadith and shari’a.” (p. 5). Setting aside the issue of normativity vis-à-vis prior Muslim engagements with Transhumanism that involve the mobilisation of religious texts, not to mention Jackson’s failure to cite, let alone engage with, the work of scholars such as Mahootian (2011), who have advanced an extra-textual critique of Transhumanism from a Sufi (more specifically, Illuminationist/Ishrāqi) perspective, there is a need to inquire as to what extent a focus on an Islamicate contribution to Transhumanism constitutes an attempt to domesticate and assimilate the Islamicate to a hegemonically Western if not white supremacist technocentric project. In this connection, consider Jackson’s plea that “we want Islam to be taken seriously.” (pp. 25–26). Who is this ‘we’? And even if this ‘we’ refers to Muslims, who are these Muslims attempting to be taken seriously by if not Transhumanists?

Yet, Jackson’s stance regarding Muslim engagement with Transhumanism appears contradictory since, in addition to the assertion that they have contributed ‘very little’ in this regard, he maintains that “in many ways Islam has, through most of its history, been involved in one way or another in the transhumanist debate, whilst it may not specifically use the term ‘transhumanism’ or understand it in the stricter sense that secular transhumanists are seeking to define it.” (pp. 9–10). Might it not be argued that Jackson appears to be bending over backwards to forge a link between Islamicate tradition and Transhumanism here through anachronistic projection? To what extent is he so broadening the idea of Transhumanism beyond its technological rationalist and scientific empiricist underpinnings to effect the contributory assimilation of Islam to this project that he ends up doing violence to both Islam and Transhumanism, notwithstanding anti-essentialist conceptualisations of both phenomena? For example, Jackson understands Transhumanism in terms of “paradigm-shifting technology that gets to the very nature of what it means to be human” (p. 72), yet reference to GRIN/NBICS technologies are notable by their absence from his framing. Rather, Jackson conceives Transhumanism simply—and rather abstractly—in
terms of two characteristics, viz. “firstly, the ‘endless capacity for self-transcendence’, with the emphasis, for me, on ‘endless’. Secondly, our ‘god-like’ character.” (p. 10). Why these should be characteristics of Transhumanism rather than some other phenomenon (such as Sufism) remains unclear.

5.2. Transcendence

Regarding transcendence, Jackson invites us to consider “the ‘trans’ element of transhumanism in terms of ‘surpassing’ or ‘going beyond’ human boundaries and, indeed, whether there are such boundaries.” (p. 6). In his view, it is open to question as to “how far human beings can go before they ‘transgress’ the borders and, for that matter, the extent to which such borders exist and can be disputed. The Latin adjective ‘trans’, in terms of ‘crossing’, ‘going beyond’, ‘surpassing’, and so on is key here if we are to determine what the boundaries are and, therefore, the extent to which humankind can and should ‘cross’ these boundaries.” (p. 63). In this connection, it is crucial to appreciate that for Jackson, such boundaries are to be understood primarily in theological terms, yet it is unclear whether his framing of transcendence engages the latter in terms of ascent within a metaphysical hierarchy. Resolving this ambiguity is important insofar as shifting the analytical and interpretative frame (and lens) from theology to political theology invites a rethinking of transcendence in terms of its entanglement with the political. Given the entanglement of race and religion, and what decolonial theorist Lewis Gordon (2013) refers to as the ‘theodicean grammar of race’—that is, a vertical hierarchy established between those in the zone of being (plentitude, whiteness, Europeanness, humanity) and those in the zone of non-being (lack, blackness, non-Europeaness, sub-humanity), shifting to a political theological reading of transcendence points to understanding Transhumanism in terms of the transformation of a hierarchy between those self-classifying as human and classifying others as sub-human into a hierarchy between the Transhuman and the human with a view to maintaining asymmetric power relations (Ali 2019a, 2021b).

5.3. ‘Man’, Coloniality, and the ‘Clash of Civilisations’

In attempting to make the case for transitioning from the Muslim to the Supermuslim, Jackson offers a brief commentary on a play by George Bernard Shaw exploring progressivist themes, viz. ‘Man and Superman’. According to Jackson, ‘Man’ is a gender-neutral term, and moreover one that he suggests “can readily be substituted for ‘Muslim’” since, in his view, “one is synonymous with the other.” (p. 2). But what of the figure of ‘Man’ interrogated by Foucault and other critical theorists along various lines (race, class, gender, etc.) and decolonially extended by Wynter (2003), viz. as the secular or ‘de-godded’ biopolitically conceived European human? Jackson appears oblivious to the racialised (classed, gendered) nature of the term ‘Man’, yet this is perhaps unsurprising given that apart from a single quote from philosopher Nick Bostrom referring to diversity in relation to ‘races’, there is a marked absence of engagement with race, racism and/or racialisation in Muslim and Supermuslim, Jackson’s lens being philosophy of religion, which, I suggest, is deeply problematic given the entanglement of race and religion referred to previously.

Regarding his indebtedness to Bostrom, it should be noted that Jackson draws upon arguments advanced by the latter with a view to asserting that the ‘derivative value’ of “religious belief [within Transhumanism] is not precluded and a recognition of diversity, including religious, is stated.” (p. 12). Granted, yet to the extent that religious belief is considered derivative rather than foundational suggests a certain secular domestication and subordinate status of the religious. Furthermore, the ‘core value’ of Transhumanism is stated to be as follows: “Having the opportunity to explore the transhuman and posthuman realms”, its basic conditions being ‘global security’ and ‘wide access’ to ‘technological progress’. But what is ‘global security’ if not the maintenance of the modern/colonial regime of power relationships? In addition, ‘wide access’ neither entails equitable access nor does it engage with the question as to whether such access is desirable in and of itself. Relatedly, to what extent does the invocation of ‘diversity’ by both Bostrom and Jackson
amount to little more than a liberal conceit masking the reality of asymmetric—that is, differential—power in the modern/colonial world system? Put simply, diversity neither entails nor is equivalent to decolonisation.

Crucially, Jackson’s advocacy of ‘wide access’ and ‘global security’ is framed in terms of the notorious ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis originally articulated by Orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis and expanded upon by political theorist Samuel Huntington. According to Jackson, “we must steer away from the presumed ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis” (p. 6), which he reframes in terms of “Islam rejecting entirely transhumanism, and transhumanism rejecting Islam.” (p. 14). But are Islam and Transhumanism civilisations, and why is the clash of civilizations a ‘danger’ rather than, as I have suggested elsewhere, an unfortunate existential reality given the ostensible backdrop of ‘White Crisis’ against which the Transhumanist project continues to unfold (Ali 2019a, 2021b)?

5.4. Textuality and Liberalism

Returning to the ‘problem’ of Muslim engagement with Transhumanism, viz. that it prioritises the prescriptive nature of paradigmatic religious sources (specifically, texts such as The Qur’an, hadith, etc.), Jackson attempts to make the case for an Islamicate Transhumanism by asserting the priority of the extra-textual over the textual. In this connection, he appeals to the late Shahab Ahmed’s What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic (Ahmed 2016)—specifically, what he sees as Ahmed’s “creative and explorative explication of Islamic sources which are all too often ignored (by Muslims and non-Muslims alike), yet . . . provide so much guidance in terms of meaning and value.” (p. 5)

On this basis, I suggest the need to consider what political and ethical work is performed by Ahmed’s (and Jackson’s) ‘bracketing’ of prescriptive/normative Islam as set out in the opening lines of What is Islam? and his (their) valorisation of a purely historical, ‘lived’ approach to the Islamic. Put simply, what political motivations underpin Ahmed’s (and Jackson’s) project? For example, to what extent might the latter turn about a tacit commitment to liberalism, and what might be entailed by embracing such an orientation given what Charles W. Mills (2008) has referred to as the illiberalism of racialised liberalism under global white supremacy? For this reason, and once again, contra Jackson, I suggest the desirability, if not necessity, of engaging with political theology, rather than with theology per se.

5.5. Transhumanism, Islamicate Modernism, and Iqbal

Consistent with this ostensible commitment to liberalism, Jackson suggests that Islam became reified under the impact of 19th century responses to colonial rule articulated by those he describes as modernists, such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (p. 69), a project that reached its culmination in the “all-encompassing ideology” (p. 75) espoused by Abul-A’la Mawududi. The poet philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, in contrast, is viewed in a much more positive light for his “trust in the individual’s ability to assert his or her own creative power or ‘will-to-power’”, and “confidence that Muslims are able to take on individual responsibility . . . Iqbal’s concept of the khudi [being] one that seemingly emerges in an evolutionary manner, rather like Nietzsche’s Übermensch [emphases added].” (p. 77)

In this connection, Jackson asserts that “Iqbal’s self, or ego (sticking, as Iqbal does, to the strict Persian term of khudi), is not annihilation, but greater individuation. This has interesting parallels with the distinctions … between transhumanism and posthumanism: the former in which the self remains
but is ‘enhanced’ so as to be God-like, whilst in the latter, human identity is effectively ‘annihilated’ like fana.” (p. 162)\(^{28}\).

5.6. Transhuman—Islamicate Parallels

In addition to Iqbal, Jackson attempts to draw parallels between Transhumanist ideas and ideas “in the works of important Muslim thinkers such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd . . . and Rumi”, although for him, “Iqbal presents a paradigm that resonates with the vision of transhumanism” (p. 7); furthermore, he invites us to “see what Islam can contribute to the transhumanist table in its explorative sense. We may have a copy of the Qur’an on the table, but also Rumi’s Masnavi, Muhammad Iqbal’s poetry and philosophy, Ibn Tufayl’s philosophical fiction, Maimonides’ Guide for The Perplexed, Ibn Rushd’s commentary on Aristotle/Aristu, the writing of Muslim scientists such as Mehdi Golshani, Mohammed Basil Altaie, Bruno Guiderdoni, Nidhal Guessoum, and so on. Here we will see that Islam does not prescribe, it does not say what is forbidden and what is allowed, but it reveals, through its generations of creativity, what it means to be human and, as a consequence, what it means to be transhuman.” (p. 35). Notwithstanding concerns about ‘textual fundamentalism’, I suggest there is a not-so-veiled attempt to decentre The Qur’an and marginalise normativity in favour of a valorised liberal commitment to creativity at work here, one that is human-all-too-human with a view to becoming Transhuman-all-too-Transhuman. Regarding the matter of parallels between Transhumanist ideas and those articulated by Muslim thinkers, it is important to consider to what extent the construction of such ‘parallels’ erases difference through anachronistic erasure of embedding context and worldview, effected from a West-centric perspective with a view to domesticating the ‘Other’-ed. Appeal to—and perhaps from a critical race theoretical and/or decolonial perspective this might be better understood as an instance of appropriation—non-European cultural and discursive precedents is common in Transhumanist writings; consider, for example, Hughes’ (2012) assertion that “Transhumanism is a modern expression of ancient and transcultural aspirations to radically transform human existence, socially and bodily”, notwithstanding his insistence that “the transhumanist movement [is] a modern form of Enlightenment techno-utopianism [emphasis added]” (p. 757).

5.7. Transhumanism, Iqbal, and Nietzsche

Returning to Iqbal, various problems surface in Jackson’s attempt to extrapolate from the thinking of the former to liberal individualism vis à vis an embrace of Transhumanism via the assimilation of Iqbal to Nietzsche: first, Nietzsche’s relationship to Transhumanism is highly contested, with various commentators questioning the assimilation of the figure of the Overman/Übermensch to the Transhuman\(^{29}\); second, to assimilate Iqbal to Nietzsche selectively and reductively obscures the former’s engagement with other Western philosophical figures including Bergson and Whitehead (Ruzgar 2008)\(^{30}\); third, and relatedly, Iqbal’s reconstructionist position vis à vis Islamic(ate) thought has recourse to both these philosophical currents, Western and Islamicate; finally, there is Nietzsche’s problematic endorsement of race hierarchy (Conway 2002), which I suggest would be emphatically rejected by Iqbal, an endorsement of which Jackson remains notably silent. This is significant in relation to the argument developed in earlier works (Ali 2019a, 2021b) and reiterated herein, viz. that Transhumanism (and technological posthumanism) should be interpreted as racialised colonial shifts about the line of the human.

Yet even if one accepts Jackson’s reductive pairing of Iqbal and Nietzsche in asserting that “Iqbal’s Perfect Human or insān al-Kamil and Nietzsche’s Übermensch are paradigms of human transformation towards a ‘better human’” (p. 166)\(^{31}\), does this justify his holding that “Iqbal presents a paradigm that resonates with the vision of transhumanism [insofar as] Iqbal’s Perfect Human, Nietzsche’s Übermensch or ‘Overhuman’, and the Transhuman meet” (p. 163)\(^{32}\). Ironically, Jackson himself appears to cast doubts on the validity of such a resonance, evidenced by his asking “am I pushing the analogies with Nietzsche, Iqbal, and Rumi too far in relation to the transhumanist debate?” (p. 167). For my part, the answer
to that question is in the affirmative, yet the more important question is ‘Why is Jackson doing this?’ According to Jackson, pushing such analogies appears to be necessary because, on his reading, the advent of the cyborg is inevitable for various reasons, including the need to adapt to a radically changed environmental landscape following the onset of the Anthropocene (or rather, Eurocene). To what extent does this line of argument turn on a tacit embrace of a variant of technological determinism, entangled with a ‘tech solutionist’ orientation to an ‘existential threat’—specifically, climate change—that might be deflecting focus away from other entangled developments including the re-emergence of the phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’—that is, perceived threat to white supremacy under mounting contestation from the non-white ‘other’?

5.8. Transhumanism and Divinization

Finally, I want to turn to Jackson’s engagement with Iqbal in relation to the former’s assertion that “Iqbal’s concept of the self is a form of self-divination . . . there is no hesitancy in striving to be God-like, and this is the ultimate concept of the self as insān al-Kamil, the Perfect Human.” (p. 163) While Jackson is correct to point to Iqbal’s invocation (and possible reformulation) of the insān al-Kamil, I want to question Jackson’s suggestion that the Islamicate Perfect Human be understood as the technological Transhuman. Consistent with Mahootian (2011), yet arguing from alternative Sufi perspectives, various Muslim commentators point to the inward (bātin) as the site of human transformation, notwithstanding the connection between such transformation and outward (dhāhīr) action, and irrespective of whether the locus seeking perfection is identified as consciousness or the heart (qalb). As Ferrero states, “in Islam, spiritual realization entails overcoming the individual’s consciousness and the progressive purification of the individual with respect to the only reality of God . . . [By contrast] what is now called transhumanism is moved by another spirit.” (p. 216).

Regarding this ‘other spirit’, it is crucial to appreciate that, for Jackson, “the Cartesian [that is, dualist] notion of the human . . . is closer to the transhumanist view: the human is not to be ‘reduced’ to the mechanical, but to be ‘expanded’ to the God-like, to acquire God’s point of view, or ‘theomimesis’ as [Steve] Fuller calls it”. In his view, “Descartes’ cogito ergo sum . . . can be regarded as ‘the first modern secularization of the theomimetic moment’” and Jackson insists that “such a notion of theomimesis, although under different names, is evident in Islam too.” (p. 121). To what extent is Jackson here conflating Islamic philosophical and theological notions of ‘theosis’ (ta-alluh)—or becoming ‘God-like’—articulated by figures such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and a fortiori by Muhiyuddin ibn ‘Arabi with Cartesian theomimesis? In this connection, Ogunnaike (2016) points out that the Cartesian cogito must be understood in terms of rationality, whereas theosis in the pre-Cartesian Islamicate tradition is associated with the intellect—and these are not identical. Going further, to what extent is Jackson attempting to assimilate Islamicate approaches to theosis to the Transhumanist project by conflating the former with technophilic conceptions of Divinization arguably traceable to transformations in the relationship to technology within Western Christianity from the 12th century CE onwards? Regarding the latter, Noble (1997) argues that the embrace of technology, persisting and intensifying through the colonial era and European Enlightenment into technocentric modernity, was theo-politically driven by two concerns: first, to recover an alleged ‘prelapsarian’ Adamic state of perfection following ‘The Fall’, and second, to facilitate the war against the Antichrist, which was often, though not exclusively, identified as either the Prophet Muhammad himself or Muslims more generally. Once again, given such theo-political entanglements, there is a need to interrogate whether framing the issue of possible Islamicate contribution to Transhumanism in philosophical and theological terms occludes other entanglements and framings—specifically, those that are political theological in nature and thoroughly racialized.
6. Conclusions

In conclusion, and consolidating the above lines of argument, I want like to re-iterate my disavowal of a proposed shift from the Muslim to the SuperMuslim. Insofar as Transhumanism can—and, I suggest, should—be understood as a technologically driven religio-racial project aimed at maintaining, expanding, and refining Western, white supremacist hegemony under non-Western contestation, and what appears to be an attempt on Jackson’s part to domesticate and assimilate Islam to the unfinished project of modernity, which, following the argument of decolonial scholars, must also be understood as the ongoing project of coloniality⁴⁰, its encroachment must be resisted on decolonial and critical race theoretical grounds consistent with aspirations toward Islamicate futures, technological and otherwise.

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Notes

1. Albeit a little dated, Steinhart’s (2010) ‘Transhumanism and Religion Bibliography’ traces the earliest instance of such a work to Barrow and Tipler’s _The Anthropic Cosmological Principle_ (1986). It should be noted that Steinhart’s bibliography is restricted to peer-reviewed scholarly articles and/or monographs and with a specific focus on theological rather than ethical concerns.

2. Notwithstanding concerns about the applicability of the category ‘religion’ to non-Christian traditions (including Islam), and Ahmed’s (2016) extended engagement with and critique of Hodgson’s schematic distinctions between Islam, Islamdom, the Islamic, and the Islamicate, I follow Hodgson’s framing of the ‘Islamicate’ as “a culture, centred on a lettered-tradition … which has been naturally shared in by both Muslims and non-Muslims”, and his restricting the ‘Islamic’ to that “pertaining to Islam in the proper, the religious sense.” (Hodgson 1974, pp. 57–59). On this framing, the Islamicate (as culture, civilisation, etc.) encompasses the Islamic (as religion, faith, etc.) Where I differ with Hodgson is in his tying the Islamicate to ‘Islamdom’, that is, “the society in which Muslims and their faith is recognized as prevalent and socially dominant in one sense or another [emphasis added].” (Hodgson 1974, pp. 57–59) Against this, and as argued elsewhere, I suggest that under postcolonial conditions of Muslim diaspora, the Islamicate has expanded beyond its pre-colonial geographical confines such that it is now globally diffuse (Ali 2019b).

3. This work should be viewed as a contribution to my ongoing project of exploring the entangled relationship between technoscientific conceptions of the posthuman, Transhumanism, and the phenomenon of whiteness against the background of what is, ostensibly, a contemporary resurfacing—or re-iteration—of the historical phenomenon of ‘White Crisis’ (Ali 2019a, 2021b).

4. On this point, see (Jotterand 2010; Bostrom 2011; Hughes 2012; Ferrando 2013) among others. While endorsing this position, Al-Kassimi (2023) goes somewhat further to suggest that “trans-humanist philosophy is the most logical and coherent consequence of (post)modern philosophy since it is an anti-theist and anti-human movement which seeks a post-human future and accepts as valid different experiments longing for the biological and technological engineering and enhancement of humans [emphasis added].” (p. 9). It is important to note here a certain reductive conflation of postmodernism with its technological—or rather, _techno-centric_—manifestation insofar as at least some _critical_ posthumanists attempt to differentiate their position from technological posthumanism.

5. The acronym GRIN refers to the confluence of genetics, robotics, information technology and nanotechnology in the service of self-directed evolution—that is, enhancement of the human—toward a technocratic future. A related acronym is NBICS which refers to the combined resources of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive science, and synthetic biology.

6. This was the situation in 2017 as determined by a visit to the following website: https://su.org/faculty-speakers/ (accessed on 24 May 2017).

7. Bonnett (2008) points to a certain ‘iterativity’ of whiteness in referring to its ‘re-invention’, “well into the twenty-first century”, pointing out that “the history of whiteness is one of transitions and changes.” (p. 17).

8. As Islam (2014) poignantly remarks, “today’s subaltern is tomorrow’s human or pre-posthuman.” (p. 5).

9. In his own words, “the prime intention of this book . . . is to see what Islam can bring to this ‘Transhumanist Table’.” (p. 22). On his view, “the transhumanist debate is both fascinating and extremely important and, in the future, it is destined to increase in importance with technological change. Islam, for its part, should be a part of this debate, and so here I want to reclaim the debate, to show that others can play the transhumanist game, that the doors to the arena should be open and should welcome
According to Badmington (2003), “there is nothing more terrifying than a posthumanism that claims to be terminating ‘Man’.

Political theology can be—and has been—understood in various ways. For present purposes, one useful point of departure is Ferrero (2022) who invites us to think about how “the theological conceptualizes higher powers engendering, conditioning, and affecting our reality as a whole, while the political deals with rivailing claims and contestations of power within the creaturely realm, and devises norms, structures, and institutions to negotiate them.” (p. 3). On her view, the political “is not the theological, and the theological is not the political. But clearly, the theological is political, and the political is theological.” (p. 4).

In this connection, see (Mavani 2014; Mobayed 2017). For a recent articulation of what amounts to an assimilationist Muslim perspective on Transhumanism based upon rather objectiveist and materially reductive reinterpretations of the human body and an adaptationist reading of the idea of balance (mitzān) within Islamic tradition which fails to consider the external drivers of such adaptation as located in Western political hegemony (albeit under contestation), see (Hijazi 2019).

In addition, even if it is conceded that Transhumanism has religious undercurrents and underpinnings, to suggest that this allows for Islam to be put into conversation with Transhumanism turns about an understanding of Islam that renders it legible in the terms of such religious undercurrents and underpinnings—specifically, those due to strands of Jewish and Christian belief and practice.

The relationship of transcendence to ascension within a metaphysical/onto-theological hierarchy is significant since Ferrero (2022) maintains that Transhumanism results in a flattening collapse of such hierarchy; as she states, “what lies behind transhumanism is . . . a reductionism that dissolves the high into the low, the superior into the inferior, reality into materiality.” (p. 220). Political theology can be—and has been—understood in various ways. For present purposes, one useful point of departure is provided by Reichel (2021) who invites us to think about how “the theological conceptualizes higher powers engendering, conditioning, and affecting our reality as a whole, while the political deals with rivailing claims and contestations of power within the creaturely realm, and devises norms, structures, and institutions to negotiate them.” (p. 3). On her view, the political “is not the theological, and the theological is not the political. But clearly, the theological is political, and the political is theological.” (p. 4).

Crucially, in the context of discussing German jurist and legal theorist Carl Schmitt’s formulation of political theology in terms of sovereignty, Reichel asserts the following: “since sovereignty invariably gestures toward ultimate dimensions, it not only prompted struggle between different conceptualizations of ‘superhuman power,’ but also struggle for supremacy between the respective ultimate authorities of the two participant fields [emphasis added].” (p. 6). Although this struggle is framed in conceptual terms and within the context of a particular tradition, viz. Western Christianity, I suggest it invites thinking about theopolitical struggle otherwise—more specifically, in decolonial and critical race theoretical terms—and hence the relevance, if not appositeness, of shifting frame from theology to political theology.

According to Lloyd (2013), “race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in modernity, or in the colonial encounter [such that] religion and race is not just another token of the type ‘religion and,’ not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, every study of religion would need to be a study of religion and race.” (p. 80).

According to Badmington (2003), “there is nothing more terrifying than a posthumanism that claims to be terminating ‘Man’ while actually extending ‘his’ term in office.” (p. 16). I suggest the same applies in respect of Transhumanism.

In addition, there is the matter of contracting religion into and onto belief as contrasted with, for example, embodied practice. A much larger concern relates to the historical function of religion as a category originating in Western colonial modernity by means of which to domesticate and assimilate ‘Other’-ed traditions. Other derivative values include a commitment to ‘Peace’ which says nothing about a commitment to justice including compensation and reparations for the legacy effects of European colonialism in relation to the formation of the modern/colonial world system.

Ahmed (2016) refers to such extra-textual phenomena as the Pre-Text (hermeneutic means of approach) and the Con-Text (accumulated interpretative tradition).

Following Ahmed (2016), Jackson maintains that “by seeing Islam as prescriptive, as governed primarily by the law, we are seeing Islam as nothing more than law, denying the importance of the discursive tradition of theology, philosophy, poetry, and
so on, as important sources of authority.” (p. 28). While Ahmed and Jackson are right to draw attention to the importance of that which is other than the nomic, they are wrong to presume some sort of oppositional dichotomy between the nomic and this other, rather than viewing them as a cluster of entangled formations. In short, this is a rather reductive framing of their relationship, suggesting that a commitment to the law entails a negation (‘denial’) of the Islamic(ate) discursive theological tradition which is demonstrably false. According to Jackson, “the fear that many Muslims have of breaking away from the shackles of prescribed law, given its authority from the Qur’an and—almost on an equal level—the hadith, prevents Islam from contributing anything dynamic and creative to the transhumanist table.” (p. 32). It is interesting to note here Jackson’s invocation of fear rather than reverence and/or deference in relation to The Qur’an, not to mention his rather reductive understanding of ‘The Law’ as shackling rather than enabling; for a rather different reading of the shari’a as engaged through fiqh with the latter seen as pluralistic, decentralised and empowering, see (Abou El Fadl 2001; Winkel 1997) among other works.

On this point, see (Winkel 1997; Chodkiewicz 1993).

According to Jackson, “there are other forms of Islam that, certainly prior to the mid-nineteenth century, were dominant in the Islamic world and, when these are considered in modern light, also show that secular transhumanists need not be so distrustful and suspicious [of religious tradition].” (p. 5). What is this modern light if not the lens of modernity, moreover a modernity that is genealogically entangled with European colonialism, and both with an accelerating technocentrism? For Jackson, “the very act of attempting to give Islam a specific and concrete definition, inevitably results in the objectification of the religion, which, in turn, results in a resistance to hermeneutical engagement with the primary religious source, the Qur’an in particular.” (p. 69). Granted, yet advocating the same sort of creative hermeneutic engagement that took place in the pre-colonial Islamicate in a post-colonial world marked by the persistence of colonial logics of domination and racialised capitalism is arguably to fail to appreciate radically changed conditions (from dominance/‘iza and autonomy to subjugation/zilla and heteronomy) as well as to fail to establish an order of priority in terms of existential threat.

According to Jackson, “while modernists such as Mawdudi may believe that they are asserting Islamic identity independent of western rational thought, they are, in reality, doing the exact opposite: they are rationalising a religion and submerging its more explorative, individual, subjective, mystical, and existential aspects.” (p. 77). This is because, “the Islamic modernists looked to treat Islam as one fixed ideological identity so as to be more robust in challenging antithetical ideologies, and, therefore, refuting the existing rich Islamic tradition of jurisprudence, philosophy, and the spiritual/mystical aspect, to be replaced with a more direct exegesis of the primary religious sources.” (pp. 70–71). It is ironic to note positive reference being made to jurisprudence here given Jackson’s earlier appeal to Shahab Ahmed as a resource for getting beyond the structures of Islamic ‘legalism’.

In an earlier work, Jackson (2007) explores the relationship between Nietzsche and Islam, including the influence of Nietzschean thinking on Iqbal. While repeated attempts have been made by proponents of Transhumanism at assimilating Nietzsche to this movement given a shared commitment to eugenics and ostensible similarities between the figure of the Overman/Superman and that of the Trans-/Post-human, it is highly questionable whether Iqbal would endorse the technocentric orientation of the transhumanist project.

It should be noted that fana’/annihilation (and its complement baq¯a/subsistence) in Sufism are not construed in technological terms which raises the question as to the basis for Jackson’s asserting the analogy. In short, to what extent is Sufism—and the Islamicate more broadly—being assimilated to Transhumanism?

In this connection, see (Zimmerman 2011; Aydin 2017; Tuncel 2017) among other works.

This reduction and ‘bracketing’ of Bergsonian and Whiteheadian currents informing Iqbal’s project is significant insofar as commentators have pointed to certain similarities between Whiteheadian process metaphysics—which is both atomistic and occasionalist—and earlier precedents within pre-modern/pre-colonial Islamicate metaphysics including the atomistic occasionalism of al-Baqillānī, al-Ghazālī (Bakar 1991), and its later development by ibn al-‘Arabi (Alpyagil 2012). Regarding the latter, in his classic work, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (1971), Iqbal (1971) insists that Ash’arīty ‘atomism’—which was later developed by ibn al-‘Arabi into a theo-cosmology based on creative pulsating cycles of Divine Breath (exhalation and inhalation)—is authentically Islamic in the sense of being an ‘indigenous’ contribution of Islamicate thought, yet one that has tended to be assimilated to Buddhism (pp. 67–68).

For Jackson, “this is all-important in respect of the transhumanist debate because Iqbal’s Perfect Being (importantly it is a trope that can be found in other Islamic thought, notably that of Rumi’s Mārd-e-Haqq) and Nietzsche’s Übermensch (which greatly influenced Iqbal’s thought) are paradigms of human transformation towards a ‘better human’ . . . In the case of both Nietzsche and Iqbal, the self is seen in this fluctuating, fluid, and changing manner. There is an existential quality to the extent that the Self is always in a process of becoming, for to ‘be’ is to cease to be creative and cease to challenge and create.” (p. 7). Agreed, yet what has this to do with technological transformation of the human via convergent GRIN/NBICS technologies?

In short, what if this is a dangerous and violent misreading of Iqbal (and Nietzsche) which completely fails to foreground the technocentrism of Transhumanism and the non-technological nature of the Iqbalian worldview?

According to Jackson, “the human will become the cyborg and, in time, the posthuman. There may well be some humans who are ‘left behind’ or, indeed, prefer to reject this intentional evolution in the same way people today would rather live ‘off-grid’, but I suspect these numbers will be small because they will be effectively signing their death warrant, whether due to death by natural old age, or because the earth’s environment has been altered so much that it is impossible for humans to survive, or that
their offspring would prefer to live, quite possibly, forever. This may all seem science fiction, but much of this genre in the past has now become a reality, and we would be intellectually blind to not seriously consider the implications of these technological advances for future generations.” (pp. 174–75).

34 See (Grove 2019) for an extended historical and geographical argument as to why the Anthropocene should be understood as the Euroocene on account of the ecological violence perpetrated by European imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism.

35 Jackson maintains that “if God possesses the attributes of immortality, perfection, and so on, then so can the human.” (p. 163) However, I would suggest that this is a distorted understanding of Sufism insofar as those Sufis who embrace the notion of insān al-Kamil understand the latter as necessarily marked by finitude. In short, it refers to perfection of the human as human, all too human, not as Transhuman, and certainly not on strict ontological parity with The Divine. Ironically, Jackson appears to concede this in appealing to Iqbal’s notion of khudi when he states that “to transcend our ‘selves’ is what it means to be human, but it is a constricted transcendence to the extent that it brings out what is best in our nature, like the perfume of the musk [emphasis added].” (p. 169).

On this point, see (Faruque 2022; Ferrero 2022; Al-Kassimi 2023) among others.

36 Briefly, in relation to the difference between rationality and the intellect, it is not merely a matter of naming—that is, of different signifiers—but rather of different meanings—that is, signifieds—where rationality operates in the context of ‘Man’ along mathematical lines, occupying what might be described as the ‘God-spot’ under a collapse of the onto-theological ‘Great Chain of Being’ in contrast to the intellect which assumes the chain as intact. As Ferrero (2022) states, “Man . . . has the function of a mediator between Heaven and Earth. As evident from his vertical position, he is naturally turned toward Heaven. The person must turn toward Heaven in order to contemplate eternal realities and know how to translate them into the life of this world. Man accomplishes this goal through the universal intellect superior to reason, the Spiritus.” (pp. 220–21). Following Gordon (2019), along with Mahendran (2011), the latter of whom points to the relation between (de)racing and computation, it might be argued that the Transhuman Cartesian theomimetic moment is entangled with the emergence of a theodicean grammar of race, the work of anthropic gods (Goldberg 1993) and ‘second creators’ (Jackson 2005).

37 Regarding the ‘god-like’ character of the human, Jackson maintains that “in terms of transhumanism and the issues Islam must face here, [Syed Hussain] Nasr’s notion of the ‘theomorphic being’, for example, is worthy of some consideration.” (p. 112). Yet to what extent does this involve a conflation of the technological superman/‘god-like’ being associated with Transhumanism and the theomorphic being of the human in Sufism? According to Jackson, “undoubtedly, visions of the Perfect Human have been presented in religion and philosophy for thousands of years, but the important objection raised by some transhumanists is that this is not transhumanism as understood in the modern, technological sense of the term, but has more to do with, for example, spiritual growth.” (p. 150). Yet he insists that even “the more ‘spiritual’ understanding of Islamic cosmology, teleology, and eschatology brings us much more within the same working arena as much of the transhumanist philosophy” (p. 152), attempting to make the case by conflating the meaning of ‘spiritual’ in Akbarian, Sadrian, and other Sufi philosophical cosmologies with the ‘informational’ sense of ‘spiritual’ associated with the Singularitarian metaphysics of figures such as Ray Kurzweil. Put simply, I suggest that a single signifier is being used in hinge fashion to forge a link between two very different orientations with a view to assimilating one orientation as a ‘regional dialect’ within the ‘language game’ established by the other.

On this point, see (Ali 2019a).

38 As argued in an earlier work (Ali 2019a), a variant of the clash thesis is sustainable once re-interpreted in terms of sedimented historical ontology rather than cosmology.

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