

Modern Muslim Theology: Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination

Martin Nguyen

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True to its title, this book engages God and the world with faith and imagination. It is a work inspired by faith and that aims to inspire faith, a work of Muslim theology that does the work of theology, a term which for Nguyen “names a life-encompassing and faith-affirming process with which every person is already engaged” (3). The book explores how theological activity “is already under-way in our lives,” with the hope that we readers “may better shape and cultivate the life of faith that draws us closer to God and deepens our commitment to the righteousness to which God continually calls humankind” (3). Inspired by the (re)visionary theological projects of al-Ghazali and Muhammad Iqbal in their respective contexts, Nguyen notes his book is “similarly concerned with *constructing a new way of understanding matters of faith* that is both revivifying and ethically grounded” (9, emphasis added). At the heart of Nguyen’s project lies the reframing of certain key concepts, namely, theology (chapter one), death, time and the end times (chapter two), tradition (chapter three), imagination (chapter four), revelation (chapter five), faith (chapter six) and prayer and prostration (chapter seven). In the space that remains, I want to highlight the novel aspects of Nguyen’s reformulation of these concepts.

Chapter one urges us to think about the term ‘theology’ not only in terms of equivalent classical Arabic formulations such as *‘aḳīda*, *‘ilm-al-kalām*, and *uṣūl-al-dīn* but as “how we respond to God” and thus a “human attempt to apprehend, make sense of, and find fulfillment in a transcendent reality” (23). He calls us to embrace English as the language in which we pursue our faith in and response to God. Nguyen here draws on the words of Malcolm X about the latter’s education in and mastery of English to argue that just as Malcolm’s words, written and spoken in English, continue to empower and transform Muslim communities in the English-speaking world, so too our theology, our responding and relating to God, should be done in the English language. He also urges us to revise our notion of the Quran as merely a verbal revelation. “God may speak in creation,” Nguyen notes, and thus “the Quran is also phenomenally experienced within the mesh of creation” (25). He nevertheless concludes that it is as God’s eternal

speech that the Quran is “theology’s foremost interlocutor” and “through it God speaks and to it we respond” (26). Nguyen conceptualizes theology as the on-going act of responding to God’s revelation, in word and action, in the language (in this case English) that shapes a community’s “horizon of meaning” (22).

In chapter two, Nguyen both highlights our decreasing awareness of time, its rhythms and its passing, and challenges the notion that modern times present us with bigger crises than people before us have faced. As he puts it, “In every generation and in every age, the present moment has seemed imperiled and unprecedented. Many who have come before us have trembled with anxiety and concerns similar to our own” (45). According to Nguyen, our lack of awareness of transience and death numbs what would otherwise be a deep inner need to form a relation with God and live for the hereafter. The crisis in all times has been the difficulty of hearing the voice of God and of witnessing his presence, due to human hubris and the desire to control and master, to ward off danger to one’s life and one’s happiness. From this prognosis, Nguyen argues to the conclusion that faith in modern times will require imagination and vulnerability and not greater argumentation and egotistical self-assertion. While Nguyen does think modern ways of life make us forget about the constant death and transience we are surrounded by and our own fragilities as human beings, he is not dismissive of modernity *tout court* and sees in it too an opportunity to struggle and “attain to God and the Hereafter” (47). He remains optimistic on account of faith in God’s encompassing wisdom: “As antithetical or oppositional as aspects of modernity may seem to the life of faith, all of it is encompassed within the wisdom of God” (47). A fuller apprehension of the depths of misery and lowness of the world are exactly where faith in God and a sense of higher purpose can best begin and flourish; this is not a coincidence but rather divinely ordained.

In chapter three, Nguyen discusses the anthropocentric connotations of various conceptions of the term *tradition* and offers an account of it that “preserves the crucial role of the Divine in the unfolding of tradition while also critically accounting for our human role in the ongoing construction of it” (61). Nguyen imaginatively thinks of tradition as a story; he tells the story of the Islamic tradition by using the Ka’ba as an allegorical representation: the Ka’ba as a physical structure, an idea and a site of both intense contestation, deep reverence and continuous efforts at preservation and rehabilitation—like “tradition as a thing undergoing constant change in

one sense while simultaneously remaining fixed in another” (67). Nguyen’s allegorical use of the Ka’ba is profound and suggestive. It models a way of thinking imaginatively and theologically about faith in the modern world and about the place of tradition. One does wonder about the limits on reimagining tradition that the rigidity, singularity and immovability of a physical structure like the Ka’ba might impose even as an allegory. At any rate, his account invites deep reflection about the tension between constancy and change and provides a vocabulary for inaugurating much needed conversations about the relation between faith and tradition today.

In chapter four, we see Nguyen mounting a robust defense of the value of imagination in the Quran, in prophetic discourses, and among notable Muslim thinkers and spiritual masters of the past. He finds “religious imagination to be critical to the task of theology today” (87). One does wonder how his optimistic claim that “imagination’s inclusiveness and inconclusiveness serve faith well” might interact with the boundedness and clarity towards which tradition seems to pull. Is it not the abiding and anchoring features of a tradition that are the basis of its appeal in the first place? Nguyen’s learned discussion of imagination in Muslim discourses raises a question: how might a dialectic between tradition and imagination play out in the lived lives of the faithful today, and how might one decide upon the right packing order for these two crucial components of human experience? In short, there is a healthy tension here that beckons exploration by scholars. To his credit, he leans decidedly more towards imagination than tradition; as such, he discusses at length how tradition is not monolithic but varied. Faith is the key feature of tradition at stake for Nguyen, and he marshals an impressive array of examples to show that faith has been understood differently by Muslims throughout history. This diversity of ways of understanding faith does speak to the worry about the rigidity of tradition I raised above, yet the question remains: does he adequately address the dynamics of power that have been at play among those with differing conceptions of faith and tradition? Of course he knows that the diversity of understanding is not simply an interesting and encouraging historical fact. It is a fact that remains implicated in much violence and turmoil among Muslims. Perhaps his decision to turn down the volume on intense internal contestation in the Muslim tradition signals his view that a modern Muslim theology must be such that it allows its practitioners to eschew these baser possibilities in favor of what is beautiful and just.

Chapter five develops an account of the Quran as more than a sacred, historical text. Nguyen understands it as a multi-faceted call that seeks our response. To engage with the Quran is to form (or to be willing to form) a relation with God and respond to him. And how should one respond to revelation? It is here that we see Nguyen succinctly articulate the main proposal of his theological endeavor: “To respond to revelation is not to rise with hubris but to fall upon one’s hands and knees before God. The answer is to prostrate oneself. A faithful theology of response must be a theology of prostration” (115). Nguyen imagines that prostration, as an ideal state, will be as varied in its meaning and expression as the ways in which we engage the Quran and the world! He also hopes that this posture is not the end but a “creative beginning” from which “living theologies ought to emerge” (116). Considering what amounts to almost limitless variation in what prostration would mean and the kind of creative energy that would produce lived theologies raises an important question: how ought one to think about prostration? How ought one to live a theology born of prostration so conceived? Nguyen provides us some clues in chapter seven, in some ways the most important chapter of the book, where he presents Malcolm X’s transformation as a model of what a lived theology of prostration (and theology from prostration) might look like for our times. He highlights how Malcolm’s struggle with the act of prayer and especially with prostration, with the bending of his knees before God and the eventual attainment of a “praying-to-Allah” posture paving the way for a deep transformation and “incredible activity” (159-160). Malcolm’s subsequent life, subsequent to accomplishing the bowed, prostrated posture, was “lived bowed before God” (160). The culminating point of the chapter is that theology (responding to God) is in prayer; prayer reaches its epitome in prostration; and prostration is not an expression of surrender or resignation but a declaration of “one’s commitment to rendering righteousness in the world” (171). Prostration expresses “a righteous discontent” (171) and when prayer ends, Nguyen teaches, “our lot is to rise up and struggle onward” (175). His idea of a modern Muslim theology is a call to fall before God in faith and humility so as to find the strength and resolve to act justly in the world while remaining bowed before God. One does wonder: if all acts are seen by an agent as fired by the faith they found in the act of prostration, would it make it easier or harder to debate and deliberate about the moral merits or demerits of those actions? Nguyen ardently desires modern Muslim theology to be just and

ethical. Some discussion of how modern Muslim theology might grapple with epistemological questions would have helped the present reader.

In this highly intelligent, imaginative, and compassionate book, Martin Nguyen calls on people of faith to fall rather than rise to the occasion of God's revelation in the Quran and to earnestly seek out a life of faith that moves beyond passive righteousness and self-assured piety. In Nguyen's view, just actions born of servility to God and awareness of his presence (and not the more glittery goals of "perfection of the soul" or "realization of human potential") ought to be the mode in which, and the goal towards which, the faithful strive. Can a theology of prostration produce robust moral action? Nguyen draws much inspiration from Malcolm's transformative experience with prayer and prostration. It is an intriguing and imaginative argument. Could it carry the day, at least among Muslims in the anglophone world (if not also beyond)? Perhaps! On a final note, one wishes Nguyen had given the readers some clues about other scholars, if any, engaged in similar constructive, theological projects and how their projects align or depart from what he is offering. But perhaps it really is the case that this book is inaugurating a new sub-field within religious studies, namely modern Muslim theology. One hopes that Nguyen's highly readable and imagination-enriching book finds a wide readership among scholars of religions and theology, and that more such works are in the offing from his keyboard as well as others'.

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