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# EDITORIAL

# Editorial Note

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This issue of the *American Journal of Islam and Society* comprises three research articles that, taken together, explore the many ethical, historical, and conceptual resources through which Muslim thinkers and communities negotiate modernity, power, and knowledge across a wide range of diverse contexts. Whilst the articles differ in method and focus, ranging from decolonial philosophy and social history to political theology and metaphysical reflection, they are united by a shared concern with mediation: between spirit and politics, memory and archive, reform and tradition, and human and more-than-human worlds.

We begin with Achraf Guennouni Idrissi's article, "From Ego-Politics to Rūḥ-Politics: Abderrahmane Taha's Insurgent Ethics of Iz'āj as a Decolonial Imperative." In this contribution, Idrissi examines the Moroccan thinker Abderrahmane Taha's concept of *iz'āj* (ethical agitation or disturbance) as an Islamically grounded mode of decolonial critique. Reading Taha in conversation with decolonial theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo, the article argues that Taha advances a distinctive form of epistemic disobedience rooted in spiritual discipline, ethical responsibility, and the cultivation of the self. Rather than framing resistance solely in terms of political mobilization or identity, Idrissi shows how Taha reorients critique toward what he terms a *rūḥ-political* paradigm, in which inner moral transformation and outward social engagement are inseparable. The article thus offers an original contribution to ongoing discussions about the possibilities and limits of Islamic decolonial thought.

We then turn to Abdullah Martin Drury's historical study, "Faith and Loyalty: A Short History of the Muslims of Colonial New Zealand." Drury reconstructs the largely overlooked history of Muslim presence in

New Zealand from the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, drawing on fragmentary archival sources, census records, and newspaper accounts. By attending carefully to both documentary evidence and archival silences, the article challenges assumptions that Muslim history in New Zealand begins only with late-twentieth-century migration. Drury highlights the everyday lives, labour, and social negotiations of early Muslim settlers, situating them within broader imperial and transnational networks while also emphasizing their local embeddedness. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship that re-thinks dominant narratives of Muslim migration and minority formation.

As our third research article, we have Andi Herawati's "The Grove of Imagination': Re-reading Ibn 'Arabi's *Barzakh* as a Spiritual Ecology." In this rich and innovative study, Herawati revisits Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the *barzakh*, arguing that it functions as a dynamic, growth-oriented realm integral to spiritual and ethical development. Drawing on vegetal metaphors in Ibn 'Arabi's writings and engaging contemporary ecological philosophy, the article considers the *barzakh* as a spiritual geography in important ways. By framing Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics as a resource for rethinking anthropocentrism and environmental ethics, Herawati's contribution opens new avenues for engaging classical Sufi thought. Alongside these research articles, the issue also includes a wide-ranging selection of book reviews that include reviews of works discussing covenantal ethics in Islam, Islamic media and revolutionary subjectivities in Egypt, comparative theology and missionary encounters, and much more besides.

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# ARTICLES

# From Ego-Politics to *Rūḥ*-Politics: Abderrahmane Taha's Insurgent Ethics of *Iz'āj* as a Decolonial Imperative

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ACHRAF GUENNOUNI IDRISSE

## Abstract

This article probes the Moroccan philosopher Abderrahmane Taha's concept of *iz'āj*—literally agitation/disturbance—as an Islamic decolonial option. Reading it through his notion of *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* (the pragmatic discursive field), this study shows how *iz'āj* redirects Walter Mignolo's "body-politics" of epistemic disobedience toward an insurgent *rūḥ*-politics, relocating agency

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in divine trusteeship (*amānah*) and innate human disposition (*fiṭrah*). Against both religionist quietism and secular activist models, Taha's *rūḥ*-centred critique refuses any split between inner purification (*tazkiyah*) and outward struggle: *al-zā'ij*—the epistemoral agitator—fuses ethical sincerity (*ikhhlās*) with justice, and spiritual renewal with social liberation. Anchored in *amānah* (trusteeship) and animated by the logic of *khilāfah* (stewardship), Taha'ian resistance seeks to 'insurgify' political life by recalibrating worldly power through ethical responsibility. Thus, this intervention recasts decolonial resistance as a covenantal ethic that redefines the telos of resistant disobedience itself. To illustrate *iz'āj* in action, the discussion closes with a reading of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961), tracing how communal ritual, personal defiance, and interior crisis each unsettle the materialist and epistemic regimes of colonial modernity. This framework demonstrates that true liberation requires ethical insurgency, resisting the reduction of ethics to private piety. *Iz'āj* thus emerges as an Islamically grounded and morally integrated Islamic decolonial option.

**Keywords:** Abderrahmane Taha, *Iz'āj*, epistemoral agitation, Islamic decoloniality, *Rūḥ*-politics, epistemic disobedience, ethics.

## Introduction

The potential of Islam and Muslim intellectuals to contribute to the cultivation of decolonial options<sup>1</sup> has emerged as a critical interdisciplinary field of inquiry, engaging scholars across the fields of: Islamic studies, philosophy, history, sociology, education and postcolonial theory, among others. Recent scholarship highlight how Islamic intellectual traditions challenge colonial epistemologies by recentering marginalized histories and reimagining global solidarity. Historically, Jason Idrissi Sparkes demonstrated that the emergence of the early modern/colonial world-system in 1492 cannot be fully grasped without recognizing how

European powers actively disrupted and colonized traditional Islam, embedding this process as a fundamental aspect of modernity/coloniality.<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing “a praxis-orientated decolonial–Islamic agenda” Halim Rane et al. articulated how Islam can be a positive force of decoloniality by drawing on the Qur’an and Sunnah as essentially anti-colonial sources through their emphasis on mutual recognition and redress with indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have underscored the importance of Islamic spirituality in indigenous resistance.<sup>4</sup> Many have also called for the decolonization of Muslim subjectivities from the ingrained shackles of the “coloniality of being.”<sup>5</sup> Relatedly, they argue for the decolonization of Islamic studies itself, moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms and taking the Islamic intellectual tradition as the epistemic and methodological yardstick against which imported scholarship should be evaluated and adjusted.<sup>6</sup>

While still nascent, this interdisciplinary debate reflects a growing recognition of Islam’s role in destabilizing colonialities and fostering pluriversal futures. This article builds on that momentum by examining the Moroccan philosopher Abderrahmane Taha’s philosophical repertoire,<sup>7</sup> highlighting its potential to advance decolonial options within what he envisions as *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* (the pragmatic discursive field).<sup>8</sup> If one of the fundamental principles of decolonial thought is the cultivation of indigenous epistemologies—that is, the development of situated knowledges that are both contextually relevant and engaged in shaping a planetary and pluriversal outlook—then this study is an effort to articulate an Islamically-anchored form of epistemic disobedience. Among the diverse and contextually attuned philosophical concepts crafted by Taha, *iz‘āj*, or what I rendered as ‘Epistemoral Agitation,’ emerges as a distinctively Islamic, proactive, and delinking mode of spiritual and epistemic engagement with the world. While epistemic disobedience aims to delink from hegemonic frameworks and construct alternative (non-Eurocentric),<sup>9</sup> transmodern (transcending colonial binaries)<sup>10</sup> and pluriversal (fostering multiple epistemic worlds)<sup>11</sup> worldviews, *iz‘āj* spiritually ‘*insurgifies*’ such formations through the Principle of Stewardship (*istikhlāf*) and the Qur’anic notion of Trusteeship (*amānah*)

as the ethical bridge between God and humanity.<sup>12</sup> Such an extension means that *al-zā'ij* as an epistemoral agitator emphasizes not only the creation of alternative cosmologies but also takes his/her critique to be incumbent upon a dutiful and ethical concern for unsettling the egoistic *nafs* (self) toward justice, and purifying the Ummatic *rūḥ* by embedding ethical responsibility at the heart of decolonial engagement.

*Iz'āj* is an all-encompassing critique that is not merely deconstructive but also transformative, seeking to displace the self and the other from a state of moral decay to one of ethical and intellectual insurgency. Various scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr,<sup>13</sup> Wael Hallaq,<sup>14</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas,<sup>15</sup> and others have emphasized that classical Islamic education was fundamentally designed to cultivate individuals instilled with a profound sense of ethical self-critique—intellectuals engaged in an ongoing process of moral and epistemic vigilance. Such a tradition of critical introspection was intended to discipline the self and shape the contours of subjectivity in accordance with higher ethical “first principles.”<sup>16</sup> While these scholars operate within distinct intellectual domains, they are cited together to establish the foundational premise for Taha’s entire project, specifically the role of ethics in Islamic intellectual heritage. They are invoked to situate Taha’s concept of *iz'āj* as an insurgent revitalization of a classical Islamic educational imperative. Taha’s vision of *iz'āj* encapsulates such a foundational pillar of Islamic intellectual heritage and renders it the initial stepping-stone of his conceptualization of liberationist and insurgent delinking.

Through a rigorous demystification of contemporary political ideologies—across the whole political spectrum—Taha endeavors to cultivate a subject that delinks from the constraints of hegemonic ideological paradigms. He critiques both the marginalization of Islam and its reduction to mere technicalities within the political sphere, stripped of its transcendent significance. In doing so, he aspires to reinvigorate a mode of thought that resists ideological co-optation and remains rooted in an ethically and intellectually autonomous Islamic tradition. Thus, this venture aims to exemplify one possible pathway—among many—for exploring the intersections of Islamic thought and decoloniality. Drawing on his

critical oeuvre, this study delineates how his philosophy offers valuable insights for re-imagining epistemic disobedience within Islamic epistemological and metaphysical frameworks. The value of such an exercise lies in establishing epistemic sovereignty and advancing a *rūh*-political paradigm as an alternative to secular and instrumentalized religious models. It is a potent double critique of *tasayyud* (tyrannical lordship), the pathology of power that corrupts both secular and religious authority. In this way, it moves beyond critique of Western paradigms to cultivate indigenous epistemologies and articulate a decolonial alternative.

To pursue such ends, this intervention adopts a multi-methodological framework, combining conceptual analysis, comparative theoretical engagement, and literary hermeneutics to explore Taha's concept of *iz'āj* and its potential contributions to decolonial theory. The core methodology is conceptual analysis, centered on close readings of some of Taha's works in order to trace the development, coherence, and ethical implications of *iz'āj* within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*. This is supplemented by a comparative approach that places Taha in dialogue with decolonial theorists such as Walter D. Mignolo. Rather than seeking synthesis, the comparison highlights shared concerns and productive tensions across distinct traditions, foregrounding Islamic thought as an active contributor to decolonial discourse. Given that my study centers on Taha's concept of *iz'āj* as an Islamically grounded form of epistemic critique, Mignolo is evoked throughout the analysis because he significantly advanced the decolonial discourse by developing and popularizing the concept of epistemic disobedience; a term which encapsulates a core tenet of decolonial thought and provides a methodological framework for challenging the dominance of Western modes of knowing. Finally, literary hermeneutics is applied to Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961), treating the novel not as a mere illustration but as a generative site of ethical reflection. Close reading uncovers narrative instances of *iz'āj* in action, thereby grounding abstract concepts in lived, affective, and historical registers. While this approach is necessarily selective in its focus on *iz'āj* rather than the entirety of Taha's system, it offers a coherent lens through which to articulate a form of Islamically grounded epistemic disobedience.

## Delinking Coloniality: Epistemic Disobedience and the *Rūḥ*-Political Turn

In Walter D. Mignolo's seminal manifesto, "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option," the concept of epistemic disobedience emerges as a subversive critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems and a call to reclaim subaltern epistemologies. Mignolo envisions it as a deliberate rupture from Western frameworks of thought, arguing that coloniality—the enduring power structures of modernity—cannot be dismantled through Eurocentric paradigms. He asserts that epistemic disobedience is "necessary because there is no way out of the coloniality of power from within Western (Greek and Latin) categories of thought."<sup>17</sup> Such a critical orientation creates space for "decolonial options as a set of projects that have in common the effects experienced by all inhabitants of the globe at the receiving end of colonial designs to colonize [...] knowledge (languages, categories of thoughts, belief systems, etc.) and beings (subjectivity)."<sup>18</sup> Mignolo argues that epistemic disobedience rejects Western epistemic origins, instead grounding itself in "a different 'beginning.'"<sup>19</sup> Since it would be far beyond the scope of this article to explore every facet of Taha's philosophical efforts to formulate an original Islamic philosophy, with an inherent right to intellectual, philosophical and methodological differences, it would be more relevant to delineate how he also marks 'a different beginning' through his conceptualization of *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*.<sup>20</sup>

*Al-majāl al-tadāwulī* refers to the dynamic and interactive domain where Islamic tradition is constructed, interpreted, practiced and transmitted. The term *tadāwulī* derives from the Arabic root *d-w-l* meaning circulation or interaction, while *majāl* denotes a spatiotemporal context. Linguistically, *tadāwulī* implies both communicative exchange (e.g., dialogue) and practical engagement (e.g., ethical action), reflecting the inseparability of theory and practice in Islamic thought.<sup>21</sup> Such a domain is shaped by a triadic framework which prevents reductionist or ideologically driven readings and ensures a holistic interpretation of the tradition. The first is language (*luḡhah*), which emphasizes classical Arabic as the primary medium for preserving and transmitting tradition,

ensuring both clarity and ethical efficacy. Second is belief (*i'tiqād*), which serves as the theological foundation, with *tawhīd* (monotheism) as its core principle, ensuring fidelity to Islamic creedal commitments. Finally, knowledge (*ilm*) is regarded not as an abstract pursuit but as inherently praxis-oriented (*amal*),<sup>22</sup> rigorously prioritizing ethical and social benefit over speculative theorization. This synthesis advances a form of hermeneutical ethics whereby interpretations must address contemporary challenges while remaining anchored in the core values of the Islamic tradition.

This is the domain in which *iz'āj* emerges as a socially embedded and committed form of engagement with the world. It represents a radical form of delinking from colonial epistemologies by recentring Islamic intellectual traditions and methodologies around various fundamental Islamic values and principles.<sup>23</sup> However, while decolonial thought envisions coloniality to be the inseparable dark side of modernity, its necessary condition and underpinning logic,<sup>24</sup> Taha separates the spirit of modernity from its various realities and the (mis)applications of its ideals. “For most who have reflected on it [modernity] have confused what constitutes its core—which must be preserved—with what is merely its shell—which may rightly be discarded.”<sup>25</sup> Taha’s engagement with modernity is marked by a subtle yet decisive distinction between its essence and its historical embodiments. He critiques Western modernity for conflating its normative core (ideals that may carry universal value) with its contingent and often corrosive manifestations, which can and must be discarded. In his view, Western notions of critique and rationality are not universal givens but particular applications of reason, among many possible forms. His framework therefore proceeds along two axes: resistance to modernity’s destructive articulations, and the salvaging of its latent potential which he believed to be embedded in human *fiṭrah* (primordial disposition). As he notes, “the meanings embedded in *rūḥ al-ḥadāthah* (the spirit of modernity) are closer to *fiṭrah* than to either the essential characteristics (*khaṣā’iṣ al-māhiyyah*) of modernity or its applied manifestations.”<sup>26</sup> Against this backdrop, Taha advances what he terms an Islamic modernity, a sovereign alternative that confronts the ethical deficits of the Western model by reuniting means and ends

under the horizon of moral value. This modernity demands authenticity and is animated by *ibdāʿ* (creativity), whereby *turāth* (tradition) is not a static inheritance but a living source of innovation.<sup>27</sup> In this paradigm, modernity is no longer singular but plural, as Taha insists that “there are as many modernities as there are creative interventions,”<sup>28</sup> provided that such interventions are guided by the imperative to elevate the human being to higher ethical and spiritual levels.

This is laid out most lucidly in his *Spirit of Modernity* (2013), which stands out as his first serious philosophical critique of Western modernity, assessing it through the very ideals its theorists pursued and the utopian vision that inspired them. His analysis not only lays bare the situatedness of the reality of Western modernity but also seeks to counter the ethical crises inherent in it by embedding moral considerations at the core of social and technological structures, ensuring that progress remains ethically guided.<sup>29</sup> While many decolonial scholars aspire to provincialize Enlightenment notions of Western modernity such as critique, rationality, and universality,<sup>30</sup> Taha sees their conceptualizations within Western contexts as nothing but one of their many possible applications.<sup>31</sup> He maintains that severing epistemological ties with the Islamic tradition on grounds of temporal irrelevance inevitably produces alienation and loss. As such, he champions a rigorous process of recovery, adaptation, and critical reevaluation, guided by the principle that no imported idea merits acceptance until its authentic validity and benefit have been logically verified within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, he laments the reality of contemporary Muslim societies which are blinded by imitation, striving to configure a modernity grounded in *ibdāʿ* (creativity).<sup>33</sup> Many appear to have resigned themselves to the inevitability of the Western model, with both intellectuals and the general public uncritically accepting the assumptions and fallacies embedded in its application, mistaking its flawed execution for the very essence of modernity itself. The core argument of his book is that the pursuit of modernity necessitates a foundation in authenticity, as genuine modernity is intrinsically based on *ibdāʿ*,<sup>34</sup> which, in turn, is contingent upon a creative engagement with *turāth* ensuring that the latter serves as a dynamic source of innovation rather than a constraint.

*Al-majāl al-tadāwulī* is designed to inhibit hermeneutic adulterations of the Islamic tradition by delinking from the imported ideological models foreign to the contextual realities of the Muslim world. Within such a domain, resistance itself—if grounded in *ibdāʿ*—becomes an expression of Islamic modernity, even when it resists certain forms of modernity, “for such resistance confronts the harmful manifestations and values that have clung to modernity, striving instead toward a more humane modernity.”<sup>35</sup> Hence Taha’s emphasis on multiple modernities extends not only across diverse traditions but also within the Islamic tradition itself.<sup>36</sup>

To bring about such creative interventions, *al-zāʿij* (the epistemoral agitator) “shift[s] the geography of reason—in unveiling and enacting geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> Taha’s geopolitical shift occurs through *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*. However, while Mignolo enacts such a paradigmatic displacement through body-politics, Taha opts for what I designate as a more comprehensive *rūḥ*-political displacement. To achieve this end, Taha chooses to initiate radical change within the premises of the egoistic *nafs* (the self and its underpinning reason), offering Islamically-anchored decolonial alternatives to abstract reason, which are better equipped to engender *ibdāʿ* in the Islamic world.<sup>38</sup> These alternatives are undergirded by a *rūḥ* which is “a hidden faculty beyond the *nafs*, one that agitates it toward goodness. The *rūḥ* connects its bearer to the unseen world whenever they engage in *tazkiyah* and safeguard the trusts (*amānāt*) entrusted to them.”<sup>39</sup> Within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*, *al-zāʿij* “is the one who undertakes to unsettle the oppressor through a holistic and heartfelt agitation, guiding him out of tyranny and into justice.”<sup>40</sup> Because the conception of reason underpinning this praxis connects ends not with means but with values,<sup>41</sup> *al-zāʿij*’s “resistant action serves as a generator of values: if values die, he revives them; if they are absent, he brings them into being; if their forces weaken, he strengthens them; and if they become corrupted, he reforms them.”<sup>42</sup>

Mignolo opted for body-politics as the racial/racist darker side of bio-politics, showcasing that the “emerging state technologies [strategies, in other words] of population control that went hand in hand with the emergence of the modern nation-state [...] were applied to the

colonies as well.”<sup>43</sup> He theorizes that “body-politics describes de-colonial technologies enacted by bodies who realized that they were considered less human at the moment they realized that the very act of describing them as less human was a radical un-human consideration.”<sup>44</sup> Taha envisions *iz‘āj* to be enacted by subjects who break the shackles of forgetfulness and ‘remember’ that they are ‘entrusted’ humans. This realization grounds human existence within states of verticality and horizontality,<sup>45</sup> whereby the *rūḥ*-cognizant individuals connect humanity with the unseen world of values through *tazkiyah*, which is an “act that removes the veil of the *nafs* from the *rūḥ*, thereby enabling the connection with *al-‘ālam al-ghaybī* (the unseen world).”<sup>46</sup> By understanding that every action generates both a temporal and spiritual output,<sup>47</sup> agents become intrinsically cognizant that subversive and radical forms of resistance are not only temporal but also spiritual, value-driven and essentially an ethical duty entrusted to everyone.

## Sacred Resistance: *iz‘āj* as Ethical Insurgency and Spiritual Delinking

Such a realization draws on an ethical framework that reshapes the self and broadens its epistemological foundations, shifting the geography of reason toward cultivating what Wael Hallaq, following Taha,<sup>48</sup> deems as the “New Human,” that is, a subject cultivated within a psychoepistemic framework in which the central domain is fundamentally ethical,<sup>49</sup> and who is ultimately oriented “toward the Absolute [which] can only be realized through the Islamic value of *ikhhlās* (sincerity).”<sup>50</sup> Struggling against the ego-self becomes the foundational bedrock of a transformative decolonial liberation from an Islamic perspective. The more *al-zā‘ij* “deepens his *ikhhlās* to God in his actions—meaning that he attributes neither their forms, nor their measure, nor their effects to himself, and seeks no purely worldly aims through them—the more he becomes self-sufficient through God and liberated from all else. He may even reach a state in which gain and loss become equal in his sight.”<sup>51</sup> Such a consciousness engenders the subversive idea that as an agent of *iz‘āj*, duty and responsibility towards God is the ultimate

basis of resistance, insurgent critique and liberation, because “it is this sincerity to God alone that engenders true freedom.”<sup>52</sup> If decoloniality centers knowledge rooted in racialized lived experience,<sup>53</sup> for Taha, to shift the geography of reason is to revolutionize body-politics through a liberationist *rūh*-politics. In his reflection on *iz‘āj* as a form of radical socio-epistemic resistance, he writes:

*Iz‘āj* is a reform for society. Undoubtedly, both [political] unrest and electoral processes target the apex embodied by state actors, leveraging the base represented by society. Their sole concern is to replace one set of rulers with another, even if the societal foundation remains unchanged—a foundation that cannot transform at the pace of shifting leadership. *Iz‘āj*, however, cares little for rulers or the state; its focus lies with the governed and society itself. The change it seeks is foundational, not peripheral, for society is the root and the state, its branch. Society has existed without a state, while no state can exist without society. If individuals within society were to engage in *tazkiyah* until they habituate themselves to being agitated toward justice in their mutual dealings, they would become capable of agitating rulers toward justice by instilling within society a spirit of truth and responsibility. Should ethical self-purificatory critique prevail across society, rulers would emerge who have partaken in such a practice, their consciousness imprinted with its spirit. They would then be agitated toward justice in ways inaccessible to those uninitiated in such discipline. Indeed, it is not far-fetched that such rulers could agitate even their peers toward justice through equitable measures and responsible stances.<sup>54</sup>

Taha distinguishes between three forms of resistance to domination: 1) resistance through *sulṭān* (lit., power, strength) that refers to the “power that enables an individual to influence others—compelling them to undertake actions they would not have initiated on their own were it not for this power in his possession”;<sup>55</sup> 2) resistance through *bayān* (lit., clear elucidation) that is underpinned by *burhān* (lit., proof) i.e.,

a discursive/rhetorical resistance undergirded by “reasoned inference in general—whether it is conclusive, as in mathematical reasoning, or probabilistic, as in political reasoning”;<sup>56</sup> and 3) resistance through “compel[ing] the oppressor to renounce injustice and turn toward justice by means of the force of *wujdān* [moral-spiritual conscience/sensibility] as it manifests in *kulliyat al-sulūk* [the totality of conduct/behavior].”<sup>57</sup> He argues that resistance through power typically manifests in three strategies for seizing authority: revolution, rebellion, and coup. Resistance through discourse, on the other hand, seeks to gain authority through processes such as elections. However, resistance through *wujdān*, which can be embodied as radical form of truth-telling, lies within the individual’s ethical responsibility and manifests through *iz‘āj*. It embodies a kind of spiritual agitation whose quintessential role is “elevating from one state to a higher state.”<sup>58</sup> *Wujdān* is the “totality [...] upon which both *burhān* and *sultān* are grounded—so that *burhān* does not degenerate into mechanical calculation devoid of living reason, nor *sultān* into vulgar oppression devoid of living heart.”<sup>59</sup> In this sense, *iz‘āj* serves as a transformative act that seeks to unsettle oppressive systems not merely through the acquisition of political power or the crafting of persuasive rhetoric, but through the cultivation of profound moral and spiritual configurations which *insurgify* the very telos of other means of resistance.

If the political constitutes one of the definitive pillars of the modern project, characterized by its roots in secular rationality and instrumental power,<sup>60</sup> Taha positions the ethico-spiritual as a critical philosophical intervention in the ontological and epistemological foundations of politics. His critique targets the ego-political paradigm—a framework in which the self, construed as an autonomous agent, asserts sovereignty over the material world through a will to power; and whereby such a will manifests in domination, possession, and the appropriation of authority, ultimately leading to self-divination. Taha argues that such a paradigm fosters a logic of *taghyyib*<sup>61</sup>—translated by Hallaq as “Extratranscendentalization”<sup>62</sup>—wherein the human subject reifies its ontological limits in order to arrogate divine attributes (e.g., omnipotence, omnipresence, immortality). This process of self-deification aspires to achieve and perpetuate an expansive and tyrannical lordship that

exhausts both the material and spiritual realms. Taha terms this phenomenon *tasayyud* (tyrannical lordship), which particularly refers to “the self’s exercise of dominion over creation.”<sup>63</sup> It denotes an authoritarian lordship irrespective of the political system or ideological foundation upon which it rests, whether nationalist, socialist, or even Islamic.

This framework resonates with Mignolo’s concept of “egology.” Like *tasayyud*, Mignolo’s conception of ego-politics is contrasted with theo-politics to encapsulate how the “attribution of Godhood to its Western self has caused epistemological, cultural, and planetary ecological destruction.”<sup>64</sup> However, while Mignolo sees “egology” as “a frame of knowledge having ‘ego,’ instead of ‘theo,’ as the central point of reference,”<sup>65</sup> Taha exposes that even the theo-political can operate within the logic of ego-politics. This occurs because the primary objective shifts from *ta‘abbud* (worship as humble devotion to the divine) to *tasayyud*. Religious authority is thereby weaponized to legitimize and expand power through two interrelated mechanisms: first, by engaging in hermeneutical distortions that reinterpret religious tenets to justify authority; and second, by integrating secular ideological frameworks to evade accusations of extremism or traditionalism.<sup>66</sup> Both strategies perpetuate *tasayyud* by subordinating religion to the ego’s hunger for control. In this process, spirituality is distorted into a dogma of domination, and faith is hollowed into a performative identity stripped of its transformative potential. Taha’s analysis focuses on the psychological and existential pathology of *al-mutasayyid* (the ego-political Imperial Man), whose pursuit of power transcends mere political ambition. In his formulation, *tasayyud* represents a metaphysical bondage:

*Al-tasayyud* of the self is an enslavement of oneself before it is of others. *Al-mutasayyid* is not merely fixated on controlling others; rather, his primary devotion is to his own self-worship. He is driven by an insatiable desire for authority, equating power with life itself. So deeply intertwined is his sense of existence with his dominion that he refuses to conceive of a world in which his authority ceases to exist. For him, the thought of his own demise is as unthinkable as the thought of losing power.

He envisions himself as a singular, God-like figure, irreplaceable and indivisible.<sup>67</sup>

Taha exposes the paradox of theo-political power: *Al-mutasayyid*, while ostensibly acting in the name of divine authority, becomes enslaved to his delusions of omnipotence. He conflates political control with existential necessity, constructing a self-referential universe where power is not merely a means but an end—a perverse form of idolatry that substitutes *ta'abbud* with self-deification. Therefore, true liberation does not emerge from merely opposing authoritarian structures but requires an ethical insurgency that delinks the logic of *tasayyud* altogether before or even while opting for a resistive front. Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes that “transmodern thought also recognizes that what is often referred to as religion can be as colonizing as secularism itself [...] Transmodernity transgresses and transcends.”<sup>68</sup> In this sense, Taha’s thought is transmodern as it delinks from the religionist and secularist tendencies which function as extensions of ego-politics. The relentless pursuit of power intensifies *al-mutasayyid*’s desires, deepens his attachments and strengthens his dependency on control, until he becomes utterly enslaved to his desires and obsessions. “His will is hollowed out, his intellect subdued, and his agency reduced to servitude under the very forces he believes himself to be mastering. Thus, at its core, *tasayyud* is nothing but *‘ubūdiyyah lil-nafs* [a servitude to the self], which in turn is servitude to *ṭāghūt* [tyranny in its most absolute form].”<sup>69</sup>

Instead, Taha advances an alternative vision, one that reorients political and intellectual engagement toward a form of *ta'abbud* that resists the appropriation of the divine for worldly lordship. *Ta'abbud* is a form of delinking, as it is neither a retreat from politics nor a surrender to secularism, but an ethical-spiritual realignment that recenters faith in justice, accountability, and the rejection of self-idolatry. It is a reconfiguration of the political itself, wherein power is re-situated as a divinely ordained duty rather than an object of possession, and where authority is exercised through ethical self-discipline rather than coercion. The notion of *iz‘āj*, as underpinned by *tazkiyah*, carries profound ethical and transformative dimensions that cut at the very core of what Nelson Maldonado-Torres

characterizes as the “egolatry of Imperial man.”<sup>70</sup> By agitating toward the ideal, *al-zā‘ij* destabilizes the appropriative and possessive power of *al-mutasayyid*, whose logic of self-deification “does not respond so much to interests in the conciliation with nature as, more fundamentally, to interests in the subordination of other human beings.”<sup>71</sup>

## *Al-Zā ‘ij’s* Manifesto

Taha advances that such a destabilization can be engendered by every action, no matter how small and however modest, that opposes *tas-ayyud*, playing a role in freeing *al-mutasayyid* from his self-imposed bondage. If even minor acts of resistance can weaken the structures of oppression, then the transformative potential of *tazkiyah* must be even more significant and far-reaching. It is not merely a disobedient act of immediate gratification but a struggle, a radical epistemological and ethical reform, which displaces ego-politics to a *rūh*-political paradigm, i.e., a framework which is anchored in *fiṭrah*—an innate, prelapsarian metaphysical memory inscribed with divine truths that precede human temporality.<sup>72</sup> As such, the individual is reoriented toward *tashhīd* (Intratranscendentalization),<sup>73</sup> a process driven by purificatory praxis which connects transcendent virtues with the material world. Rather than aspiring to dominate the material through instrumental reason, *rūh*-politics is a grassroot harmonization of human agency with divine ideals, fostering a socio-political order rooted in trusteeship.

*Al-zā‘ij* religiously embodies such a paradigmatic shift under a set of conditions. 1) *Iz‘āj* cannot exist without *inzi‘āj* (inner disquiet) because individuals cannot truly undertake the task of disturbing unjust structures without first experiencing profound personal inner upheaval that propels moral and intellectual refinement. *Al-zā‘ij’s* journey involves traversing the ranks of insight and ethical cultivation. *Iz‘āj*, therefore, is not a mere reaction but a conscious and disciplined praxis of transformation.<sup>74</sup> 2) At its core, *iz‘āj* is a restorative force which seeks to return individuals and societies to their *fiṭrah* by reviving the ethical and spiritual consciousness that has been dulled or extinguished by *tas-ayyud*. In this sense, the role of *al-zā‘ij* is not simply to agitate, but to

reawaken the spirit of those who wield power by challenging them to reclaim their lost sense of justice and moral responsibility.<sup>75</sup> 3) *Iz‘āj* does not only confront individual injustices but interrogates the structures of power themselves. Within this framework, *tasayyud* exists in two principal forms: “disruptive domination” (which is coercive and violent) and “elective domination” (which is sustained by tacit consent). Each of these, in turn, manifests in three degrees: “manifest domination” (visible and overt), “hidden domination” (covert and systemic), and “the most concealed form of domination” (so deeply embedded in consciousness that it is mistaken for natural order).<sup>76</sup> True *iz‘āj* seeks to expose and dismantle all these layers of control by making the unseen seen and the unquestioned questionable.<sup>77</sup> 4) However, unlike conventional forms of resistance that rely solely on external confrontation, *iz‘āj* starts by cultivating *al-wāzi‘ al-rūḥī* (inner deterrent). It instils in individuals a moral vigilance that compels them to hold themselves accountable before seeking to reform others. Such a form of self-discipline is rooted in “*ḥayā‘ min Allāh*,” a profound sense of “modesty/humility before the Divine” which merges “love for God” with “awe of His justice.”<sup>78</sup> *Iz‘āj* transcends legalistic constraints, for it does not rely on external enforcement but on an internalized sense of responsibility that develops through *tazkiyah* and curtails injustice at its root.<sup>79</sup> 5) Last, but not least, if *tazkiyah* were to permeate society, governance itself would be transformed as the ruler who wrestled with moral disquiet and underwent inner self-criticism, would not rule through tyranny but through a deeply ingrained sense of “ethical stewardship.” In such a vision, the reform of leadership does not begin with external policies because a society infused with *iz‘āj* is one where governance is not an exercise in *tasayyud* but in service, one where power is not an entitlement but a responsibility.<sup>80</sup>

Taha implies that true power lies not in the imposition of control but in the ethical cultivation of a society of agitators, a project that begins with liberating the ego-self from the tyranny of its own desires. If decolonial scholars advance “that it is not enough to change the content of the conversation, that it is of the essence to change the terms of the conversation,”<sup>81</sup> then Taha changes the terms and the content of the conversation.<sup>82</sup> *Iz‘āj* is the driving force of a resistance that prioritizes

societal transformation from the ground up, rather than focusing solely on replacing leadership. Thus, it challenges the modern colonial emphasis on state-centric reforms and the liberal obsession with institutional change through its emphasis on the deeper and more transformative role of individuals to build a collective moral consciousness. Taha rejects the colonial logic that equates progress with top-down modernization or state-centered governance by emphasizing the primacy of society over the state and,<sup>83</sup> as such, shifts the denunciatory locus of critique and resistance to the communal and ethical.<sup>84</sup> In this vision, politics becomes not a battleground for hegemony, but a space for collective ethical insurgencies, which recenter the spirit as a site of radical and transformative interventions.

## The Tangibility of *Iz'āj*: A Reflection on Urgency and Practicality

As has been noted above, the efficacy of *iz'āj* as a form of resistance lies in its capacity to reawaken the primordial meanings embedded within *fiṭrah*. *Iz'āj* operates not as an elitist practice reserved for exclusive groups of *fuqaha'* (scholars of Islamic jurisprudence) but as a universally accessible praxis contingent on *niyyah* (sincere intention). *Al-zā'ij* unsettles the clerical reduction of salvation to private piety and ritual rectitude. He rejects the quietist illusion that spiritual hygiene alone can redeem a fractured Ummah. True faith is not passive acquiescence but ethical unrest, i.e., a refusal to sanctify silence before tyranny. *Tazkiyah* is not the cultivation of secluded virtue, but the forging of a collective conscience that confronts oppression without compromising the soul. While *iz'āj* emphasizes the transformative power of ethical and spiritual renewal, Taha's framework underscores that decolonial resistance cannot remain confined to intellectual critique alone. As much as academics might idealize transcending dominant paradigms through ideas, dismantling these structures necessitates rehabilitating the material systems that sustain them, a task inseparable from the moral recalibration of both self and society. Thus, *al-zā'ij* embodies a thorn in the side of power, and a mirror to the conscience of the faithful. Resistance, here, becomes

proportional to the individual's level of *tazkiyah* and the strength of the spiritually attuned conscience within *al-zā'ij* which enables discernment between justice and oppression.<sup>85</sup>

Critics may challenge the relevance of *iz'āj* in contexts where democratic opposition appears to suffice as resistance. Taha, however, delineates a critical distinction: whereas oppositional resistance—rooted in secular rationality—aims to reclaim power solely through institutional channels, seeking only peripheral and top-down changes, *iz'āj* operates as a foundational *wujdān*-based *rūḥ*-political displacement. While conventional resistance seeks to redistribute authority, *iz'āj* confronts the foundational structures of power itself, transcending mere leadership changes to prioritize the ethical transformation of the individual as the fundamental unit of society. As Taha clarifies, “the target of *iz'āj* is not to change the authorities [...] but rather to transform the human being—and there is a vast difference between the two forms of change.”<sup>86</sup> He argues that systemic injustice endures even after regime change, as the logic of *tasayyud* persists in the absence of inner moral renewal. Thus, it is imperative to emphasize that *al-zā'ij* must not uphold *tazkiyah* as an isolative ethic divorced from socio-political struggle. His is a mode of resistance wherein inner transformation and structural opposition coalesce, resisting both hegemonic violence and the reduction of ethics to private piety.

Skeptics might argue that focusing on individual *tazkiyah* overlooks the urgency of confronting material injustices (e.g., economic exploitation or political violence), particularly when coercive force seems unavoidable. Taha concedes that *iz'āj* does not preclude physical resistance but insists that *tazkiyah* must precede and guide it. By restoring individuals to their innate orientation toward justice, *iz'āj* equips them to discern when strength or gentleness is warranted. As he notes, “the one who engages in *iz'āj* preserves both the force inherent in their nature and the gentleness that also stems from it. In both cases, they do not resist oppression except through witnessing the divine command.”<sup>87</sup> This balance ensures that resistance remains anchored in *ta'abbud*, transcending the ego's hunger for control. Crucially, Taha elevates moral injustice above material injustice, arguing that corruption of the soul precedes

and perpetuates bodily harm: “moral injustice [...] primarily harms the human soul, with the body possibly suffering as a consequence. In contrast, material injustice [...] primarily harms the body, with the soul potentially being affected as a secondary effect.”<sup>88</sup> This hierarchy underscores *iz‘āj*’s focus on ethical and spiritual repair as prerequisites for addressing material injustice.

### ***Iz‘āj* Manifested: Reading Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* Through the Lens of Epistemoral Agitation**

Through a reading informed by the ethics of *iz‘āj*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) illuminates the principles of epistemoral agitation through its portrayal of characters navigating the profound spiritual and cultural crisis faced by a colonized Muslim society. Set in the fictional Diallobé country—a representation of Senegal under French colonial influence—the novel provides a concrete manifestation of the tension between indigenous Islamic epistemologies and colonial knowledge systems. The French colonial presence represents not only political and economic domination but also epistemic violence, evident in the establishment of the “new school,” which threatens the spiritual and cultural foundations of the Diallobé through the imposition of Western knowledge systems and the marginalization of indigenous ways of knowing. From this hermeneutical angle, Kane’s narrative exemplifies Islamic decolonial praxis, showcasing how resistance operates across individual, communal, and spiritual dimensions, and collectively illustrating how *iz‘āj* breaks the bifurcation of inner ethical reform and material engagement.

### ***Iz‘āj* and the Fragile Ethics of Return**

In the Diallobé community, disciples—among them the young protagonist Samba Diallo—are required to beg for their sustenance, a practice that transcends mere survival. Rather than a passive necessity, this ritual cultivates humility and embodies an ethical trade grounded in *tazkiyah*, resisting colonial materialism and individualism. As they seek daily

sustenance, the disciples chant litanies that shift focus from material wealth to spiritual accountability, enacting *iz‘āj* as a moral and epistemic agitation. The invocation, “Men of God, reflect upon your approaching death. Awake, Oh, awake! Azrael, Angel of death, is already breaking the earth for you [...] Listen to its voice!”<sup>89</sup> serves as a deliberate act of ethical disruption. It unsettles the conscience and redirects desire from accumulation to accountability. The moment of death, here, is not feared as annihilation but invoked as a mirror reflecting the soul’s readiness for the afterlife. Through this collective spiritual practice, the disciples contest the colonial logics of profit, commodification, and human supremacy.

Their condition as “poor disciples in quest of their daily pittance”<sup>90</sup> emphasizes mutual dependence and reframes vulnerability as ethical strength. This is reinforced by the chant: “Men and women who sleep, think of peopling by your benefactions the solitude which will inhabit your tombs. Feed the poor disciples!”<sup>91</sup> Here, the ethics of giving is reoriented as a metaphysical investment, compelling the wealthy to anticipate their solitude in death rather than assert power in life. This spiritual agitation, which the narrator notes “terrorize[s] the region by their imprecations against life,” is not destructive but transformative, a moral awakening that contrasts sharply with the colonial pursuit of “joining wood to wood,”<sup>92</sup> a metaphor for mechanical and soulless progress. The litanies agitate the community’s conscience, urging a re-evaluation of priorities and reinforcing *iz‘āj* as a proactive stance against exploitative systems.

Samba Diallo’s personal comportment deepens such a philosophical ethic. Despite his noble lineage, he embraces the humility of his role. When his cousin offers food, Samba “remained serious, focused on his spiritual path.”<sup>93</sup> His refusal of indulgence is not stoicism for its own sake, but a cultivated detachment rooted in *taqwā* (God-consciousness). Later, when mocked by Demba, Samba replies, “you can go away with someone else. I shall not hold it against you,”<sup>94</sup> rejecting pride and hierarchy. He seeks not to affirm the ego, but to efface it so that ethical clarity might emerge. His punishment for wearing new clothes becomes a further moment of reflection: “He was not thinking of his nobility [...] He was reciting to himself the verse which says that God abases and

exalts whom He wills.”<sup>95</sup> Such an embrace of abasement resonates with the Islamic conception of the ethical self as *mustakhlaf*: entrusted, not entitled. The teacher sharpens this point further stating that “the teacher believed profoundly that the adoration of God was not compatible with any exaltation of man. But, at the bottom of all nobility there is a basis of paganism. Nobility is the exaltation of man, faith is before all else humility, if not humiliation.”<sup>96</sup> The text suggests that true nobility lies not in bloodline but in the ascetic labor of spiritual refinement. Samba’s discomfort with his inherited status, “a diadem [...] too much in evidence,” is a critique of unearned privilege and an argument for ethical becoming. While the Qur’an teacher Thierno’s condemnation of nobility aligns with Taha’s analysis of *tasayyud* as a form of self-deification, Samba’s ability to dissolve the distinction between spiritual and material resistance exposes how discourses of religious asceticism conflate humility with self-abasement, potentially reducing *tazkiyah* to performative suffering rather than ethical awakening. Taha’s *tazkiyah*-based *iz’āj* is transformative precisely because it empowers the self to agitate against injustice, not merely endure it.

Additionally, at the core of *Ambiguous Adventure* lies a profound interrogation of the colonial fracturing of human existence into competing domains of spiritual devotion and material necessity. This schism, introduced through the epistemic violence of Western education, manifests most acutely in Samba Diallo’s crisis of consciousness as he grapples with the artificial opposition between prayer and labor, mirroring the polarization between inner reform and material resistance. His anguished reflection, “why did I think of prayer and life in terms of opposition? He prays, he does not live [...] I am the only one who could have this bizarre idea of a life which could be lived, in some fashion, outside the presence of God,”<sup>97</sup> reveals how colonial modernity imposes a binary ontology alien to the Islamic worldview. Where the Diallobé tradition understands work as an extension of *taqwā* (God-consciousness), colonial rationality reduces labor to instrumental toil, stripping it of its sacral potential. This exemplifies Taha’s critique of *tasayyud*, rendering ethics not ancillary to knowledge or politics, rather their precondition. Thierno’s pedagogy reflects such a fusion. When Samba recalls acquiring

“the Word of God [...] by the whole being,”<sup>98</sup> he affirms embodied cognition. The sacred is not absorbed through abstraction but etched into the self through discipline and repetition. Thierno’s harsh methods are not punitive but pedagogical: they enact *tazkiyah* through a slow cultivation of sincerity. The body-political here becomes not only a matter of social embeddedness. Far from being a site of decay or distraction, it becomes the ground of divine proximity because *rūḥ*-political ethics locates the political within the inner transformation of the self, rendering the latter as the temporal and spiritual basis of structural and systematic insurgency.

Within the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*, action is not divorced from divine orientation. By contrast, colonial modernity elevates labor and efficiency above all. The principal’s comment that “the school only teaches men to join wood to wood,”<sup>99</sup> reduces education to mere construction. Samba’s horror at a life “outside the presence of God”<sup>100</sup> articulates a deeper metaphysical dislocation. Where Islamic epistemology sees work as *‘ibādah* (a form of worship), colonial logic sees it in terms of production, detached from soul, community, or eschatology. Samba’s father offers a corrective: “if a man believes in God, the time he takes from prayer for work is still prayer. It is even a very beautiful prayer.”<sup>101</sup> This vision is underpinned by Taha’s *al-‘aql al-mu’ayyad* (supported reason),<sup>102</sup> which unites material effort with spiritual intention. In this paradigm, neither labor nor resistance is envisioned only in material or secular terms. Rather, they become sacramental, i.e., an expression of gratitude and custodianship. Yet, Kane resists synthesis. The Diallobé’s dilemma: “can one learn this without forgetting that and is what one learns worth what one forgets?”—captures the existential paradox of decolonial becoming. The Most Royal Lady’s agricultural metaphor—“We plough [our fields] up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury [our seed] in the earth”<sup>103</sup>—captures the paradox of *ibdā’*: preservation requires transformation, survival demands surrender. Her vision transcends the binary of resistance/accommodation by framing adaptation as an act of ethical stewardship, where sending children to the foreign school becomes a sacred risk akin to planting seeds in barren soil, complacency without severing ties to tradition. The Most Royal

Lady's insistence on teaching the youth to embrace life embodies *iz'āj*'s proactive ethos, which reimagines resistance as the cultivation of life-affirming values within hostile epistemic terrain.

### Insurgent *Wujdān*: The Most Royal Lady's Ethics of *iz'āj*

In *Ambiguous Adventure*, the Most Royal Lady emerges, through the lens of *rūh*-politics, as the novel's most potent narrative embodiment of *al-zā'ij*, mobilizing *iz'āj* as both critique and ethical guidance. She is introduced as the older sister of the Diallobé Chief and the older cousin of the protagonist, Samba Diallo. She holds a pre-eminent position of power and moral authority within the Diallobé ruling elite, possessing a "haughty and imposing visage,"<sup>104</sup> and an "extraordinarily luminous gaze."<sup>105</sup> She is so formidable that the countryside reportedly feared her more than her brother, the Chief. Her authority was historically established by military force and political efficacy, having "pacified the North by her firmness,"<sup>106</sup> a feat that earned her the name, "the Most Royal Lady"<sup>107</sup> from the subjugated tribes. She acts as the vital and decisive counterpoint to the Chief, who tends toward introspection and peace. Her brother implicitly acknowledges her function when he tells the Teacher Thierno, "My brother is the living heart of this country, but you are its conscience."<sup>108</sup> Her actions are driven by such an authoritative conscience. She physically intervenes to halt the trajectory of the protagonist Samba Diallo, proclaiming, "I have warned your great fool of a father that your place is not at the teacher's hearth [...] I am going to put an end to all that."<sup>109</sup>

Designating her as *al-zā'ij* stems directly from the lucidity and *wujdān* of her vision, which refuses the paralyzing binaries torpefying the Diallobé leadership. Her wisdom is anchored in a pragmatic realism that transcends merely preserving the past and accurately assesses the existential colonial threat. She argues that the "foreign school is the new form of the war"<sup>110</sup> being waged against them, and therefore they must learn "the art of conquering without being in the right."<sup>111</sup> This is not a wisdom of retreat, but a prophetic insistence that spiritual truths must be dynamically applied to contemporary historical challenges. She directly

performs *iz‘āj* by standing against the Teacher’s spiritual rigidity and “values of death,”<sup>112</sup> asserting that the community must instead “teach our sons to live.”<sup>113</sup> Her critical urgency is grounded in socio-economic necessity, as she warns that inaction will lead to ruin, stating pointedly that “extreme poverty is, down here, the principal enemy of God.”<sup>114</sup> This wisdom culminates in her decision to frame adaptation as an act of *amānah* and sacred stewardship, captured in her powerful agricultural metaphor, “we plough them up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury them in the earth.”<sup>115</sup> By insisting that preservation demands transformation, she champions a *wujdān*-driven ethical clarity that enables the creative intervention necessary for the community’s survival. Therefore, her political authority is ultimately deployed to enforce a spiritual reorientation of the collective toward life, necessity, and dynamic fidelity.

Through her principled defiance of colonial binaries and internal spiritual rigidity, she enacts a decolonial praxis rooted in Islamic ethics. Her confrontation with Thierno, the spiritual teacher and custodian of the Diallobé tradition, is not simply a generational or ideological disagreement; it is a performative enactment of an *iz‘āj* that disrupts the moral absolutism masked as piety. However, it is paramount to underscore that the depiction of multiple spiritually dedicated figures, particularly the Teacher (Thierno) and Samba Diallo, requires a philosophical distinction vis-à-vis the difference between their ethical devotion and The Most Royal Lady’s specific enactment of *iz‘āj*. Such a distinction is one of kind and telos, rather than merely degree. While many figures embody the essential preconditions for *iz‘āj*, namely, rigorous inner purification and rejection of ego-politics, the Most Royal Lady alone performs the dynamic and generative intervention required of *al-zā‘ij*.

The Teacher Thierno is the dedicated master whose entire life is consecrated to teaching the Word. His harsh pedagogy is based on combating *tasayyud*, as he believed that genuine worship of God is incompatible with the idolization of human beings.<sup>116</sup> His methods, using switches and burning faggots, are a form of demanding suffering to achieve humility and ensure the “pure and limpid”<sup>117</sup> flow of the Word. Similarly, Samba Diallo’s discomfort with his noble status, describing his

patrician origin as “a diadem which was too cumbersome and too much in evidence,”<sup>118</sup> and his participation in ritual begging exemplify *al-inzi‘āj* (inner disquiet) and *tazkiyah* necessary for ethical self-refinement. These characters embody the requisite ethical preparation and self-discipline that prevents resistance from devolving into instrumental calculation.

However, the core distinction lies in how the ethical ideal is applied in a moment of existential crisis. The Teacher’s spiritual profundity leads to paralysis when confronted with the colonial threat, demonstrating that *tazkiyah* alone is insufficient for collective decolonial action. As we have noted before, he risks reducing Islamic ethics to unpracticed virtue whereby fixating on the values of death leads the fossilization of Islam into a shrine of self-sacrifice, where vitality gives way to ritualized remembrance. When faced with the dilemma of the foreign school, he sees the paths as fundamentally opposed and “inflexible.”<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, he admits defeat stating, “but do not ask me what should be done tomorrow morning, for that I do not know.”<sup>120</sup> His moral absolutism prevents him from achieving the dynamic and generative foresight required for *iz‘āj*.

In contrast, the Most Royal Lady embodies *iz‘āj* because her intervention is transformative and aimed at societal reformation. As noted at the beginning of this section, she demands that the Diallobé cultivates the values of life, acting as an epistemoral agitator against the quietism and rigidity of the Teacher. Her proposals, actions, and visions are the necessary creative intervention that breaks the collective paralysis of the community. Thus, while the Teacher embodies the necessary ethical foundation, the Most Royal Lady embodies the active and generative *wujdān*-driven moment of *iz‘āj*, the critical philosophical step that moves beyond inner purity to ethical insurgency. This generative quality of her *wujdān* is dramatically demonstrated in her confrontation with the spiritual authority of Thierno, where she articulates her philosophy as a moral imperative. She declares:

I believe that the time has come to teach our sons to live. I foresee that they will have to do with a world of the living, in which the values of death will be scoffed at and bankrupt. Thierno, I am

not saying that you are wrong. But I think that the new world has upset the old values, and that we ought to find a way of keeping what is essential in them, while adapting ourselves to the life that is coming.<sup>121</sup>

Here, she articulates *iz'āj* not as a nihilistic rejection of tradition but as a moral disturbance that reclaims Islamic ethics as a dynamic and life-affirming force. Her call to “teach our sons to live” is simultaneously a critique of Thierno’s asceticism and an affirmation of *tawḥīd*—the unitive principle that insists on the inseparability of the spiritual and the material. She does not dismiss Thierno’s commitment to spiritual discipline; rather, she exposes its misapplication in the face of historical urgency. Her intervention critiques the reduction of Islamic ethics to metaphysical detachment and reasserts it as a *wujūdān*-driven engagement with worldly life. The Most Royal Lady’s inner moral sensibility grounds her speech in ethical insight rather than intellectual abstraction. When she tells Samba Diallo that “the teacher is trying to kill the life in you,”<sup>122</sup> she is not denying the value of spiritual formation but indicting its instrumentalization toward docility and disengagement. Thierno’s fixation on death as a pedagogical moral horizon risks ossifying Islam into a museum of self-sacrifice, that is severed from the demands of colonial subjugation. The Most Royal Lady’s emphasis on life is thus not a secular deviation but a prophetic insistence that spiritual truths must be reanimated to meet historical challenges.

Such an ethical reorientation is dramatized against the community’s above-mentioned paralyzing dilemma about the worth of learning at the expense of forgetting. It encapsulates the existential stakes of colonial education for the Diallobé, between the promise of technical mastery and the peril of cultural amnesia. In response, the Most Royal Lady sacralizes adaptation as *amānah*. Her agricultural metaphor reinforces such sacredness: “we plough [our fields] up and burn them: we kill them. In the same way [...] we bury [our seed] in the earth”<sup>123</sup> In her hands, adaptation becomes an act of faith, not capitulation. She invokes the image of sowing seeds in fallow soil to signify that the act of sending children to colonial schools must be approached not as cultural betrayal

but as a risk of spiritual stewardship. Her intervention also problematizes the Chief's epistemological impasse. While he hesitates before the possible erosion of values, she insists on distinguishing between the essential and the dispensable. Her proposal to preserve what is essential while adapting to change exemplifies what Taha denounces in those who confuse *al-jawhar* (essence) with *al-lawāzim* (incidental additions). She reclaims such a decolonial discernment through *wujdān*—the ethical intuition that recognizes the core of tradition while challenging its fossilization. Thus, her *iz'āj* diverges sharply from Thierno's rigidity, as seen in his reply: "I do not see how, Madame. We move along parallel lines, and both are inflexible."<sup>124</sup> The "parallel lines" reveals a worldview that sees dialogue as impossible, not because of difference but because of inflexibility. In contrast, the Most Royal Lady's agitation opens the possibility for synthesis, what Kane terms "ambiguous adventure." Her ethical clarity allows her to hold paradox without paralysis, advocating neither wholesale rejection of tradition nor blind embrace of modernity.

Her authority amplifies the weight of her critique. Kane presents her not merely as a dissenting voice but as a commanding presence: "She had pacified the North by her firmness. The tribes subjugated by her extraordinary personality had been kept in obedience by her prestige. It was the North that had given her the name 'the Most Royal Lady.'<sup>125</sup> Her confrontation with Thierno is therefore not an emotional appeal but a politically and morally calculated intervention. Her leadership is characterized by a unique fusion of spiritual insight and strategic foresight. When she says, "If I do not tell the Diallobé to go to the new school, they will not go. Their houses will fall into ruins, their children will die or be reduced to slavery,"<sup>126</sup> she is not fearmongering but articulating a lucid vision of the socio-economic collapse that will follow inaction. What distinguishes her *iz'āj* is that it is not only oppositional but creative, seeking to realign the ethical compass of her community. Her challenge is grounded in *wujdān*, not ideology, and this allows her to speak with both urgency and humility. Her earlier intervention with Samba Diallo, "I have warned your great fool of a father that your place is not at the teacher's hearth [...] I am going to put an end to all that,"<sup>127</sup> is not mere maternal concern. It is an assertion that spiritual vitality

must manifest in the world, not retreat from it. In the Most Royal Lady, Kane stages a profound meditation on ethical leadership in the context of colonial modernity. Her capacity to hold complexity, to discern between the essential and the incidental, and to reframe survival as sacred stewardship makes her the clearest literary figure of *al-zā'ij*. Her legacy lies in her ability to hold paradox without succumbing to powerlessness. She neither sanctifies the past nor capitulates to the present but navigates the “ambiguous adventure” of decolonial healing with a *wujdān*-driven clarity that transcends ideological purity. In a world reduced by colonial logic to “joining wood to wood,” the Most Royal Lady’s voice resounds as a call to reweave the fabric of being, where labor is devotion, adaptation is fidelity, and decolonial survival is nothing less than sacred continuity.

## Conclusion

Abderrahmane Taha’s *iz‘āj* reframes decolonial resistance as an ethically anchored and spiritually transformative praxis, grounded in *tazkiyah* and *fiṭrah*. The *majāl al-tadāwulī* framework offers a roadmap for reconstituting agency, shifting resistance from ego-political domination to *rūḥ*-political stewardship. Taha adamantly insists that ethical transformation is the foundation for sustainable justice, rejecting the binary of inner purification versus external resistance as a betrayal of Islamic ethical ontology. True transformation requires an ethically grounded praxis that unites inner renewal with external struggle. *Al-zā'ij* discloses that Islamically-anchored resistance is animated by a transgressive *ikhhlāṣ* that ruptures the idolatries of the *nafs*’ tyrannical lordship and hegemonic reason. Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *Ambiguous Adventure* crystallizes these principles: Samba Diallo’s spiritual crisis and the Most Royal Lady’s insurgent critique exemplify *iz‘āj*’s dual focus—agitating against external oppression while cultivating an inner ethical compass capacious enough to bear the trust of *istikhlāf* (ethical stewardship). Beyond Islamic thought, *iz‘āj* challenges decolonial scholarship to integrate transcendence and moral accountability into critiques of power, resisting the reduction of liberation to material or institutional change.

## Endnotes

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- 7 In keeping with Abderrahmane Taha's own clarification, made in his response to Wael Hallaq's study on his thought, I follow the name order "Abderrahmane Taha," since he indicated that Taha is his family name rather than Abderrahmane. See Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), xvi.
- 8 In his philosophy, the concept *al-majāl al-tadāwulī* could be rendered as the pragmatic-discursive-cultural domain or field. His formulation and its relevance to the decolonial discussion in the Islamic world is to be found in the next section. Please also note that, when written in full, the concept is transliterated as *al-majāl al-tadāwulī*. However, to avoid redundant repetition of the first definite article (i.e., the / *al-*), where stylistically appropriate we have preferred phrasing such as "the *majāl al-tadāwulī*" and "the Islamic *majāl al-tadāwulī*."
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- 11 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

- 12 Mohammed Hashas translates *al-istikhlāfas* “the principle of Caliphate,” and further explains that it “holds the highest rank after divinity itself. God has willed that man does not only care for his private matters but also carries the honorary message of inheriting the world, a deposit (*amānah*) he should ethically care about.” Mohammed Ḥaṣḥas *The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2019), 190. For a further discussion of how Taha’s project can engage with and transcend alternative, transmodern, and pluriversal perspectives, see Guennouni Idrissi, Achraf. “Misreading the Rūḥ: Taha Abderrahmane, Enrique Dussel and the Ethics of Decolonial Modernities.” *Postcolonial Studies* (2025): 1-24.
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- 14 Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
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- 17 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 45.
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- 19 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 45.
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- 23 For a thorough discussion of these principles, see, Taha Abderrahmane, *Rūḥ al-dīn: Min dīq al-‘almāniyya ilā sa’at al-i’ṭimāniyya*, 4th ed. (Dār al-Bayḍā’: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2017), 23–44.

- 24 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
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- 26 Taha Abderrahmane, "Taha Responding", in Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 275.
- 27 Harald Viersen, *The Time of Turāth: Authenticity and Temporality in Contemporary Arab Thought*. (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 353.
- 28 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 14.
- 29 Taha Abderrahmane, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadāthah al-Islāmiyyah*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2013).
- 30 See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "What is Decolonial Critique?," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 41, No. 1 (2020): 157–83; Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas," in *Towards a Just Curriculum Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 147–64; Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies*, 21, No. 2–3 (2007): 168–78.
- 31 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 22.
- 32 Taha, *al-Ḥaqq al-'Arabī*, 71.
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- 34 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 14.
- 35 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah*, 18.
- 36 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah*, 18.
- 37 Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, No. 7–8 (2009): 14.
- 38 Taha distinguishes three degrees of reason: (1) *Abstract reasoning* (*al-'aql al-mujar-rad*), purely theoretical and detached from ethics/religion (dominant in philosophy); (2) *Guided reasoning* (*al-'aql al-musaddad*), rule-bound and juristic but limited to textual formalism (dominant in fiqh); and (3) *Supported reasoning* (*al-'aql al-mu'ayyad*), which integrates intellect, spiritual insight (*ma'rifah*), and divine grace, grounding knowledge in ethical self-purificatory critique (*tazkiyah*). The hierarchy critiques secular and reductionist epistemologies, positioning Sufi-inflected reason as the highest form of ethical-intellectual praxis. For a detailed exposition of these degree see Taha Abderrahmane, *al-'Amal al-dīnī wa-tajdīd al-'aql*, 2nd ed. (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1997). For a brief sketch of levels of reason in English, see Farid Suleiman, "The Philosophy of Taha Abderrahman: A Critical

- Study,” *Die Welt Des Islams*, 61, No. 1 (2021): 49-50; Mostafa Amakdouf, “Su’āl al-Akhlāq bayna al-Dīn wa-l-‘Aql al-Mujarrad: ‘Alī ‘Izzat Bīgūvītsh wa-Tāha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Namūdḥajan” in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 78–103.
- 39 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 510.
- 40 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 41 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 29.
- 42 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 52.
- 43 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 16.
- 44 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 16.
- 45 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 60. See also Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 14.
- 46 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 47 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 59.
- 48 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 40.
- 49 Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 14. See also Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 73. In fact, Taha inaugurates a rupture with the Western conception of the human by displacing the primacy of rationality as its defining trait, and reinstating the ethical as the cardinal mark of human distinctiveness. Taha Abderrahmane, *Su’āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhamah fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqī li-l-Ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2000), 13-14.
- 50 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27. Taha further explains that the basis of being oriented by the Absolute is a triad of complete sincerity. As an exemplar of Islamic resistance, *al-zā’ij* embodies such a unique paradigm of “*ṣīdq kāmil*,” one that transcends the personal to include transparency with the Ummah, honesty with the enemy, and integrity in political engagement (the world). As such, *iz’āj* serves not only as a political force but as an ethical and pedagogical model which challenges the prevailing norms of deceit in global political culture. See Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 75-76.
- 51 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27.
- 52 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 27.
- 53 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 17.
- 54 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302.
- 55 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.
- 56 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 510.
- 57 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 513.
- 58 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 296.
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- 72 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 52.
- 73 Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity*, 208.
- 74 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 297.
- 75 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298.
- 76 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298-299.
- 77 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 298-299.
- 78 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 300.
- 79 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 300.
- 80 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302.
- 81 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought,” 4.
- 82 See Masoud Budoukha, “Milestones of Terminological Renewal of Taha Abdul Rahman,” *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu‘āṣir*, 21, No. 83 (2016): 87–112; Nourreddine Benkaddou, “Philosophical Independence and Renewal of Taha AbdurRahman,” *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu‘āṣir*, 24, No. 93 (2018): 119–43; Muḥammad Al-Shahabī and Fayṣal A. Būzāhir, “Su’al Tajdid al-Manhaj al-Kalāmī ‘inda Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān: Dirāsah fi Fiqh ‘līm al-Kalām,” *Majallat Namā’*, 7, No. 3 (2023): 124–54.
- 83 Taha, *al-Ḥadāthah wa-l-Muqāwamah*, 35.
- 84 Taha, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302
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- 124 Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, 31.
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# Faith and Loyalty: A Short History of the Muslims of Colonial New Zealand

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ABDULLAH MARTIN DRURY

## Abstract

The popular association of Muslim immigration to New Zealand with recent Asian and African arrivals obscures a longer trajectory of settlement dating to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. From the 1850s onward, Muslim individuals and families have migrated, lived, and worked across various regions of the country, contributing in diverse yet often unacknowledged ways to New Zealand's

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historical tapestry. This paper examines the first century of Muslim presence, mapping key phases of migration and the gradual emergence of Islamic institutions. It also interrogates the archival silence surrounding these communities, arguing that their marginalisation in dominant historical narratives belies a rich and instructive legacy. The evidence recovered not only illuminates the lived experiences of early Muslim settlers but also offers insight into the broader dynamics of religious adaptation and social integration in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

**Keywords:** Colonial New Zealand, Muslim diaspora, South Asian migration

## Introduction

This essay aims to trace the first few decades of Muslim presence in colonial New Zealand, spanning from 1841 to 1907. In 2019, terrorist shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, drew international attention to this small faith group and generated much interest in their presence and activities—their history, less so. Today, the Islamic community in New Zealand—estimated at approximately 60,000—is marked by pronounced diversity in ethnicity, profession, education, social class, and regional dispersion, rendering generalizations about contemporary dynamics increasingly imprecise.<sup>1</sup> Broadly, the community may be categorized into four intersecting groups. First, immigrants from varied national origins, including both recent arrivals and long-term residents. Second, refugees from African, Asian, and European regions. Third, converts from Anglo-European and Polynesian backgrounds, whose affiliations with Islam arise through theological conviction or intermarriage. Fourth, and increasingly prominent, are the New Zealand-born descendants of these groups, shaped by hybrid identities and situated within local cultural milieus. A minority emerge from mixed-faith or mixed-ethnic households, further complicating communal boundaries. These layers of origin and social adaptation suggest an evolving matrix of Muslim

identity in New Zealand—one whose implications for civic inclusion, religious representation, and intergenerational transmission merit critical attention.

Scholarly engagement with the early history of this community has often been cursory, with some commentators contending that a compelling narrative is unattainable due to the fragmentary nature of archival sources. Such assessments argue that the paucity of documentation precludes meaningful analysis of personal religious practices or communal characteristics. However, this essay contends that even the silences and absences within the historical record are analytically fruitful. The nuanced religious dispositions and pragmatic adaptations exhibited by early Muslim settlers—though inconsistently preserved—invite interpretive reflection. Textual ambiguities, contradictions, and historiographical gaps, rather than obstructing inquiry, enhance its depth. These liminal spaces reveal a complex interplay of belief, identity, and settlement that merits sustained attention.

To trace the Muslim presence in colonial New Zealand is to engage with historical constellations that extend beyond discrete migration events and to explore a complex and evolving constellation of competing and cooperating social hierarchies. Early Muslim settlers arrived not merely as isolated individuals but as participants in broader imperial, commercial, and socio-cultural networks. Their trajectories and fealties reflect the mobility patterns of indentured laborers, sailors, merchants, and hawkers situated within the British imperial web and regional circuits spanning South Asia, the Middle East, and Australasia. Yet, despite these transnational linkages, prevailing historiography has largely overlooked their stories, treating Muslim presence as an incidental footnote rather than a formative strand of the colonial experience. Recovering and contextualizing these lives reframes the early religious landscape of New Zealand as one marked by pluralism, ambiguity, and quiet persistence. Ultimately, by foregrounding interpretive tension and embracing the fragmentary contours of the record, this work seeks to contribute a more textured understanding of the history of the early formative period of the Muslim community in New Zealand.

## Foundations

In May 1841, New Zealand was proclaimed a colony by the British authorities.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this date, New Zealand was inhabited by Polynesian tribes for approximately 500 to 800 hundred years.<sup>3</sup> The colony lasted until September 1907 when it transitioned into a self-governing Dominion—a status that remained until its legal reconstitution as a Realm in 1983. This colonial period coincided with the arrival of the European settler population—the colonists, mostly from the British Isles.<sup>4</sup> These folk built the country, introduced law and order, and created a modern economy. This era also saw the earliest Muslim settlers, many of whom hailed from British India. The contribution of India and Indians to the colonial and developmental trajectory of New Zealand has often been understated in local historiography. Beyond the prevalence of Indian place names (Berhampore, Khandallah, Bombay Hills, and so forth), the scholarship of Jacqueline Leckie has foregrounded the diverse presence of Indian settlers—predominantly Hindu and Sikh, though including Muslim and Christian migrants—whose socio-economic contributions shaped emerging settler society.<sup>5</sup>

I consider the role of early Muslim migrants as warranting particular attention. Analogous to the influence exerted by European pioneers—sailors, whalers, merchants, and missionaries—in cultivating Anglo-European institutions and identity, Muslim forerunners similarly laid foundations for the development of Muslim minority communities in New Zealand. These individuals did not merely reside within colonial society but actively participated in the structuring of religious and communal identities that would evolve throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their historical significance, though frequently overshadowed, remains integral to understanding the pluralistic fabric of New Zealand’s national narrative.

Prevailing historiography has long cited the 1874 government census—which recorded 17 individuals under the designation “Mahometans”—as marking the inaugural presence of Muslims in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup> However, my own recent research has revealed an earlier Muslim settlement, challenging this conventional starting point.<sup>7</sup> Evidence suggests that a Muslim

family resided in Canterbury from the 1850s, with the first clearly identifiable Muslim settler being Mahomet Wuzerah (alternatively recorded as Wuzerah Moosalman), commonly known simply as Wuzerah. His arrival in New Zealand appears to have coincided with his employment under Sir John Cracroft Wilson (1808–1881), who disembarked at the port of Lyttelton in 1854 aboard the *Akbar*. Wilson subsequently acquired property on the southern base of the Port Hills—land encompassing swamp and low hill terrain—which he named Cashmere, in reference to Kashmir, India. Notably, Wuzerah’s presence is corroborated by his involvement in a legal proceeding dated 1858, thereby constituting the earliest documented appearance of a Muslim in New Zealand’s judicial records. This finding urges a reconsideration of the temporal and demographic contours of early Muslim settlement in New Zealand, underscoring the interpretive value of archival recovery and historical nuance.

The case which occupied the Court to-day was an action brought against one Goorden, a native of India, by Wuzeera another Indian, for a robbery of some money from the house of the latter on the 27th September last. Both were servants of Mr. Wilson, of Cashmere. Both parties being ignorant of the English language, Mr. P. Ashton acted as interpreter, and the witnesses Wuzeera and his wife were sworn upon the Koran (English translation) and repeated the Mahometan formula and genuflexions of a solemn oath.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of Wuzerah in Canterbury was familial, not solitary. Archival press sources identify his wife, Mindia, and two sons, Pero and Mero, born in India circa 1850s. Subsequently, two additional sons—Noora and Rabbi—appear to have been born at Cashmere around 1859 and 1861. Wuzerah, identified in the newspapers as a “Mahometan,” contributed to the 1857 Indian Relief Fund alongside Anglo-Saxon donors, colonists. I think his inclusion underscored his sociocultural proximity and loyalty to other Christian-European settlers despite ethnoreligious difference.<sup>9</sup> The 1861 government census recorded four individuals under the classification “Mahometans,” likely referencing Wuzerah and his

immediate household, thereby marking the first official recognition of Muslim residents in New Zealand.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously “Wazera Noora” was later involved in horse breeding and by the 1890s was selling trotting stallions in Otago.<sup>11</sup> This is almost certainly the New Zealand-born son of the Wuzerah mentioned above. Throughout the 19th century, members of Wuzerah’s family were involved in multiple legal proceedings, including an inquest following the drowning of one son. These events generated a modest but invaluable corpus of official documentation, offering historians a rare—albeit asymmetrical—glimpse into the internal dynamics and lived experiences of an early Muslim settler household in colonial New Zealand.<sup>12</sup>

The *Star* newspaper, dated 1 May 1902, published an obituary for Wuzerah under the alias “Bezire,” describing him as a bullock driver who transported stone from a Port Hills quarry for the construction of Christchurch Cathedral in the 1870s. Whether viewed as a pragmatic labor engagement or an instance of early interfaith labor integration, this contribution by a Muslim settler to a major Christian institution holds considerable symbolic weight. The death of Wuzerah from heart disease at the Cashmere property—where his son Mero reportedly discovered the body—received detailed coverage in the *Christchurch Star*, and more succinct mention in several regional newspapers, including those in Auckland, Otago, and Wanganui. I suggest that this was evidence of their integration into colonial communal life. His burial record at Sydenham Cemetery lists him as a pensioner under the Cracroft Wilson family, while press accounts estimated his age at death to be between 80 and 100 years. The widespread attention suggests that an Indian Muslim’s life and passing in colonial New Zealand elicited notable public interest, further emphasizing the social visibility of early Muslim presence during this formative period.<sup>13</sup>

The progeny of Wuzerah seem to have remained in the Christchurch region into the early 20th century, contributing to its laboring workforce. His son, Mero Wiggers, a resident of Drain Road, Halswell, died in 1927 at the age of 75.<sup>14</sup> His brother, Noah Wizerō—a laborer of Hoon Hay—was interred in the same plot on 25 September 1928.<sup>15</sup> Their younger sibling, Rabbi (also recorded as Robert Wazero), born in Christchurch,

worked as a farm laborer and resided on Cashmere Road. He died aged 79 on 21 March 1941 and was buried in Block 29A Plot 33 at Sydenham Cemetery.<sup>16</sup> The exact identity of Wuzerah remains difficult to verify, with significant ambiguity surrounding his full name and historical documentation.

## South Asians

The 1871 Otago regional census recorded a single individual designated as a “Mussulman,” almost certainly Mahomet Khan, who is understood to be the earliest traceable Muslim resident in the region.<sup>17</sup> Khan reportedly worked in the Kyeburn goldfields circa 1869 during the Otago gold rush. His surname suggests Indian origin, though no further biographical detail is available.<sup>18</sup> By April 1874, the government census identified 15 Chinese Muslim goldminers residing in Dunstan, Otago—reflecting both the ethnic diversity and religious plurality of the colonial goldfields. Additionally, two Muslims were recorded in Auckland and Dunedin, respectively.<sup>19</sup> From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Indian men began settling in New Zealand in increasing numbers. Many of these migrants formed households through marriage with local women, predominantly of Anglo-European descent, marking a slow but sustained expansion of South Asian Muslim presence across New Zealand’s urban and rural landscapes.<sup>20</sup> Curiously enough, one of the first identifiable Muslims living in Dunedin in the 1870s was “Butterdean” (presumably Badruddin) “a Mahommedan, born in Cashmere.” We know little of the rest of his dress but in 1875 he was described as having “recently arrived in this Province” and was “wearing the turban in court” as a witness.<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary newspaper accounts from the 1870s document the presence of an elderly Indian lascar residing in impoverished circumstances within one of New Zealand’s port cities. Despite his material hardship, reportage conveyed a tone of sympathy and quiet respect, suggesting a degree of public recognition for his laboring past and dignified endurance. Such references offer rare insight into the socio-economic realities and public perceptions of non-European maritime workers in colonial urban settings:

Baba, a Hindoo, who was remanded on a charge of vagrancy, in order that might be seen what would be done with him, as he was very old and decrepit, was again brought up. Sergeant-Major Parry said nothing could be done except sending him to gaol. The Bench, out of kindness, ordered the prisoner's confinement in Mount Eden for three months.<sup>22</sup>

Newspaper references to the individual as "Hindu" likely reflect reductive journalistic shorthand conflating Indian ethnicity with religious identity. The name "Ali Baba" also appears improbable as an authentic identifier, more plausibly serving as an Anglo-European substitute for a Muslim name. Records suggest he had resided in the colony for an extended period, lacked familial ties or dependents, and was unsupported by any official agency. A similar case recurred the following year, underscoring the isolation of elderly laborers of non-European origin. The condition of Ali Baba did not improve and he was remanded in court on identical charges the following year:

Ali Baba, a Hindoo, was brought up on a charge of vagrancy, having been found in an oil jar in Chancery Lane, and having no visible means of employment. Sub-Inspector Parry described the old man as miserably poor and inoffensive, and rather than allow him to starve, had brought him to Court. His Worship remanded the old man until Monday to consider what should be done with him.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his infirmity, incarceration appears to have been framed as a form of provisional charity, offering shelter and sustenance to a man perceived as law-abiding and loyal—but basically destitute.<sup>24</sup> His final mention in the press placed him within a refuge for impoverished men in the city. A newspaper article places him in a room alongside an aged Maori warrior—Hori Henni of the Taranaki province—as well as a superannuated sea captain and a retired dancing master.<sup>25</sup> These men represented an eclectic assembly of the marginalized yet diverse constituents of colonial society.

This old Hindoo shares a room with his dark-skinned brother of New Zealand. Baba is a well-known character. He used to show a decided partiality for empty outhouses and was often found roosting amongst the fowls, not with any predatory object, for the old man is a staunch idolater, and would not even steal a copy of Confucius on the Laws of Menu if he found one lying handy. In reply to inquiries, the old man managed through a mist of broken English to convey the impression that he had never been more happy and contented in his life. He is always sure of food, shelter, and clothing, and on fine days can bask in the sunshine and contemplate the beauties of Parnell and the North Shore. The only thing he misses is the turban and a few other odd luxuries to which he was accustomed in days of yore on Indias Coral Strand. Baba has been brought up 999 times more or less for having no visible means of support.<sup>26</sup>

Ali Baba appears to have died in 1877. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, scattered court records and newspaper reports reveal a small but active cohort of South Asian Muslim hawkers operating within New Zealand's urban landscapes. In 1887, one "Ammer Nuddeen"—likely a transliteration of Amir Nuruddeen—successfully brought legal action to recover £2 for dress material supplied to a local client.<sup>27</sup> His subsequent disappearance from public record suggests a probable migration to Australia or return to South Asia, following patterns common among itinerant Asian traders. Further episodes underscore the occupational and social precarity of these individuals. In January 1889, the residence of one "Moslemalli" (Muslim Ali) on Newtown Road was burgled, with textiles among the stolen items (shawls and handkerchiefs).<sup>28</sup> Later that year in September, "Haniff," another Indian hawker, unsuccessfully sought legal restitution for unpaid goods.<sup>29</sup> In 1891, "Isser Alli" (likely Isa Ali) initiated legal proceedings against Alfred Greenway for silk handkerchiefs supplied to sex workers associated with brothels; another hawker, "Deedor Box" (interpretable as Deedar Baksh), served as witness.<sup>30</sup> These cases not only reflect economic interactions across class and gender lines, but also register the hawkers' engagement with local legal mechanisms.

Violence and discrimination also marked their experiences. In February 1891, “Goolam Basar” (Ghulam Bashir) was physically assaulted while seeking shelter under a veranda in Karangahape Road.<sup>31</sup> In April 1894 during the month of Ramadan (1311 AH), a legal altercation occurred involving “two Hindoos and a Persian” named Hasan Alli—all hawkers—who were charged with assaulting Abdul Khan. The incident raises questions regarding intra-community tensions, possibly exacerbated by religious observance, though the sources remain silent on such specifics.<sup>32</sup> These are all Muslim names. Was the flare up fueled by the fasting month? Were these Muslims fasting and observing the tenets of their faith? We cannot know for certain. The court case involving “three natives of India” was flummoxed by issues surrounding language, with the complainant rejecting the assigned interpreter for alleged bias.<sup>33</sup> The *New Zealand Herald* reported in tones stentorian and sententious:

It seems strange considering the few Persian lollie dealers that ply their calling in our city that they cannot carry on their trade without falling out. But judging from the proceedings at the Magistrate’s Court yesterday, it would appear that competition is so keen between them that it often leads to strife, and that jealousy exists among them to a greater extent than among our own tradesmen. [...] The hearing of the case lasted the greater part of the day. A large number of witnesses were examined on both sides.<sup>34</sup>

The case and testimonies were taken seriously, some charges were dismissed, and fines were issued. This episode offers a compelling lens through which to examine interethnic and interreligious dynamics in late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Auckland. At once illustrative of socio-cultural negotiation and symbolic representation, the narrative documents moments of interaction between Muslims and Christians, Anglo-Europeans and South Asians, capturing the interpretive agency and emotional registers of those involved. The journalist’s approach to the subject matter—undertaken with evident acuity and literary flair—remains strikingly resonant, affording valuable insight into the period’s public discourse. Notably,

the conduct attributed to the “Persians” reflects much on both colonial society and the Muslim presence within.

The case itself, preserved and filtered through local media reportage, assumes an archetypal quality, emblematic of broader patterns in urban colonial life. Its imagery—of immigrant men navigating modest livelihoods amid a growing metropolis—evokes the social textures of Auckland during the turn-of-century and its lower-class milieu and disrupts monolithic portrayals of settler society. Framed within the macro-economic development and emerging urbanization of New Zealand, this account foregrounds human mobility, precarity, and pluralism at the margins of colonial orthodoxy. It arguably marks one of the earliest instances in which the voices of Muslim residents surface in local public record—men articulating lived concerns, negotiating status, and expressing sentiment within a society in formation. It is interesting to note the appellation “Persian” being applied broadly here and the distinction drawn to “our tradesmen”<sup>35</sup> (by which the newspaper almost certainly meant Anglo-European). This reporting underscores the evolving power dynamics between media proprietors, their readership, and the represented subjects. Importantly, it highlights the active role individual Muslims played in shaping public perceptions of cultural and religious plurality, alongside international affairs. Immigrant activity remained a recurrent focus of popular journalism within the colonial public sphere.

In the 1890s, Dunedin court records reveal the presence of two Muslim men—“Abdul Borham” (likely Burhan) and “Soloman Shah” (possibly Suleiman)—presumed to be hawkers from Bengal, eastern India. In 1893, Borham was party to a legal dispute involving another hawker.<sup>36</sup> A contemporary report in the Christchurch Press simply calls him and Charles Abraham “Assyrians”<sup>37</sup> although the Christchurch Star presented Shah as “an Indian hawker.”<sup>38</sup> Unhelpfully, an earlier account in the *Otago Daily Times* simply called both Shah and Abdul Boreham “two Hindoos.”<sup>39</sup> By 1898, Shah was residing in Christchurch but was arrested and returned to Dunedin for neglecting to support two illegitimate children—Solomon and Robert McGuire—born to Isabella McGuire in 1896 and 1897. He was defended by prominent lawyer Alfred Charles Hanlon (1866–1944). Shah subsequently married McGuire and fathered

a daughter before his death in Christchurch on 16 December 1909. These fragmented narratives reflect the tenuous social positioning and varied public portrayals of South Asian Muslims in colonial New Zealand, shaped by racialized descriptors and inconsistent journalistic framing.<sup>40</sup>

Also in the Otago province, Ahad Baksh Malik arrived in 1890 from northern India and settled in Arrowtown, in the heart of the region. He lived and worked as a hawker—travelling to remote farms to proffer his merchandise and wares. He was married to an Anglo-European woman at one point but there do not appear to be any descendants. He remained a popular small businessman and—community spirited—in 1917 he contributed 5 shillings to the Dunstan district hospital subscription fundraiser. A year later, he was delighting newspapers with semi-humorous outbursts in court, in yet another legal dispute over one of his horses, the *Cromwell Argus* reporting: “He proceeded to impress on all concerned that he was a Mahommedan, and assured them they were lucky they were not in India.”<sup>41</sup> These were not the words of a man who felt particularly oppressed or downtrodden by anything other than regular bureaucracy. Later in 1918, Malik died after a fatal heart attack whilst visiting an old friend, one John McMaster, farmer, at Arrow Junction. In their obituary for the Indian hawker, the *Cromwell Argus* described him as “quite a local celebrity in Central Otago.” Malik was buried in Arrowtown, his service conducted by the Presbyterian Reverend James Rattray, on August 26, 1918.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, the 1890s saw a small influx of identifiable Punjabi Muslim settlers. Sheikh Mohammed Din (1877–1945), likely the earliest traceable Punjabi Muslim settler in the South Island of New Zealand, originated from Sialkot and was born to Fazal Din, a farmer and merchant. In 1904, his entry to the colony at Lyttleton (the main port serving Christchurch) was granted by W. T. Glasgow, Customs Secretary and Inspector, strictly contingent upon a written guarantee from Mr. Devereux that Din would depart within one month alongside a Mrs. Kempthorne—a condition he did not fulfil.<sup>43</sup> Within months, Din became store manager of Pannells Ltd. on Lavoud Street, Akaroa, and was soon married, signaling his intent to settle permanently.

The local newspaper contains a positive account of his marriage at St Peters (Anglican) Church on 15 September 1904 to Gertrude Esther Hill, a 20 year old spinster and the eldest daughter of A. W. Hill (proprietor of Criterion Hotel in Akaroa).<sup>44</sup> The couple separated and by March 1905 Hill were filing for divorce.<sup>45</sup> Sheikh Mohammed Din and Gertrude Hill were divorced (by Decree Nisi) in September 1909.<sup>46</sup> However Din remarried the following year, to Madeline Elizabeth Olsen, aged 19. Whilst Sheikh Mohammed would use his surname ‘Din’ throughout his life, the children were all given an English version: their first child, a girl named Zohra Elizabeth Dean, was born in 1911, and their only son, Lawrence Edward Dean, in 1912. Newspaper evidence suggests there were two further daughters—Myra Gladys and Onyx or Onex Miriam Dean.<sup>47</sup>

The professional and personal trajectory of Din proved turbulent, marked by legal disputes, bankruptcy proceedings, marital separation, and divorce. In 1923, his marital complications were sensationalized in the *NZ Truth* under the headline “Mixed Marriage Muddle.”<sup>48</sup> His death in July 1945 occurred under ambiguous circumstances near his shop in the Chatham Islands.<sup>49</sup> His son Laurence “was suddenly anxious to show solicitude towards his father’s body and ordered a coffin suitable to send back to Mecca, as befitted a good Moslem.”<sup>50</sup> However, Din was ultimately cremated at Bromley Crematorium in Christchurch on July 24, 1945. His ashes were later interred at Waikumete Cemetery in Auckland in 1948, for reasons not clearly documented but plausibly attributable to practical considerations.<sup>51</sup>

Men from the Gujarat province of India started to arrive in the 1900s, with the Bikhoo and Musa families settling in the North Island; their descendants would later establish the New Zealand Muslim Association in 1950—the first Islamic agency in the country. In the South Island, Mohammad Kara from Adad arrived in 1907, marking the beginnings of a Gujarati Muslim presence across both regional spheres of New Zealand. Like other Muslim men from the Gujarat, the Kara family “were all Sunni Vohras of the Hanafi branch of Islam.”<sup>52</sup> Mohammed Kara, having previously resided in South Africa, pursued opportunities in Fiji before applying for residency in New Zealand during transit. Upon securing

residency, he settled in Christchurch, where he established himself as a hawker and engaged in small-scale recycling entrepreneurship.<sup>53</sup> In 1921, Mohammed Kara facilitated the arrival of his 13-year-old son, Ismail, and both later joined the Canterbury Indian Association upon its formation in 1936. The devout religiosity of Kara was reflected in his practice of personal Halal slaughter, discontinued only due to municipal regulations. Like other Indian businessmen, hawkers and shopkeepers of the era in New Zealand, Hindus and Sikhs alike, both Mohammed and Ismail Kara returned to India from time to time to visit family. At some point Ismail Kara married in the Gujarat and fathered a son himself. In 1949, Suliman—son of Ismail Kara—migrated to New Zealand at age eight, joining his father and grandfather. By 1960, Suliman had established a dairy business and subsequently became a founding member of the Muslim Association of Canterbury in 1977.

## Peripheral presences

Some Muslim immigrants during the colonial era were from outside the British Empire; some only stayed for short periods. The earliest identifiable Turkmenistani family to settle in Christchurch was that of “Sali Mahomet”—likely a transliteration of Saleh Mohammed—whose birth name was reportedly Mohammed Khan of Ashkhabad. Fleeing the Russian incursion into Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the family endured profound hardship. Female relatives perished during the crossing into British India via Afghanistan. Sali and his father, Sultan Mahomet, eventually migrated through Australia, arriving at Bluff in December 1896.<sup>54</sup> They sustained themselves as itinerant hawkers across Otago and the West Coast until Sali’s injury prompted relocation to Christchurch in 1903. Sultan, described in contemporary press as an “old Assyrian,” died and was interred in December 1905.<sup>55</sup> Soon thereafter, Sali established an ice cream business operating from a vividly painted cart in Cathedral Square’s southeast corner. In 1906, he married Florence Henrietta Johnstone, an Anglo-European woman from Otago. The couple had four daughters who, according to local accounts, attained notoriety for their beauty in urban Christchurch. This familial trajectory

encapsulates both the transregional dislocation and complex social integration of Central Asian Muslim migrants in colonial New Zealand.<sup>56</sup>

On his marriage certificate, Sali gave his birthplace as Ceylon and, elsewhere, he said that he was a Punjabi. He may have decided that, when living in a country that was proud to be part of the British Empire, it was best to claim that one had been born within the bounds of that empire.<sup>57</sup>

Fluent in Arabic, Russian, German, and Punjabi, Sali Mahomet periodically served as a court interpreter for foreign sailors facing legal proceedings. His affable temperament and generosity endeared him to the Christchurch public, earning him the moniker “Ice Cream Charlie” (with “Charlie” likely an anglicized rendering of Saleh). In April 1943, he entered the Old Men’s Home in Ashburton and died of a second stroke on October 7. He was interred alongside Sultan Mahomet at Linwood Cemetery.<sup>58</sup>

Sali Mahomet remains an elusive figure within New Zealand’s early Muslim history—possibly the first Muslim refugee to enter the colony, and unequivocally its earliest Turkmenistani settler. His biographer Richard Greenaway of the Christchurch Library writes convincingly that Sali Mahomet was absolutely “devoted to his wife [...] Loving and indulgent to his daughters, he also encouraged them to gain as much as possible from their education.”<sup>59</sup> Such testimony not only reflects his familial commitments but also offers a rare, intimate glimpse into the personal values of an early Muslim migrant navigating domestic and social life in colonial Christchurch.

The earliest known European Muslims to work and reside in New Zealand appear to have been Omer and Salko (Salih) Hadžiahmetović, whose names (subject to multiple variant spellings) are associated with the November 1904 arrival of Dalmatian gum-diggers aboard the *SS Zealandia*.<sup>60</sup> The precise composition of the party remains ambiguous due to incomplete passenger records, though the men were all identified as “Armenians” by the recording official. The records suggest the emergence of a small enclave of thirteen Muslims from Hercegovina

in Maropiu, Northland, under the informal leadership of Mustafa Fetagić.<sup>61</sup> Documentation from the National Archives indicates that Lahir Hadgovic (likely Hadžović) received a gum-digging license for the Aratipu Riding on December 14, 1904. Subsequent additions to the community included Zaim Budalica, Ahmet Falajić, Osman Felajić, Ahmet Galujatović (presumably Galijatović), and both Omer and Salko Hadžiahmetović, all licensed in mid-1905.<sup>62</sup> In 1906, Mustafa Fetagić, Ahmet Fetagić, Avdo (Abduh) Fetagić, and Ahmet Galujatović also obtained licenses for the Kaihu Riding, followed by additional grants to Ahmet and the Hadžiahmetović brothers in March 1907.<sup>63</sup> In October 1907, two members of this community were summoned to testify at the Dargaville Court and instructed to remove their fezzes—Although the men complied on the day, their appointed group leader, Mustafa Fetagić, lodged a formal objection through diplomatic channels. At the time, Hercegovina was under the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its official representative in New Zealand, Eugene Langguth, was a German-born Roman Catholic with an English spouse. On behalf of the aggrieved Slavic Muslims, he addressed a letter to the Minister of Justice, James McGowan, an Irish-born Protestant, on September 27, 1907. The letter requested that “Herzegovinians of Mohammedan religion be allowed to appear in Court in dress prescribed by their religion.” The affirmative response from the Ministry arguably established a precedent for the legal permissibility of religious dress—such as the fez—in the judicial settings of New Zealand. To date, the continued presence of this small group remains relatively undocumented, although departure records confirm that O. Hadžiahmetović and Zaim Budalica left Auckland for Sydney aboard the *Mokoia* in January 1909. These fragmented traces reflect the modest yet formative Muslim presence and fealty among South Slavic laborers in the early gum-digging frontier of colonial New Zealand.<sup>64</sup> This episode offers a striking illustration of early multicultural engagement, interreligious negotiation, and diasporic self-representation. Moreover, this group of Slavic Muslims likely formed New Zealand’s earliest Islamic congregation or *jamaat*, though they appear to have departed prior to World War I and remain largely absent from collective historical memory.<sup>65</sup>

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the imprint of Muslim lives in colonial New Zealand (although faintly traced in official records) had already seeded a diverse and multifaceted presence. The scattered biographies of lascars, hawkers, householders, interpreters, goldminers, and gum-diggers all point to forms of quiet perseverance in a land whose social and legal frameworks were often indifferent, if not obstructive, to spiritual identities outside mainstream and dominant forms of Protestant Christianity rooted in the British Isles. Whether navigating discriminatory court proceedings, labor exploitation, or tenuous immigration status, these individuals exhibited resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to familial and religious integrity. Their experiences underscore how marginal actors nonetheless engaged meaningfully with civic institutions and left tangible marks on their communities—be it through interfaith commerce, court appearances, or intermarriage. At the core of their settlement lay a negotiation between personal piety and public survival, between the comforts of tradition and the uncertainties of diaspora.

Despite prevailing historical silence, these early Muslim migrants contributed not only to the material scaffolding of New Zealand's infrastructure—transporting quarried stone for cathedrals, trading fabrics with sex workers, selling ice cream from painted carts—but also to its evolving pluralism. In their interactions with employers, staff, brothel keepers, Protestant magistrates, and Roman Catholic consuls, they partook in the understated social dramas of a nascent multiculturalism—one that challenged rigid constructs of race, religion, and imperial identity. The protection of religious dress in court, for instance, reflects the subtle impact of minority advocacy within the colonial justice system, anticipating contemporary debates on religious freedoms and cultural rights. These precedents remind us that cultural pluralism in New Zealand did not emerge *ex nihilo* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century but carries antecedents that demand rediscovery and recognition.

It is precisely through the recovery and reanimation of these fragmented lives and loyalties that one glimpses the promise of a more capacious historiography—one that honors ambiguity and refuses to marginalize early Muslim presences as anomalous or exotic. Rather than isolated anecdotes, these stories signal a more expansive reading of New

Zealand's religious and ethnic tapestry, foregrounding the agency of communities who, though peripheral in demographic scale, engaged earnestly with the moral, economic, and spiritual contours of colonial life. This historical reckoning offers not only correction, but inspiration. For in retracing these immigrant paths, often forged with limited resources and uncertain futures, one recognizes the foundations of a contemporary Muslim community marked by diversity, resilience, and civic engagement. Their legacy invites us to imagine belonging not as a consequence of numerical dominance or political visibility, but as a quiet accumulation of lives lived in commitment to faith, family, and fairness. It is a legacy still unfolding—one that continues to write itself across mosques, migrant centers, cemeteries, and courtrooms.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to briefly overview the history of the Muslim community of New Zealand from the 1850s to the 1900s. I wanted to focus on the earlier formative period, those first few decades that laid the groundwork for the subsequent events and issues of more recent times. During this formative period of Muslim presence in New Zealand, the absence of formal Islamic institutions necessitated individualized expressions of faith. Early Muslim identity was often negotiated through personal or familial frameworks, shaped by varying levels of religious education and comprehension. Distinctive markers such as Muslim names for children, religious provisions in wills, and court oaths taken upon the Qur'an reflect diverse modalities of spiritual articulation within this nascent community.

Following the creation of the New Zealand Muslim Association in 1950, the first Islamic agency in the country, there has been a gradual proliferation of Islamic organizations, especially after 1990. The contemporary Muslim community in New Zealand has evolved into a highly heterogeneous body, rendering generalizations increasingly untenable. The multiplicity of cultural, theological, and institutional affiliations underscores the complexity of its current composition. In reflecting upon this historical continuum, the future of Islamic communal life in New

Zealand rests upon the capacity to translate historical depth into meaningful and enduring institutional structures—ones that embody substance rather than merely ornamental representation.

Engaging seriously with these early Muslim narratives affirms that the colonial history of New Zealand is not solely the domain of stereotypes or monolithic settler paradigms. The stories of Wuzerah, Kara, Mahomet, Shah, Fetagić, and others reveal micro-histories of interaction, resilience, and overlooked contribution. Rather than tokenistic gestures toward diversity, their lived realities deep in the South Pacific prompt a reckoning with how religious minorities navigated (and subtly shaped) colonial institutions and society, from legal systems to commercial economies. In embracing the complexity and contingency embedded in these accounts, we edge closer to a historiography that honors both the margins and the multitude, acknowledging that even ephemeral presences can cast enduring shadows across the national memory.

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# “The Grove of Imagination”: Re-reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Barzakh* as a Spiritual Ecology

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ANDI HERAWATI

## Abstract

This paper re-examines Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of the *barzakh* through the lens of spiritual ecology, arguing that it functions not only as an eschatological or metaphysical intermediary but as a dynamic, growth-oriented realm integral to the soul’s development. Moving beyond previous structural and ontological readings, the paper highlights the *barzakh* as an active, vegetal-like ecosystem where the human being—understood

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as a “plant-like” entity (*nabāṭī*)—matures through embodied, experiential engagement with the natural world. Drawing on Ibn ‘Arabī’s descriptions of the “Vast Earth” (*ard al-ḥaḥīqa*) and the “Pledge of the Plants,” the analysis reveals how the *barzakh* serves as a spiritual geography that integrates mineral, vegetal, and animal dimensions into the path of human perfection. By synthesizing insights from contemporary Islamic scholarship and vegetal philosophy, the paper presents the *barzakh* as a foundational, indigenous framework for an Islamic ecological spirituality—one that decenters anthropocentrism and affirms the sacred interconnectivity of all beings in the journey toward divine proximity.

**Keywords:** Ibn ‘Arabī, *barzakh*, *nabāṭī*, spiritual ecology, imaginal world (*‘ālam al-mithāl*), vegetal philosophy, spiritual geography, Sufism, environmental spirituality, human perfection (*kamāl*)

## Introduction: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Unique Treatment of the *Barzakh*

The “*barzakh*” is one of the most fundamental and multi-faceted metaphysical concepts of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>1</sup> To understand its significance, we must first recognize its deep roots. The word *barzakh* appears twice in the Qur’an, describing boundaries in both physical and metaphysical contexts (at 55:19-20, and 25:53).<sup>2</sup> Regarding the etymology of this unusual term, most philologists remain silent as to the possibility of its being a loan-word in Arabic,<sup>3</sup> while Lane uses it as a faith-related term. For Lane, *barzakh* in its derivative meaning connected to faith, means what is between the beginning of faith, which is “the removal of what is hurtful from the road”;<sup>4</sup> or what is between doubt and certainty. Often the *barzakh* here is understood as a referring to a line of knowledge as well as faith. Islamic scholars and mystics went on to expand on its implications, linking it to dreams, visions, and discussions of the afterlife.

The 13th-century Islamic milieu of theological debate and Sufi creativity was a pivotal period for speculative mysticism (*‘irfān*), marked

by fruitful intellectual exchange between Andalusia and the East. In that creative context, Ibn ‘Arabi situated the *barzakh* within a distinctive cosmology and epistemology that blended esoteric knowledge, philosophical rigor, and poetic expression. His complex use of *barzakh*, as outlined here, reflects the intellectual and spiritual exchanges of his time, focusing on the dynamic interplay between human experience and divine reality.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, *barzakh* transcends its conventional eschatological meaning popularized by earlier Sufi authors to become a dynamic, transformative metaphysical domain central to human spiritual perception, self-realization, and ethical growth. While in earlier Islamic tradition it was primarily associated with the intermediary state of the human soul after death, Ibn ‘Arabi integrates several distinct spiritual, philosophical, and poetic dimensions to portray it as a creative locus of meaning-making, discovery and growth that continuously bridges divine and human realities.

Since Ibn ‘Arabi’s time, his expanded conception of *barzakh* has illuminated diverse studies, reflecting a wide array of personal experiences, religious piety, and novel perspectives on nature. Yet we are still awaiting a thorough discussion of its dynamic character and manifestations. Popularly known as liminality,<sup>5</sup> especially in anthropological and religious discussions, relatively few scholars have paid attention to the wider importance of this concept, providing important groundwork for this study. George Archer meticulously traces the Qur’anic foundations of the *barzakh*, firmly anchoring it as an intermediary “space” linked to resurrection, ambiguity, and the posthumous journey of the soul.<sup>6</sup> His extensive analysis is crucial for understanding the term’s eschatological core and its role as a barrier and a passage in the Islamic tradition. While his study establishes its ontological “location,” it does not fully engage with Ibn ‘Arabi’s expansion of the *barzakh* into a multidimensional domain of continuous spiritual experience and growth accessible to everyone within the human journey. The philosopher Salman Bashier earlier explored its ontological dimension as a liminal world of imagination that reflects both the eternal and the temporal. Bashier highlights the *barzakh* as a reflective mirror that embodies the eternal nature of

God alongside the temporally originated world,<sup>7</sup> as well as exploring it as the principle of "limit" that makes relationship and existence possible, focusing on its function in Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics. However, such a highly abstract conceptual understanding, while profound, still lacks the phenomenological, experiential dimension of how a seeker actually interacts with and grows within the *barzakh*.

Shifting the focus from ontological structure to subjectivity, Sa'diyya Shaikh fruitfully employs the *barzakh* as a metaphor for a particular ethical and epistemological posture. For her, the *barzakh* represents a "way of thinking" characterized by embracing ambiguity, holding tension, and navigating the in-betweenness of contradictory truths.<sup>8</sup> This approach is invaluable for understanding the intellectual and ethical discipline required of the spiritual seeker. Similarly, Miriam Cooke examined the *barzakh* through the lens of spiritual ecstasy, highlighting its role as a site of profound, transformative experience that transcends ordinary consciousness. By examining the work of poet Huda Naamani, Cooke frames the *barzakh* as the site of an intense, ineffable spiritual experience where "two elements behave as one" during divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). She vividly describes how this state is accessed and expressed through non-linguistic means, such as sound, color, and rhythmic repetition, arguing that the *barzakh* retains the actual spiritual experience in sound and color rather than erasing its living reality.<sup>9</sup>

This article builds upon those recent studies by introducing a further vital element, which is the *barzakh*'s developmental life and its inherent dynamism and profound experiential connection to the natural world. I will demonstrate here how, in Ibn 'Arabī's thought, the *barzakh* functions not as a passive boundary but as an active, growth-oriented realm, a vital spiritual ecosystem where the soul—certainly the human soul, but perhaps all living things as well—is cultivated and matured. A more direct modern theoretical support for this perspective comes from outside Islamic studies, in the growing field of "vegetal philosophy."

Recent thinkers elaborating that conception, such as Michael Arder, argue instead for decentering the human and recognizing other unique modes of being, temporality, and wisdom inherent in plant life.<sup>10</sup> This study examines a parallel approach that Ibn 'Arabī elaborated within the

framework of Islamic spirituality, where his scattered discussions of vegetal awareness must be taken not simply as poetic devices nor metaphor, but instead as serious indicators of a “plant-like” (*nabāṭī*) dimension of human spiritual existence which is characterized by growth, sensitivity, and rootedness, reflecting a wider symbolic relationship with one’s environment. In other words, this study complements the existing structural models provided by previous scholarship by revealing the *barzakh* as the very ground of spiritual becoming. Indeed, understanding the *barzakh* as it arises in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought and experience requires a multifaceted perspective that transcends rigid philosophical or religious categorization, but instead reflects a dynamic, comprehensive vision of reality. In this perspective, the function of the *barzakh* is not metaphorical. Rather, it is a profoundly real, and widely accessible (perhaps universal) realm with distinct eco-spiritual characteristics. As Titus Burkhart described its interpretation in pre-modern Sufi tradition, the *barzakh* is generally taken to mean a certain intermediate state in the posthumous evolution of each human being.<sup>11</sup>

My methodological approach is informed by two key strands of contemporary Islamic scholarship. First, I employ a close textual hermeneutics akin to Sa’diyya Shaikh’s work, which pays careful attention to the construction of the self and spiritual anthropology in Sufi texts. Secondly, I approach Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology here through an ethical and critical lens, inspired by Miriam Cooke’s projects, that focuses on its potential for de-centering human dominance and articulating a much broader, relational ethical perspective. By synthesizing these approaches, this article demonstrates how Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical system provides a powerful, indigenous foundation for rethinking the human place in a more-than-human world. From that point of view, the *barzakh*, as understood by Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters, enriches philosophical discourse by transforming conceptual rigidity into a more flexible, effective, and living approach to wisdom.

Beyond its role as a conceptual reminder of the coexistence of transcendence and immanence, the *barzakh* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, is something profoundly real. But in what way is it real, rather than

merely a metaphor? Building on the inherent naturalistic and dynamic characteristics of Ibn ‘Arabī’s exposition, our argument here about the *barzakh* proceeds along two complementary lines: its organic nature; and its wholistic inclusion of the non-human *dimensions* of being. The first approach operates according to principles of growth, cultivation, and symbiotic relationship, much like a natural ecosystem—a quality epitomized by Ibn ‘Arabī’s persistent use of vegetal metaphors (the tree, the growing plant) to describe spiritual development. The latter approach points to a realm where the spiritual realities of minerals, plants, and animals are not only present, but are essential for the soul’s own realization and perfection. Both aspects are well demonstrated in Ibn ‘Arabī’s special chapters on “*The Vast Earth*”<sup>12</sup> and “*The Pledge of the Plants*.”<sup>13</sup>

The groundwork for understanding the *barzakh* as a real, perceptible world was laid by Henry Corbin. His seminal works, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī* and *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*,<sup>14</sup> were groundbreaking in introducing the ‘*ālam al-mithāl* (the “imaginal world”) to Western audiences. Corbin’s detailed analysis of the *Futūḥāt* chapter on the “Vast Earth” (*arḍ al-ḥaḳīqa*) established it as a distinct ontological realm, a “celestial earth” with its own geography, accessible through the imaginative faculty (*khayāl*). However, his focus in those studies remained largely on the noetic and visionary “architecture” of this realm, its role in prophetic revelation and spiritual perception, rather than its involvement with much wider ecological and developmental processes.

By situating the *barzakh* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s larger cosmology, this paper argues that it is more than an abstract or merely doctrinal teaching. Instead, for him it is a widely accessible realm of being and experience with distinct eco-spiritual characteristics. We must also acknowledge, however, that any potential “definition” of these intermediary realms of existence is constrained by the boundaries that imagination and language establish.<sup>15</sup> For the *barzakh* is itself unavoidably a site of exploration into the interpenetration and interconnectedness of realms of existence (both alternative “translations” of its reality), and we find that Ibn ‘Arabī’s

extensive thought provides the necessary background for envisioning this multifaceted nature in Islamic thought and practice.

## The *Barzakh* and the “Intermediate Realms” of Existence

In later schools of Islamic spirituality, the *barzakh* is often understood as the “intermediate realms” associated with both divine and human imagination.<sup>16</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī adopts this definition, identifying *barzakh* at the outset of the *Futūḥāt*<sup>17</sup> as the realm of the “imagined body” and the first level of the lower world (*dunyā*). While other Sufis used the term to describe realms between the material and the purely spiritual, Ibn ‘Arabī develops it into a precise technical concept with unique characteristics and several different shades of meaning.<sup>18</sup>

For him, the linguistic root of *barzakh* implies an “intervening divider” (*al-fāṣila*), yet its distinctive function is fundamentally creative and connective. He applies it broadly to any liminal state that combines two distinct, “adjacent” levels of existence, conditions, or realms. It is the lukewarm state between hot and cold, or the auditory midpoint between soft and loud. This intermediary state is one of profound equilibrium. Ibn ‘Arabī compares it to a restful slumber, where the sleeper exists in a state between life and death,<sup>19</sup> reconciling these apparent opposites. Similarly, he points to the Day of Resurrection, where divine Names with opposing qualities interact. Thus the many intermediary realms (*barāzikh*) mentioned in his work represent distinct levels of existence, each with specific characteristics, but all sharing this fundamental liminal nature.

When the *barzakh* is associated with imagination, it is a specific capacity that perceives and navigates different realms of meanings. Thus it can supersede purely intellectual approaches to meaning, which only heightens its paradoxical power<sup>20</sup> to both reveal and conceal vast ranges of human perception<sup>21</sup> and spiritual possibilities. Within this framework, the *barzakh* denotes the continuous streaming of forms corresponding to each individual’s spiritual state. For this reason, this intermediary realm is called the World of Mystery (*‘ālam al-ghayb*). And it constitutes, as Henry Corbin observed, an immense “mystic geography.”<sup>22</sup> Building on

Corbin's insight, this spiritual geography can be mapped analogously to natural geography, revealing a vast extrasensory (or "trans-sensory") realm that is both interpretable and perceptible.

When the Qur'an states (QS. 41:53)<sup>23</sup> that these divine signs are visible "on the horizons" and "within their souls," this geographical metaphor extends to spiritual directions. The Qur'an alludes to this through repeated references to "the east and the west" (55:17;<sup>24</sup> 73:9<sup>25</sup>), including Moses's proclamation that God is "the Lord of the east and the west, and everything in between" (26:28).<sup>26</sup> The famous Light-Verse (24:35)<sup>27</sup> further situates divine illumination in a niche that is "neither of the east nor the west." Ibn 'Arabī expands these allusions into a complex spiritual cosmology. This is not merely about cardinal directions, but instead encompasses a panoramic dimension of nature itself, reflecting a crucial aspect of the human condition: our innate access to this intermediary dimension of being. Therefore, this spiritual geography enumerates all things perceived in the world in their subtle state of "immaterial matter" (*jism*), with their contours and forms, a reality made vividly apparent in visions, such as those contemplated by a dying person.

## The Barzakh as Spiritual Geography

A striking illustration of Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of the *barzakh* is his early, mysterious vision of the "Reality of the Vast Earth."<sup>28</sup> This account appears amidst a long cosmological elaboration (over several extensive chapters) on the stages of creation and divine "Self-manifestation." It is recounted in the guise of an unnamed companion's story—sharing some "fantastic" elements with science fiction or Dante's *Divine Comedy*—which presents an "awakened dream" or spiritual travelogue filled with marvelous places, figures, colors, and actions. Yet these worlds remain mysteriously connected to our own, as when Ibn 'Arabī discovers that an earthquake he experienced there is linked to his daughter's simultaneous illness and passing on earth.

Ibn 'Arabī explains that this "Vast Earth" was formed from the residual fermented "Clay" of the primordial Adam (*min baqiyyat khamīra*

*tīnat Ādam*). This primal origin roots the entire imaginal cosmology in a foundational, natural element, connecting it directly to the essence of the human archetype. Within this special realm, the abstract becomes concrete: the inhabitants possess physical bodies of a refined and subtle consistency, while their inner qualities, such as character, ethical wisdom, and the like, are manifested in a tangible, visible manner. This “Celestial Earth,” as Corbin calls it, is symbolized by an extraordinary palm tree created from the same substance as the original Adam’s Clay; then from it the rest of these earths were created, so that this endlessly fruitful “Palm-tree” is also called “Adam’s sister.”<sup>29</sup> Thus the complete range of “imaginal encounters” described in this journey, though extraordinary, are fashioned from natural elements and are ultimately designed to contribute to the reader’s own practical spiritual “self-knowledge” or *maʿrifa*.

Significantly, this poetic and mysterious chapter does not solely mention Ibn ʿArabī’s own vision, but also aspects of this realm that other fellow Sufis like Dhūʿl Nūn al-Miṣrī have experienced as well.<sup>30</sup> As Ibn ʿArabī says, “there appeared to me in a penetrating vision that ‘Earth (of Reality),’ in this bodily configuration.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, while talking to us as his readers, Ibn ʿArabī was also evoking or addressing a wider group, since the pronouns and other references to those who have access to this vision of the “Earth of Reality” are never very clear. By following his descriptions, we traverse a “spiritual geography” that shows what it means to be living both outside and within imagination. Here are four striking characteristics of this imaginal “Earth” he describes here:

1). **The Actualization of the Impossible:** This Earth of the *barzakh* is a realm of miracles, but its descriptions should not be dismissed as fantasy. Ibn ʿArabī insists it is as real and tangible as our world, frequently visited by advanced spiritual “knowers.” Explorers describe cities of gold and silver, fruits with unknown flavors, and oceans of precious metals whose waters do not blend. Here, the impossible becomes actual. One narrative describes a fruit that regenerates after being cut. To support this idea, here is one narrative mentioned by one of the *ʿarifūn* (most likely Ibn ʿArabī himself):

[...] This is something that the intellects here (on earth) deem to be impossible, in their view. So when Dhū'l al-Nūn al-Miṣrī witnessed this wonder, he spoke of what has been reported from him, (including) bringing the larger to the smaller, without the larger being diminished or the smaller becoming larger, or what is narrow widening, or what is wide narrowing. Thus, the immensity of an apple there—as I have just mentioned—is unchanged, and yet (our) little hand can grasp it! This holding the (entire immense apple) actually happens, although how that happens is unknown, and only God knows that, since the knowledge of (how that happens) is restricted to God alone. And a single day in our (normal earthly) time is a period of several years for them, since the times occurring on that Earth are different.<sup>32</sup>

2). **A Stage for Conscious Theophany:** “This Earth is a vast panorama for the eyes of the ‘arifūn<sup>33</sup> [...] a pasture through which they roam.” Among its many worlds is one that accords with human forms, allowing the knower to witness himself in them. Divine Self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*) occur there with a unique characteristic: they do not overwhelm the recipient’s self-awareness. Unlike in our world, where such theophanies can take individuals out of themselves, there the knowers remain fully conscious within themselves during the experience.

One of the ‘arifūn reported something about that Earth, which I myself know from direct personal witnessing. He said: “One day I came upon in this Earth a spiritual gathering called “the gathering of Lovingmercy” (*majlis al-raḥma*). I had never seen a more wondrous gathering before. And while I was there, suddenly a divine theophany (*tajallī*) appeared to me. But it did not take me out of myself: no, it made me remain (conscious) within myself. This is one of the special characteristics of that Earth. For the divine Self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*) that come over the ‘arifūn in this (earthly) abode, in these earthly bodies, do take them out of their self-awareness. (This is true for) the prophets, the *awliyā*’, and everyone who experiences this (in our world).

According to Ibn ‘Arabī’s description, this particular *barzakh* constitutes the very ground for enlightened perception—the spiritual “eyes” through which divine radiance (*tajalliyyāt*) is received. Within this Earth, these opened faculties act as instruments of divine perception, actively conceiving landscapes, personalities, colors, and tastes that he meticulously details.

**3). A Multiplicity of Coexisting Worlds:** This “vast Earth” is one *barzakh* among many (*barāzikh*). It contains numerous distinct worlds, each with unique qualities. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s account, this special Earth tells us a substantial story through the very different and unfamiliar creations that are in it, particularly of the unusual qualities that are specific to that particular “world” within it which is “in accord with (our human) forms.” As he indicates there, many different “worlds” were created from and within this realm, including all the marvels that appear to the enlightened *‘arifūn* in this depiction.<sup>34</sup> This chapter indicates how truly vast is this immense *barzakh*, opened up by the penetrating spiritual vision needed to arrive there, revealing in its many levels (known and unknown) that this world that we inhabit is in reality only one among many other *barzakhs*.<sup>35</sup>

The panorama of different images and characteristics of this “vast Earth” described in this chapter is largely recounted in the first person by someone unnamed, who is most likely Ibn ‘Arabī himself. The following passages, describing different worlds that the narrator himself visited within this immense Earth, are a small selection of the fascinating descriptions of the extraordinary spiritual “locales” that take up most of this chapter:

He said: “I entered there (i.e., in that “vast Earth”) an earth of white silver, in appearance full of trees and rivers and various fruit, all of them silver. And the bodies of her inhabitants were all silver. Likewise in all the other earths (worlds), each had trees, fruits, rivers, oceans, and all her other creatures of the same kind (of the same distinctively colored “material”). So, when I procured (their fruits) and ate them, the taste and scents and flavors I found in them were like other foods, except that the pleasure (of eating them) cannot be described or recounted.

And I entered there an earth of white camphor. In some places there was heat more intense than fire. But the human being can plunge into that and not get burned. And other places there were mild, while others were very cold. Now each earth (world) among these earths, which are places within that Vast Earth: if I were to place the (familiar earthly) heavens in just one of those worlds, it would be (in proportionate size) like a necklace in a vast desert!

Among all the earths (worlds) of that Vast Earth, for me none is more beautiful and more agreeable to my constitution than the saffron earth. I have not seen a world among the worlds of that entire All-encompassing World (whose people are) more relaxed than them, nor more friendly to someone arriving among them, greeting them warmly and hospitably[...]. And if you regard her women, you see that in comparison with the women existing in the Garden (paradise), the women of that (world) are like our women among the people of this (earthly) world in comparison with the women of paradise[...]. Her people are the most passionately loving of creatures in regard to anyone who comes among them. They have no obligatory (religious) responsibility (*taklif*), since they are automatically glorifying God and His Majesty. Were they to try to do something opposed to that, they would not be able to do so[...].”<sup>36</sup>

4). **Universal Communication:** This Earth grants every visitor an understanding of all languages within it. This intense, immediate communion among all beings parallels the human soul’s innate sensitivity to the vegetal, animal, and mineral realms in our own existence. Those images, such as stones, animals, gardens, and people all communicate and understand each other. Thus, he tells us:

You do not pass a stone or a tree or a clod of earth or anything else, but that if you want to speak with it, you speak with it like one person speaking to another. They have different languages.

This Earth gives specially to everyone who enters her an understanding of the languages of everything in her.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the special characteristics of this vast Earth, especially the intense level and immediacy of communication between and among all the creatures and “objects” of those worlds that Ibn ‘Arabī describes, also seem to parallel his subsequent broader account of the particular connections and sensitivities of the human soul with regard to the vegetal, animal and mineral realms of our own earthly existence.

### ***Barzakh* as Stages of Humanity: The Growth of the “Plant”-like Human**

The spiritual journey narrates a human soul’s development and maturation, while the vegetal *barzakh* represents the very environment and natural laws governing that development. These are two perspectives of a single reality. Although the *barzakh* is often vaguely discussed in Sufi literature as a distinct eschatological “world” for initiates, travel metaphors aptly capture the fluidity central to the religious quest.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the detailed mapping of the spiritual journey through the *barzakh*, reveals it as the fundamental domain of transformation.<sup>39</sup> However, in order to deeply realize this condition, the spiritual perception requires a “soul sensitivity” and instinctive awareness<sup>40</sup> manifesting itself as an invisible open door, that is, however, accessible to us through its effects and influences. So, when we translate the sensibility of spiritual perception as a journey,<sup>41</sup> then the stories of that journey are projected onto and refracted in the hopes and nascent intuitions of others who watch, read, or listen to such accounts.<sup>42</sup> This perception helps map a spiritual geography, as exemplified in Ibn ‘Arabī’s elaborate account of the Prophet’s night-journey (*isrā’*) in chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt*.

In constructing this symbolic map of the stages of spiritual growth, he first focuses on the dimension of the *barzakh* tied to the archetypal stages of the Prophet’s ascent, as imaging the sacred finality of human acts and events.<sup>43</sup> Second, he illustrates the importance of our spiritual perception of sacred places (as exemplified in the different places connected with the

Prophet's journey). Third, he emphasizes the great importance of certain realized Friends' "return" to this world after their bodily death as a kind of transformed, positive awareness of the spiritual dynamic underlying the human physical and social world, an insight expressed through their active responsibility of teaching and guiding their people toward their ultimate destination. Finally, his detailed account about the *barzakh* as a spiritual journey highlights the necessity of spiritual preparation for this voyage, in both the invisible (inner) and visible, external dimensions.

"The human is (part of) the plant." With this, Ibn 'Arabī introduces the wisdom of the "plant dimension" (*nabāt*) of human being. Due to its intermediate position between the mineral and animal realms, the plant realm is a locus where the human becomes a fully realized *barzakh*: i.e., a domain capable of growing, accepting, and thus transforming. This domain grants self-knowledge to those who reveal the truths discovered within it. "*Al-nabāt*," in Islamic philosophy, is one of the levels of existence of "the (earthly) Kingdom" (*mulk*) that is considered as the ultimate source of the powers of growth and development. The *Ikhwān al-Safā'*, for example, wrote that plants actually come before animals in the series of existent beings.<sup>44</sup> Thus Ibn 'Arabī points to this plant realm as an intermediate realm comprising the designated means for the purpose of "preparation" and "growing." For example, he says:<sup>45</sup>

In the plant, there is the secret heart of the *barzakh* that does not exist in anything else other than in itself, because it (that secret dimension) is a barrier between the human being and their self (or their "lord"). The cause of this is as indicated by the Quranic verse:<sup>46</sup> God caused you all to grow (*anbatakum*) from the ground like plants (*nabāt<sup>an</sup>*).

The sensitivity of the human soul gives the human position in nature, in the intermediate realm including the neighboring mineral and animal domains, essential elements of what it needs to actualize the full potential of *khayāl*, of that dimension and far-reaching power of imagination. This means those dimensions of existence that constitute an important locus for spiritual learning, where each soul can develop and expand as

a *barzakh* between pure corporeality and pure spirituality. As Ibn ‘Arabī explains more extensively in the famous chapter on Ilyās (Idris) in his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*,<sup>47</sup> the full realization of our humanity (i.e., the comprehensive microcosmic reality of *insān*) necessarily incorporates our mysterious awareness of the animal (as well as the vegetal and mineral) planes of existence.

Ibn ‘Arabī refers to both ways of looking at the human soul (*nafs*) as a problem to be overcome, as the practical object of spiritual exercise and meditation for those who properly situate the human reality within the cosmos. Yet no matter how we define it, the human soul is always an intermediate domain:

*The soul comes from the world of the barzakh,  
so every secret becomes clear from her.*<sup>48</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s careful attention here to the spiritual importance, indeed the necessity, of experientially exploring the realm of plants (and the adjacent “pre-human” domains of animal and mineral existence) does coincide with the repeated emphatic Qurānic reminders of the worshipping and other inner dimensions of the creatures in all those natural dimensions of existence. (Even more obvious is the Qurānic use of symbols drawn from the vegetal, animal and mineral realms.) It is noteworthy that contemporary researchers have also pointedly observed the expansion of “vegetal philosophy” (mentioned above) as an independent field of study highlighting the capacities of plants, as a means of de-centering the prevalent metaphysical conceptions of human dominance, since people do obviously exist in a fundamental relationship with all non-human others.

To continue exploring the intricate yet intimate relationship between the universe and humans, Ibn ‘Arabī, like other mystics, also refers to the various Qurānic sources developing the symbolism of the individual as a tree. “The human being is a tree,”<sup>49</sup> he says. In addition to having a longstanding connection to divine figures and mythology,<sup>50</sup> trees have also been recognized in many cultures and religions as a link between different realms of creation<sup>51</sup> throughout the course of human existence.

This certainly contributes to understanding and enriching the terminology and symbolic use of the intermediary world as a means of human development and perfection.<sup>52</sup>

Now from Ibn ‘Arabī’s phenomenological hermeneutics and metaphysical perspective, the vegetative and other natural aspects of human being are an important object of exploration, an extensive source of this plant-wisdom that grants humans access to the world from a vegetal perspective, as represented in the immense phenomenology of the experience of nature among all peoples. Therefore Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the spiritual role of plants (and other natural creatures) does not contradict his other metaphysical perspectives. In fact, it refocuses our attention on the interconnectedness of human nature (*nāsūt*) and divine nature (*lāhūt*), as that is enabled through the natural world (*tabī‘iyyāt*).<sup>53</sup> This has been suggested by Islamic environmentalist scholars following the spiritual path of development that “people have to reform themselves, before they can reform the world.”<sup>54</sup> However, realizing the full import of that vast range of phenomena and sensitivities may understandably prove to be more difficult for people today, when compared with those indigenous groups who are still dependently living side by side with nature.

We might also note that this vegetal *barzakh* presents a twofold ethical dimension. We refer here to its lived aspect with regard to the sensual, as well as the spiritually sensitive, nexus of its human relations. Vegetal life gives us a sense of what is meant by the perpetuation of creation, on both the physical and the mental planes, that takes place through daily exercise and “cultivation,” both outwardly and inwardly. The concepts of kinship and participation, along with that of responsibility, are key components within religious ethical discipline.<sup>55</sup> In its intrinsic aspect, the plant realm of the *barzakh* particularly suggests what makes for the virtues of spiritual humility and modesty associated with the terms *khushū‘* or *tawādu‘* and *zuhd* in Sufi ethics.

Still, the deeper spiritual reality of this state is to emphasize inward turning, the “humility of heart,” an interior state that requires the human self to recognize its total ontological dependence on God—and which, in relation to the other humans (and all other creatures as well), requires

restraining the self from feelings of superiority.<sup>56</sup> Thus the eventual human result of this “plant-like” ethical nature is realized spiritual knowledge. The more we grow (spiritually), the less we become. In Indonesian spiritual lore, it is understood that knowledge of the life-cycle of the rice paddy plant provides an image of this deeply rooted inner humility that has long been culturally integrated into everyday life-philosophy among indigenous people.<sup>57</sup>

Through this turning and profound “humility,” the human being who has realized these plant-like qualities can absorb and contact this world and the worlds beyond. We find this statement bringing out Ibn ‘Arabi’s notion of the fruitful human connection with the vegetal *barzakh* developed in detail in his chapter 366.<sup>58</sup> Though this article is not an independent systematic discussion of the whole cosmological realm of plants, nonetheless it does elaborate on the essential human spiritual connection of our relation to this vegetal aspect of *barzakh*. Thus, from this perspective, neglecting this vegetal element in us is akin to annihilating different species of plants, in that it impoverishes a vital element of our being human and “growing in humanity” in this world. In addition, this vegetal dimension of accomplished humanity suggests not just growing to a higher spiritual level but also sustaining the human being and keeping it in a healthy state. It is part of the soul’s “convalescing” when it has been cured of its deficiencies, requiring nourishment and protection from maladies in the physical, intellectual, and spiritual spheres.

In Stephen Hirtenstein’s study on the alchemy of happiness, one of the “alchemical” (i.e., spiritually transformational) functions of our inner realization connected with plants in this intermediary realm is therefore to help cure mental and spiritual illness and to provide the proper conditions that can protect against the dominance of earthly desires.<sup>59</sup> Through this full assimilation of the *barzakh* of plants, the realized soul acquires a medium of perception and other qualities such that whoever attains the highest spiritual level (described here as “gold”) will never again undergo the sort of negative transformation that leads back to a lower level.<sup>60</sup>

The following sections elaborate on two key lessons from chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt*, followed by a memorable personal testimony by Ibn ‘Arabi

about his own realization of this transformation through the *barzakh* of animality (*hayawān*), a striking passage that concludes his chapter 22 on Ilyas (Idris) in the *Fuṣūṣ*. This key chapter there concisely sums up and highlights his teaching regarding the essential role of the *barzakh* in spiritual realization in earthly life, as it enables our assimilation of the animal, mineral and vegetal dimensions of all earthly creatures.

## The "Plant-Dimension" (*nabāt*) as That Which Gives, Leads, and Rules

For Ibn ʿArabī, the human being is "a tree," and due to this inherent constitution, humans are always in disagreement and disputes until they concur on one thing, which is death:<sup>61</sup>

[God] made human beings a tree in which there is contentiousness (*tashājur*),<sup>62</sup> because humans were created from contraries,<sup>63</sup> due to the human constitution being made up of different elements; and this intermediate position is very characteristic of the imagination and the *barzakh*. For if the matter were limited only to the growing (physical) body and its other (purely physical aspects), without including the soul, then (that person) would not be disputing (against God). For (the body) is created primordially (*maftūr*) to glorify God and to praise Him. So, the human body (alone, without the human soul) is like herbage among the plants.

It is the integration of the soul with the body that introduces the tension and the potential for conflict, and thus, for choice. This is why, in his chapter on plants, Ibn ʿArabī likens the human condition to an inner pledge of allegiance (*mubāyaʿa*). This allegiance acknowledges the profound effect that nature and the elemental "pillars" (*arkān*) have on all the earthly generated bodies (*muwalladāt*).<sup>64</sup> Therefore, "growth" in this context signifies not merely biological development, but above all a navigation of life that entails responsibility, accountability, and ultimately, leadership. This alludes to the fundamental human need for

an Imam, caliph, or guide. Ibn ‘Arabī employs a figurative language of “likeness” to show how the “human tree” corresponds to universal Reality, with the dynamics of semantic power and weakness illustrating this realm of spiritual growth. The human, as a kind of spiritual “child,” can be led and supported by the power of imagination, which acts as an internal ruler. In a positive sense, the duality within the human “tree” is the very ground from which that leadership is born. The *barzakh* thus functions as a measure, and the quality of this inner leadership judges and rules on an essential, individual, and social level. Concerning this, Ibn ‘Arabī continues here:

*Barzakh* is a person who divides, who is wise and just, who is the one who judges between himself and his God. So, the revealed law itself does not apply until that person himself contradicts his God and judges his God based on his own carnal self (*nafs*), on his (limited) knowledge. Because the knowledge of just persons, which is knowledge of Truth, is in the hands of God in every situation.<sup>65</sup>

This paradoxical nature of the *barzakh* as both a separator and a bridge is epitomized in the symbolic figures of Khizr and Moses, who serve as a paradigmatic model for the master-disciple relationship throughout Islamic history.<sup>66</sup> Their interaction provides a vertical and horizontal model for relating different realms of knowledge, embodying the archetype of a guide who is both a “maker and protector” and a “destroyer of illusions.”<sup>67</sup>

Crucially, the human body itself is a plant. However, it does not stand on a stem, and it is not fully a “tree” unless the spirit is present. It is this *spiritual* animation that distinguishes the human “plant” from all others. As a *barzakh*, the plant-like human body is a mirror capable of receiving and forming images of the other two earthly isthmuses: the realms of minerals and animals. Therefore, when a person pledges allegiance, the oath encompasses the entire chain of being: plants, animals, and minerals. This suggests that “plant” refers simultaneously to the body, the individual person, and the principle of leadership inherent within them.

Consequently, the causation of growth is not merely a predetermined biological process. While it is part of God's making Himself a "partner" to creation, the actual aspect of growing is also a partially self-determined factor necessary to qualify as a perfected human being. Without the human being's own preparation for "sprouting," the Divine Names would not manifest their effects within each person. The vegetal aspect of the human ultimately serves as a profound reminder, a concept supported by the Qur'an, where the growth of plants is presented as a transformative insight and a mirror to individual eschatology and resurrection (Qur'an 50:7-11) :

As for the earth, we spread it out and placed upon it firm mountains, and produced in it every type of pleasant plant, all as an insight and a reminder to every servant who turns to Allah. And we sent down blessed rain from the sky, bringing forth gardens and grains for harvest. And towering palm trees with clustered fruit, as a provision for our servants. And with this rain, we revive a lifeless land: that is similar to the emergence from the graves (at the Resurrection).

In its highest function, the allegiance to the "plant" is an allegiance to a mode of knowing. It is therefore associated with measure, rules, and, ultimately, the highest station of the spiritual "pole" (*qutb*). Spiritual knowledge and perfection spring from this allegiance. This integrated knowledge includes: the knowledge of the divine Signs in all creation; the knowledge of completion and perfection (*kamāl*), a perfection pertaining to each person's created rank; and the knowledge of statement and clarification, which includes the knowledge of uprightness and even the profound wisdom behind the gray hairs of the Prophet, as indicated in the Sura of Hud.<sup>68</sup>

### Ibn 'Arabī's Personal Experience of the *Barzakh* of "Animality"

Ibn 'Arabī's discussion makes it clear that the spiritual necessity of realizing the "*barzakh* of plants" extends to fully discovering and experiencing

the hidden realities of all creation, including the animal and mineral realms. This process is powerfully illustrated in his account of the prophet Idrīs (Ilyās) in the *Fuṣūṣ*, chapter 22<sup>69</sup> and in his own personal experience:

[...When the spirit of the prophet Idrīs had been “*raised up*” to God,]<sup>70</sup> he was sent back (to earth) as a (divine) Messenger after that.<sup>71</sup> So God combined for him the two levels (of existence: as pure intellect, *‘aql*, and earthly animality). Thus He made him descend from the state of his (pure) intellect to that of his animal desire (*shahwa*), so that he became an absolute animal (*ḥayawān*), experiencing directly what is experienced by every animal, apart from the humans and jinn. Then he knew that he had realized fully (*taḥaqqāqa*) his own animal nature.

Now there are two indicative signs of that (purely animal state). One is this “unveiling,” so that he sees whoever (among those living) will be punished and who will be rewarded in their grave (i.e., after their death); and he sees the dead person as living, the dumb person speaking, and the sitting person walking. The second sign is that he becomes dumb, so that even if he wants to speak about what he sees (in that state), he is unable to do so. So at that point he fully realizes his animality.

We once had a student who did undergo that, but who didn’t remain in that state of dumbness, so that he didn’t fully realize his animality. But when God established me in that station, I realized and experienced my animality completely. Then I was seeing (these unveilings) and I wanted to speak of what I was witnessing, but I was unable to do so. So there was no difference between myself and the dumb person who is unable to speak.

Thus, when someone has fully realized what we have just mentioned, he is transferred to (a state) where he becomes a disembodied intellect, without any material nature. Then he

directly witnesses those things which are the (immaterial) roots of what appears in the natural forms, and he knows through direct experience the origin of this (embodied) condition in the natural forms [...].

## Conclusion

Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology presents the *barzakh* not merely as a static intermediate realm, but as the dynamic and creative principle underpinning all of existence and spiritual development. It is the ontological bridge that connects the divine and the created, meaning and form (*ṣūra*), and the present life with the realities to come. The *barzakh* gives profound meaning to the stages of human life, while its very nature challenges the limits of human language and conception. As this study has illustrated, the journey through the *barzakh*, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is one of progressive realization (*taḥaqquq*). The human being, initially understood as a contentious “tree” in the vegetal realm, must navigate the spiritual growth inherent in their composite nature, embracing responsibility and leadership. This journey can extend into the profound, pre-mortem unveiling of states like pure “animality,” where the mystic learns to see with visionary clarity, a precursor to the soul’s final awakening. In human development, the *barzakh* manifests as a series of transitional stages, evoking the rhythmic spiritual states of contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*). This dynamic process, symbolized by the Quranic concept of *inshirāḥ* (expansion), reflects the soul’s responsive engagement with divine reality.

Ultimately, it is through imagination (*khayāl*) that humans gain an intimate awareness of other realms, with *ma‘rifa* (spiritual knowledge) offering a direct encounter that transcends mere conceptual understanding (*‘ilm*). This aligns with the soul’s journey toward perfection (*kamāl*), where successive *barzakhs* are not obstacles but essential opportunities for integration and growth. Ethically, navigating these liminal states fosters profound self-awareness and spiritual discovery, demanding that the soul move beyond established patterns.

As a creative force, the *barzakh* facilitates the internalization of diverse spiritual insights, unifying their deeper meanings. In rituals, arts, and mindful acts, it bridges the corporeal and the spiritual, embodying the

transformative potential of human imagination. It reveals the constant interplay between the outer world and inner spiritual life, grounding cosmic realities in human experience. Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the *barzakh* signifies the soul’s perpetual journey toward transformation, wholeness, and ultimate proximity to the Divine, a journey that begins with the growth of the “plant,” passes through the unveiling of the “animal,” and culminates in the perfected human being who fully reflects the “Names” and attributes of their Creator.

## Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Professors James Morris and John Walbridge for their comments and useful suggestions; I am also grateful to Professor Carl Pearson for his helpful comments on different versions of this article.
- 2 "He has set free the two seas, so that they meet/ between them a barrier (*barzakh*) neither of them crosses." The meaning of the "two seas" here is usually interpreted in terms of verse 25:53: "He it is Who set free the two seas: one sweet and fresh; the other salty and bitter. And He placed between them a barrier (*barzakh*) forbidding (their mixing)." Before Ibn 'Arabī, earlier Sufi commentators and others had often connected these two waters to symbols of the material and the spiritual realms of existence.
- 3 Gholamhossein Ebrahim Dinani, "Barzakh," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, trans. Kevin Brown (Brill, 2021).
- 4 Lane, *Lexicon*, "barzakh," [https://lexicon.quranic-research.net/data/02\\_b/070\\_brzx.html](https://lexicon.quranic-research.net/data/02_b/070_brzx.html). The first definition here is alluding to a famous hadith
- 5 The notion of *barzakh* as liminality can be a point of departure. Liminality is derived from a Latin word, *limens*, means 'threshold.' It developed to be translated as a house, dwelling, abode and the barrier in a racecourse. See Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, "Limen," <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=limen&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059>.
- 6 George Archer, *A Place Between Two Places: The Qur'anic Barzakh* (Gorgias Press, 2017), 2.
- 7 Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn Al-'Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (SUNY Press, 2004), 12.
- 8 Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Embracing the Barzakh: Knowledge, Being and Ethics 1," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021): 28–48.
- 9 Miriam Cooke, "The Barzakh of Ecstasy," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2022): 17–28.
- 10 Michael Mardar et. al., *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 11 Titus Burckhardt, "Concerning the Barzakh," in *Mirror of the Intellect*, ed. William Stoddart (SUNY Press, 1987), 193–99.
- 12 Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 2 of 4 volumes. Reprint of Bulaq edition (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1968), Ch. 8 of the *Futūḥāt* on the "Reality of the Vast Earth."
- 13 *FM* 3, Ch, 135–140.
- 14 Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton University Press, 1969).

- 15 James W. Morris, "Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and 'Translating' the *Meccan Illuminations*," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 33 (2003), 54–98. See also Annabel Keeler, "Wisdom in Controversy: Paradox and the Paradoxical in Sayings of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875)," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7, nos. 1–2 (2018): 1–26.
- 16 For the meaning of *barzakh* in the writing of Suhrawardī, one of Ibn 'Arabī's immediate philosophical and spiritual predecessors, see Malihe Karbassian, "The Meaning and Etymology of Barzakh in Illuminationist Philosophy," in *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies*, ed. Ali Gheissari, et al. (Brill, 2018), 86-95.
- 17 As for this definition of *barzakh* as the first level of existence, see Ibn 'Arabī, *FM 2*, 5.
- 18 See Wilson (transl.), *The Masnavi*, Vol. 2, Book II (Probsthain & Co, 1910), note 20.
- 19 *FM 2*, 46.
- 20 *FM 3*, 232. 24
- 21 Mona Siddiqui, "Imagination and the Ethics of Religious Narratives," in *Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith Are Shaping Today's World*, ed. James Walter (Gingko Library, 2018), 37.
- 22 Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, 218.
- 23 "We will show them Our signs in the universe and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is a Witness over all things?"
- 24 "[He is] Lord of the two sunrises and Lord of the two sunsets".
- 25 "He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no god worthy of worship except Him, so take Him alone as a Trustee."
- 26 "He is the Lord of the east and west, and everything in between, if only you had any sense."
- 27 "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from the oil of a blessed olive tree, located neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! Allah guides whomever He wills to His Light. And Allah sets forth parables for humanity. For Allah has perfect knowledge of all things."
- 28 *FM 2*, Ch. 8 "on the Inner Knowing of the Reality of the 'Vast Earth' that was Created From the Remnants of Adam's Clay."
- 29 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 135.
- 30 Notably, this reference to their conversation (about experiences not otherwise mentioned in surviving stories of this famous early Egyptian Sufi teacher) suggests something that Ibn 'Arabī might have learned in another personal encounter with

Dhū'l Nūn in the *barzakh* of the afterlife, since he often mentions in multiple works his personal discussions with a number of well-known (but long-deceased) spiritual figures in the next world. Dhū'l Nūn's dates are 796-859 CE, or almost four centuries before Ibn 'Arabī.

31 FM 4, 127.

32 FM 2, 128.7-11.

33 *Al-'ulamā' bi'llāh*: this is one of Ibn 'Arabī's favorite terms for designating the highest spiritual ranks of the "true spiritual knowers," the *'ārifūn*.

34 FM 1, 127 (ch. 8) and following.

35 See James Winston Morris, "Life Is But a Dream": Creation as Divine Cinema and the Shadow-Theater of Existence, From Plato to Ibn 'Arabī," *El Azufre Rojo: Revista de Estudios Sobre Ibn 'Arabī* 2 (n.d.): 30-48.

36 FM 1, 128 (beginning line 11) to 129.

37 FM 1, 127. 20-23.

38 Sheikh, "Embracing the Barzakh," 28.

39 Nazeer El-Azma, "Some Notes on the Impact of the Story of the Mi'raj on Sufi Literature," *The Muslim World* 63, no. 2 (1973): 93-104:94.

40 I use Herlihy's terminology of "soul instinct," which is an inner eye of the heart accessing key existential and spiritual matters. See John Herlihy, *Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind* (World Wisdom, 2005). 74-75.

41 The most personal and detailed account of Ibn 'Arabī's own spiritual journey in its earliest form is considered to be his highly symbolic account in his youthful book *Kitāb al-Isrā' ilā al-Maqām al-Asrā'* ("The Book of the Night-Journey to the Farthest Station").

42 See the opening sections of James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj Part I," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 4 (1987): 629-52.

43 Frederick S. Colby, "The Subtleties of the Ascension: Al-Sulamī on the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Muhammad," *Studia Islamica*, no. 94 (2002): 167-83.

44 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 72. Ibn 'Arabī echoes earlier philosophers and Sufis, such as *Ikhwān al-Safā'*, regarding the cosmic hierarchy of existents and the special position of plants. In that context, "*al-nabāt*" refers to that dimension of the world (or "the Kingdom, *al-mulk*") that is considered to be the source of the potential for growth and development.

45 FM 3, 139, lines 11-14. This and the other passages below are taken from the FM, chapter 336.

- 46 The specific verse alluded to here is at 71:17; but it presupposes the larger context of verses 71:14-20, part of Noah's address to his people.
- 47 See the translation of this key passage from the end of this *Faṣṣ* that is included at the end of this section below, where Ibn 'Arabi includes his own experience of this state of pure "animality."
- 48 *FM 2*, 586. Ch. 267, "On inner knowing of the soul...."
- 49 *FM 3*, 137. ch. 366.
- 50 J.H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree, or the Tree in Religion and Myth* (NY, Dover Publications, 2004).
- 51 Noble Ross Reat, "The Tree Symbol in Islam," [http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/the\\_tree\\_symbol\\_in\\_islam-by\\_noble\\_ross\\_reat.aspx#\\_ftn58](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/the_tree_symbol_in_islam-by_noble_ross_reat.aspx#_ftn58).
- 52 Here one might also note that one of the most popular and widely read early summaries of Ibn 'Arabi's central metaphysical teachings was entitled the "Tree of Existence" (*Shajarat al-Kawn*).
- 53 For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (ABC International Group, Inc., 2001), 200-206.
- 54 A.M. Schwencke, *Globalized Eco-Islam A Survey of Global Islamic Environmentalism (Draft Version)* (Leiden Institute for Religious Studies (LIRS), Leiden University, 2012), 11.
- 55 In Goethe's natural philosophy, the adaptability of the transplanted shoot of a plant, the fact that a broken-off part can reattach itself, and from that point of adaptation take up further stages of metamorphosis: "[A] new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch." Cited in Elaine P Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (SUNY Press, 2002), 186.
- 56 See an overview of this terminology in Atif Khalil, "Humility in Islamic Contemplative Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* (Leiden, The Netherlands) 4, nos. 1-2 (2020): 223-52.
- 57 This lifecycle of paddy rice is known in Southeast Asian philosophy as *Ilmu Padi*, or "the 'knowing of the paddy-plant.'" It refers to a person's maturity, self-realization, and spiritual attainments, symbolized by the growing nature and ripening of the paddy plant. In Indonesian, a proverb says "*seperti padi, semakin berisi, semakin merunduk*". Which translates to: "*be like the rice stalk: as it is laden with ripening grains, it bows down.*"
- 58 In full, that title of chapter 366 is: "Concerning inner knowing of the waystation (*manzil*) of the plants' pledging allegiance to that spiritual Pole (*Quṭb*) who is the 'Master of the Moment' in every age, and this is from the Presence of Muhammad." This chapter within the larger *Futūḥāt* Section concerning the Spiritual Waystations (*faṣl al-manāzil*) corresponds to Sura 48 (*al-Fath*), where verses 10 and 18 both refer to the famous "swearing allegiance" (*mubāya'a*) to Muhammad by his followers

at Hudaybiyya, "*underneath the Tree*," as the Qur'an describes that key event. The closing verse 48:29 refers specifically to the distinctive signs of the people of true faith, concluding with the spiritual plant imagery that runs through most of this chapter: "*That is their likeness in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel—like the sown seed that brings forth its shoot, and strengthens it; then it becomes strong, so it rises up on its stalk, pleasing the sowers....*"

- 59 Ibn 'Arabi, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein (Anqa Publishing, 2017), 58-59, footnote 48. The text translated and annotated in that volume is of *FM*, Ch.167.
- 60 *Alchemy*, 56.
- 61 *FM* II, 295.
- 62 This sense of the *sh-j-r* Arabic root as referring to disagreement and opposing qualities is emphasized in a number of Qur'anic verses, especially referring to the forbidden Tree in Eden: "*Don't you two (Adam and Eve) approach this tree, lest you become among the wrongdoers!*" (2:35).
- 63 *FM* 3, 137.
- 64 *FM* 3, 137. Line 26
- 65 *FM* 3, 137. Line 25-28.
- 66 Hugh Talat Halman, *Where Two Seas Meet: The Qur'anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Fons Vitae, 2013).
- 67 Sometimes a shaykh knows how to reconstitute a student's situation by imaginatively transforming an apparently strictly legal solution into a more personal, negotiated solution. For an example of this, see Andi Herawati and Andi Rachmawati Syarif, "Religion and Creative Imagination: Religious Representation in I.B. Singer's *In My Father's Court* and The Shadow-Theater (*Wayang*) In Indonesia," *Prajñā Vihāra* 20, no. 2 (2019): 37.
- 68 *FM* 3, 140 and following.
- 69 *FH*, 186-187. The selections quoted below here are from the very end of the *Fass* of Ilyās (Idris). At the beginning of this same chapter (pp. 181-182), Ibn 'Arabi already carefully outlines the metaphysical importance of this complete realization of *both* the purely intelligible sources of manifest existence, together with the realized awareness in *this* material world of the essential role of human "imaginings" (*awhām*, here used in the sense of *khayāl*) in order to fully perceive the significance of all those earthly forms of the divine creation.
- 70 The allusion is to verses 19:56-57, "... *We raised him [Idris] up to a High Station.*"
- 71 This later sending back to earth of Idris, who was understood first as an early prophet between Adam and Noah, was often identified with the *later* prophetic figure called Ilyās/Elias (6:85; 37:123-13). Hence Ibn 'Arabi opens this chapter 22 by saying: "Ilyās is Idris."



# REVIEW ESSAY

# After Savagery: Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of Western Civilization

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CHICAGO: HAYMARKET BOOKS, 2025,  
304 PAGES.

HAMID DABASHI

As Tufan al-Aqsa marks its second anniversary, the devastation in Gaza remains immense. Thousands have been killed in relentless Israeli bombardments, and countless children, the sick, and the elderly face starvation under a blockade that has systematically denied access to food, medicine, and humanitarian aid. Relief efforts to reach Gaza's besieged population have been deliberately obstructed, while global protests from India to the United States have been criminalized and severely repressed. Diplomatic initiatives and peace negotiations have yielded no lasting results. In a striking display of hypocrisy, several Western states complicit in the genocide against Palestinians have now moved to recognize Palestine as a state.

This prolonged and visible genocide, unfolding before a global public, has transformed the Palestinian question into a universal moral concern. The future of Palestine, therefore, is inseparable from the moral future of the world itself. It is within this morally and politically charged context that Hamid Dabashi's *After Savagery: Gaza, Genocide, and the Illusion of*

*Western Civilization* emerges as a work of critical urgency. Comprising six chapters, Dabashi's study interrogates the structures of Western power and thought, arguing that the ongoing genocide in Gaza exposes the moral exhaustion and philosophical bankruptcy of the Western intellectual and political tradition. Crucially, Dabashi positions Palestine not merely as a political site of resistance but as an epistemological vantage point, a locus from which to rethink the world and its moral possibilities.

One of the key aspects of Dabashi's book is that he does not view the genocide and savagery in Gaza as isolated events independent of the historical and epistemic structures that produced them. He traces their roots within Western philosophy itself. He writes that Western philosophy, often celebrated as the highest achievement of Western civilisation, is in fact a tribal and racist system that is inherently exclusive. The people of the Global South, he argues, exist categorically outside of it. They are seen as a metaphysical menace to Western philosophy and are denied the very metaphysical existence, and this metaphysical violence culminates in physical violence. The European history of colonialism, he notes, is the history of physically eliminating those people whose bodies are subjected to the same violence that Western philosophy had already enacted upon their souls, those who were metaphysically and ontologically killed long before.

This is a terrifying reality in the Palestinian case as well, where people are simply not considered human beings, an idea to which Israeli authorities repeatedly refer. "We are fighting human animals," Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant stated on October 9, 2023, "and we are acting accordingly." This haunting phrase, along with the solidarity statement issued by the celebrated Western philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whom Irfan Ahmad powerfully described as an "ethnic thinker par excellence" (1), exposes the false claim of universality and the moral bankruptcy of European philosophy. Dabashi holds the entirety of "Western philosophy" accountable for this unfolding terror and genocide in Gaza.

Dabashi further argues that the moral foundation of Western philosophy, especially in Kant's notion of the metaphysics of morals, is itself immoral and distinctly European in nature, which Kant, the philosophical grandfather of Heidegger and Habermas, calls "universal." Dabashi

asks, how can racism be universal? Racism is not an accident of Western philosophy but part of its very structure. Within this racist philosophy, the wretched of the earth have no place, no room, no existential ontology. They mistakenly believed that the West's universal claims also spoke for them and that they were part of it, but Gaza has made it clear that they are not. Even before Gaza, Western philosophy had already revealed, through its language and logic, its exclusionary, racist, and dehumanising core. Therefore, Dabashi writes that "the task at hand is to read the metaphysics of morals at the foundation of Western civilisation as a metaphysics of barbarism." (p. 21)

While Dabashi's critique of the Enlightenment effectively exposes its racial underpinnings, it remains largely confined to the register of race and overlooks the religious and theological foundations of Enlightenment rationality. Unlike Dabashi, Irfan Ahmad persuasively argues in *Religion as Critique*, the Enlightenment was not merely a racial project but also a profoundly Christian one, a project that did not reject Christianity, as is commonly assumed, but rather reconfigured and re-evaluated it, positioning Islam as its essential Other. (2) Dabashi extends his critique of Western philosophy to the tradition of "Critical Theory" itself, particularly Adorno, in the section titled "Uncritical Theory." He argues that thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer, often celebrated as radical critics of fascism, remain deeply implicated in the very Eurocentric and colonial structures they claimed to oppose. Drawing on Gabriel Rockhill's analysis, Dabashi recalls how Adorno and Horkheimer, in a 1956 article, defended the imperial invasion of Egypt by Israel, Britain, and France during the Suez Crisis, referring to Nasser, one of the leading anti-colonial voices of the Non-Aligned Movement, as a "fascist chieftain." Such language, Dabashi notes, exposes the racial hierarchy within European critical thought, which is especially applied to Arab, African, and Muslim leaders, while no European dictator is described in such terms.

For Dabashi, this complicity represents not just an individual failure but a deeply rooted structural problem. Consequently, he argues that Adorno and his generation of European thinkers must be understood as the rightful descendants of the racist philosophies of Hegel and Kant. In his own words, "Their works have never been sufficient for our critical

understanding of the global context. Their blinding Eurocentrism, their unflinching racist preoccupation with ‘Western Civilization,’ their numbing indifference to the world at large, and their astonishing ignorance of non-European critical cultures make them not entirely useless but, in fact, useful as symptoms of the disease they think they want to cure but instead exacerbate.” (p. 54)

Dabashi continues his critical engagement with Adorno in Chapter 3, “Poetry After Genocide,” where he responds to Adorno’s well-known assertion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Dabashi challenges this claim, arguing that such a view remains confined within a Eurocentric horizon that fails to engage with the moral and historical realities of the world beyond Europe, thereby revealing its inability to learn from or relate to experiences outside the European context. For him, poetry after genocide is not an act of barbarism but an affirmation of life, resistance, and the liberty of a people to fight against barbarism.

After exposing the structural racism embedded in the philosophies of Adorno, Hegel, and others, Dabashi turns to a detailed examination of Agamben’s concept of the camp, extending Agamben’s theorization to reveal its colonial genealogy. While Agamben identifies the camp as the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of modernity, Dabashi insists that it is, in fact, the paradigm of colonial modernity. Situating Israel as a garrison state and Palestine as a constellation of camps, he exposes how both are structurally intertwined forms of colonial domination. The colonial condition, overlooked in both Harold Lasswell’s theory of the garrison state and Agamben’s concept of the camp, is in fact their original site. Dabashi argues that the genocidal logic of the Holocaust was not an isolated event in Europe but a continuation of colonial violence long practiced in Africa and Asia. Before targeting their “internal Others” (the Jews), Europeans had already experimented with mass extermination and concentration camps in the colonies, a historical reality Agamben overlooks this fact due to the limits of his European imagination. Dabashi contends that the genocidal mechanisms used in German concentration camps prefigured the logic later applied by Zionists in Palestine. However, while Agamben studies European camps like Auschwitz and Buchenwald, he ignores Palestinian camps such as Yarmouk, Rafah, Khan

Younis, and others. Dabashi calls this omission an epistemic limitation, even in radical theory, that prevents him from grasping the global and colonial implications of the camp as a modern structure of power.

This moral and philosophical collapse that Dabashi traces within Western thought finds a resonant echo in Pankaj Mishra's reflections. Like Dabashi, Pankaj Mishra, in his article *The Shoah after Gaza* (3) and later in his book *The World After Gaza* (4), powerfully argues that the destruction of Gaza marks a decisive moral and civilizational rupture, the moment when the post-Holocaust moral order of the West, built on the vow of "Never Again," finally collapses. He contends that the memory of the Shoah, once a universal moral warning, has been transformed into a political instrument that legitimizes Zionist violence and shields Western complicity. Mishra sees October 7 as a profound rupture that divides time into a world before and after Gaza, leaving humanity caught between an insufficiently understood past and a menacing future.

Both Mishra and Dabashi thus converge on Gaza as an event that exposes the exhaustion of Western moral and epistemic traditions, Mishra articulating this collapse through the history of moral philosophy and Holocaust memory, and Dabashi through the philosophical genealogy of Western metaphysics and colonial power. Dabashi describes Palestine as "the bleeding wound of Western colonial projects," implying that the Palestinian genocide and occupation are direct outcomes of Western colonial modernity: moral, military, and epistemic. Hence, resistance cannot be merely political or military; it must also be moral, imaginative, aesthetic, and epistemic. The struggle for Palestine, therefore, must reshape the very foundations of how we think, imagine, and see the world. Dabashi insists that the Palestinian experience, with its history of Nakba (catastrophe), Intifada (uprising), and Sumud (steadfastness), should not be viewed merely as acts of survival or passive resistance but as conceptual frameworks and modes of knowing and resisting that disrupt Eurocentric paradigms of thought. By linking Palestine to decolonial theorists such as Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo, Dabashi situates it within a broader global struggle for epistemic decolonization, an effort to displace Europe as the center of thought. Ultimately, Dabashi contends that without Palestine, the global project of decoloniality and

postcoloniality remains incomplete. It is Palestine, as an epistemological site of anticolonial contestation, not Europe, that offers the moral and epistemic ground for a new moral and intellectual order.

After this entire discussion, where Palestine should emerge as an epistemic epicentre, Dabashi's proposal as a postcolonial scholar carries certain limitations. Dabashi proposes what he calls a syncretic Palestinian liberation theology, a framework that transcends Islamic, Jewish, and Christian theologies. Dabashi's formulation of this syncretic Palestinian liberation theology appears appealing at first, but it also exposes a tension within his own project. While he calls for an epistemic decolonisation rooted in Palestine's lived experience, he simultaneously sidelines Islam as a distinct intellectual and spiritual source of resistance. In doing so, Dabashi risks reproducing the very epistemic erasure he attributes to European philosophers like Kant, Hegel, and Agamben, thinkers who universalised knowledge while ignoring non-European categories of thought. By framing the future of Palestine primarily in ecumenical terms, Dabashi abstracts the Islamic moral and civilizational dimension of the struggle, even though Islam has historically shaped the Palestinian consciousness of justice, resistance, and liberation. His treatment of Islam as sectarian also neutralises the spiritual foundations of resistance. Moreover, Dabashi's persistent emphasis on overcoming "sectarianism" implicitly positions Islam merely as a sectarian identity rather than as a civilizational and epistemic framework. In doing so, he risks casting Islam as something that must be transcended or domesticated within a universal, non-sectarian framework. This move echoes the secular-liberal impulse of Western critical thought, where religion, especially Islam, is often seen as an obstacle to modernity rather than as a potential site of liberation and moral, epistemic, and political renewal. Dabashi's framework thus remains caught between critique and complicity, attempting to provincialise Europe while still operating within the secular logic of its epistemic order.

Furthermore, Dabashi speaks of both a post-Islamist and a post-Zionist Jewish liberation theology in parallel, envisioning them as complementary theological projects of decolonization. However, this symmetry flattens a crucial asymmetry. While Zionism is a colonial

project sustained by imperial power, Islamism, despite its internal diversities, has largely emerged as an anti-colonial response. By placing them on the same plane of “post-” transcendence, Dabashi risks equating the colonizer’s theology with the colonized’s resistance.

In sum, the central concern is that Dabashi’s portrayal of Palestine as merely another chapter of Western colonialism is analytically insufficient. The current Palestinian genocide is not occurring in the lawless context of historical colonialism but in an age defined by the United Nations, international conventions, and human rights discourse. It is happening in real time, before the eyes of the world, which remains both morally outraged and politically impotent to stop it. This unprecedented visibility and the failure of global governance render the Palestinian genocide exceptional, unique in its conditions, its spectatorship, and its exposure of the profound contradictions of the international order. Moreover, reducing Palestinian resistance to a purely secular narrative effectively suppresses the religious and spiritual dimensions that animate a significant part of the struggle, from the sanctity of Al-Aqsa to the theological meanings attached to steadfastness and martyrdom.

Dabashi largely omits Islam as a moral, political, and epistemic category in his analysis of Palestine and in his envisioning of its future, revealing a significant epistemic limitation in his postcolonial scholarship. Denying Islam in the discourse on Palestine is itself a product of secular colonial power that disciplines Muslims and erases their political subjectivity. Even in a book written in the aftermath of October 7, there is a conspicuous silence regarding Hamas and its role as a central actor in both resistance and the imagination of Palestine’s future. This deliberate omission raises critical questions about Dabashi’s framing of Palestinian agency. By effacing the Islamic intellectual and political dimensions of the struggle and overlooking its primary agents, he inadvertently reproduces the same epistemic exclusion he attributes to Western thought.

Such an omission is not merely analytical; it is profoundly political and epistemological. When read alongside Muneeza Rizvi’s powerful intervention in *Palestine and the Question of Islam* (5), Dabashi’s framework appears insufficient to capture the full moral, spiritual, and civilizational depth of the Palestinian question. While Dabashi’s

postcolonial humanism situates the Palestinian struggle within a broader critique of empire and Orientalism, Rizvi reclaims an Islamic moral vocabulary that resists the secular compartmentalization of faith and politics. Her intervention thus restores to Palestine a spiritual depth and ethical totality that transcends the limits of secular decolonial frameworks. From this position, re-centring Islam does not signify a regression to “sectarianism,” as Dabashi fears, but rather a reclamation of an epistemic and moral horizon long suppressed by Western secular paradigms. Recognising Palestine as an Islamic issue thus enables a move beyond Dabashi’s postcolonial humanism toward a genuinely decolonial project, rooted in the everyday experiences of Palestinians and grounded in the spiritual, civilizational, and epistemic ethos of Islam.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

# The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization

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NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024,  
352 PAGES.

ELHAM FAKHRO

Elham Fakhro's *The Abraham Accords: The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization* offers a groundbreaking and timely analysis of the 2020 normalization agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain—collectively known as the Abraham Accords. As the first major academic treatment of these accords, the book presents a comprehensive, incisive, and methodologically rigorous account of their genesis, negotiation processes, and far-reaching geopolitical consequences.

A research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center and an associate fellow at Chatham House, Fakhro brings deep expertise in Gulf politics. Drawing on extensive interviews with policymakers and regional stakeholders, she offers a richly textured critique. The book's analytical depth and accessible style make it an invaluable resource for scholars, policymakers, and students alike. However, its limited

engagement with grassroots perspectives and its silence on developments following Israel's devastating assault on Gaza in October 2023 modestly constrain its contemporary relevance. Still, its analysis of the accords' structural fragility—especially in light of Saudi Arabia's continued refusal to formally normalize ties with Israel—is both sobering and illuminating. While the argument that elite-driven agreements are unsustainable without popular support is not entirely novel, the book's enduring value lies in its close documentation of normalization from the vantage point of Gulf ruling elites.

Fakhro's central thesis is that the Abraham Accords, though framed as a strategic convergence of shared security interests, economic ambitions, and regional realignments, fundamentally fail by marginalizing the Palestinian issue. Rather than resolving or constructively addressing the roots of regional instability, they entrench a status quo defined by Palestinian dispossession and asymmetric power. The book persuasively argues that by privileging elite interests and U.S.-brokered diplomatic gains over justice and peace for Palestinians, the accords perpetuate cycles of violence and political disenchantment.

Structurally, the book is organized into six chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter examines a distinct dimension of the accords: the historical trajectory of Gulf-Israel relations; the emergence of a new generation of Gulf leadership; the tactical role of the Trump administration; the rapid institutionalization of military and economic cooperation; the reputational strategies pursued by the UAE and Bahrain; and the wider implications for Palestinian agency and prospects for regional peace.

A critical theme running throughout is the break with the longstanding Arab consensus—embodied in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative—which linked normalization with Israel to tangible progress toward Palestinian statehood. Fakhro deftly analyzes the political, ideological, and strategic transformations that enabled this rupture. Central to her account is the rise of younger, Western-educated Gulf rulers—figures like Mohammed bin Zayed in the UAE and Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia—who prioritize regime stability, selective modernization, and integration into the Western economic order over traditional commitments to Arab and

Islamic solidarity. Their realpolitik calculations—shaped by the perceived Iranian threat and the symbolic shock of Hezbollah’s 2006 military performance—facilitated the decoupling of normalization from Palestinian liberation.

Fakhro credits the Trump administration with seizing this opportunity, offering diplomatic and economic inducements while circumventing traditional channels of negotiation through figures like Jared Kushner. In doing so, the U.S. reframed peace-making as a series of transactional deals designed to advance immediate American, Israeli, and Gulf elite interests, rather than as part of a broader resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Among the book’s most original contributions is its analysis of “tolerance-washing”—the use of narratives around religious tolerance and modernization to obscure authoritarianism and human rights abuses. Fakhro illustrates how Gulf states deploy imagery of interfaith dialogue and multicultural celebration to curry favor with Western audiences while stifling dissent at home. These rhetorical strategies function within a broader reputational economy, through which Gulf regimes attempt to present themselves as progressive allies of the West, often at the expense of their own populations’ moral and religious sensibilities.

Particularly sharp is Fakhro’s critique of the role of firms like McKinsey in driving top-down neoliberal reforms. These reforms—marked by privatization, economic liberalization, and state-led modernization—have widened the gap between Gulf elites and their societies, deepening the region’s democratic deficit and eroding traditional social contracts.

To her credit, Fakhro does not overlook the widespread popular opposition to normalization. She highlights polling data from 2023 indicating that 96% of Saudis oppose normalization with Israel. This grassroots resistance is further reflected in consumer boycotts of Western brands linked to Israel (e.g., McDonald’s) and in recurring public protests, particularly in Bahrain. These expressions of discontent—though often suppressed—indicate that normalization remains deeply unpopular and that the “Arab street” has not been fully pacified.

The fragility of the accords became starkly apparent in the wake of Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza beginning in October 2023. Though

Fakhro refers to the conflict using more cautious terminology, she astutely observes that Gulf states were forced to scale back or freeze their cooperation with Israel to manage domestic outrage and avoid antagonizing Iran. This recalibration, she argues, reflects deeper questions of regime legitimacy: Gulf rulers must navigate a precarious path between appeasing Western allies and containing popular discontent. Her analysis of Saudi Arabia is especially instructive. Riyadh has thus far withheld formal normalization, demanding U.S. security guarantees and progress on Palestinian statehood—an indication of the monarchy’s sensitivity to domestic and religious opposition.

The book excels in timeliness and analytical clarity, though its depth is sometimes uneven. It does not offer a sustained intellectual or cultural history of the Gulf’s political transformation, nor does it interrogate how Gulf regimes reconcile their professed conservatism and Sunni religiosity with their embrace of Israel. While Fakhro notes the 1981 formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the context of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, she leaves unexplored the deeper theological and geopolitical consequences of the GCC’s increasing dependency on the United States. Nor does the book fully examine the internal evolution of Gulf elites. Fakhro observes that the new generation of rulers are unbound by the informal solidarities that constrained their predecessors—connections to their peoples, to the Palestinian cause, and to pan-Islamic and pan-Arab ideals—but she stops short of analyzing the ideological, educational, and economic shifts that produced this alienation. Why and how have these elites come to embrace Israel—long seen as a symbol of Western aggression and a regional adversary—with such ease? What accounts for their detachment from the region’s history and from their societies’ moral horizons? These remain pressing, unanswered questions.

Nevertheless, Fakhro succeeds in situating the Abraham Accords within a broader historical arc. She traces earlier episodes of normalization to the Oslo Accords of the 1990s, when Arab leaders, chastened by decades of military defeat and political failure, sought face-saving exits from the Palestinian impasse. The real rupture, she argues, occurred post-2006, when Gulf elites—emboldened by economic power and alarmed

by Iran's rising influence—saw in normalization a strategy to secure American protection, deflect internal calls for reform, and prepare their economies for a post-oil future. In this view, normalization is less a pursuit of regional peace than a tactic of dynastic survival. The accords thus emerge as instruments of what Fakhro calls “modernized tyranny”: regimes that consolidate power through surveillance, repression, neoliberal restructuring—and now, alignment with Israel as both local hegemon and broker of American favor.

In sum, *The Abraham Accords* is a compelling and thoroughly researched account that foregrounds the interests and calculations of Gulf elites without romanticizing their motives. Its greatest strength lies in its dissection of the political logic that has led Gulf states to sideline the Palestinian cause in favor of regime security, reputational capital, and economic transformation. Though the book could benefit from deeper cultural and ideological engagement, as well as a fuller treatment of post-2023 developments, it remains an indispensable resource. Fakhro offers a clear-eyed assessment of how the Gulf's turn to normalization is less a herald of peace than a symptom of regional decay—a triumph of elite interest over collective justice, and of performative diplomacy over principled solidarity. Unless anchored in a just resolution of the Palestinian issue and sustained by genuine regional consensus, the Abraham Accords, she warns, may ultimately prove more illusion than solution.

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# The Revolution Within: Islamic Media and the Struggle for a New Egypt

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368 PAGES.

YASMIN MOLL

In the last two decades, debates within the anthropology of Islam have been invigorated by ethnographies set in Egypt – from Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* and Charles Hirschkind’s *The Ethical Soundscape*, to Amira Mittermaier’s *Dreams that Matter* and Samuli Schielke’s *Egypt in the Future Tense*. In conversation with these influential texts, anthropologists studying Muslims have delved into issues like the relationship between interiority, exteriority, and ritual; the normative and analytical distinctions made between piety and impiety; the political valences of public religiosity; and the entanglements of the religious and the secular. Yasmin Moll’s *The Revolution Within* explores all these questions and more through an investigation of how Sunni Egyptian Muslims embody diverse orientations towards piety and politics in their struggles to build a New Egypt.

Moll’s ethnography revolves around the preachers who rose to prominence on Iqraa, the world’s first Islamic satellite television channel, established in 1998 by a Saudi media mogul. With their pioneering

preaching style and innovative series, the New Preachers, as they were dubbed, captivated Muslim audiences within Egypt and abroad—they were also spurned “as neoliberal apologists by leftists, as stealth Islamists by liberals, as secret liberals by Islamists, and as Westernizing sellouts by Salafis” (5). Figures like Amr Khaled, Mustafa Hosny, and Moez Masoud – household names since the 2000s – reshaped ideas about “proper” Islamic practice, offering believers a path towards piety that diverged from the Salafi one perceived to be dominating Egypt’s Islamic landscape in the decades prior. Debates around what it meant to be a pious Muslim became especially charged during the revolutionary period of 2010-2013, during which Moll conducted fieldwork, with these channels and their stars greatly shaping how a large swath of the population imagined Egypt’s future.

Moll’s ethnography deftly interweaves observations made in the series’ production rooms; interviews with New Preachers and their production teams, funders, and fans; and analyses of the series’ episodes and the online social media discussions they spark. Showing how “pietists’ debates about the forms and ends of Islamic media intertwined with those about the forms and ends of a New Egypt” (252), Moll highlights the theological and political stakes inherent to media debates. This is perhaps the book’s most valuable intervention: showing, in practice, how theological disputes can (and must) be studied in relation to disagreements in media and politics, and vice versa – how contestations surrounding the shape that media and politics take are inherently theological. In tracing “the social life of theology” (19) thus, Moll demonstrates how, today, theology is found not in the abstract exchanges penned by out-of-touch scholars in dusty books. Rather, theology materializes in sound bites creatively produced for the screen by media-savvy professionals, and is consumed by modern believers faced with a range of secular and Salafi alternatives vying for their souls. Stoked by fluctuating social and political circumstances, Iqraa’s media producers and viewers engage in intense theological reflection in their efforts to pursue a godly life.

By meticulously analyzing how theology is mediated – through screens, preachers, producers, and political events – Moll makes an excellent contribution to the anthropology of media and mediation. Her other

crucial intervention lies within the anthropology of Islam. In the preface, Moll immediately counterposes her approach to the two paradigms that have structured the discipline in recent years. Most staunchly, Moll sets herself apart from the field's "Asadians," who have deployed Talal Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a discursive tradition to denaturalize the universalisms of Western liberalism and secularism. According to Moll, this approach erroneously takes Salafism as the normative form of Islam and glosses over intra-Muslim contestation to it – as when Moll's interlocutors decry Salafi religiosity as unnatural, unrealistic, or even repugnant. At the same time, Moll challenges those who have critiqued Asadian accounts by normatively asserting a secular humanism that venerates ethical inconsistency and imperfection as universal traits. Critical of both orientations, Moll continually illustrates how her interlocutors provincialize both Salafism *and* secularism in their attempts to be good Muslims. Espousing the polemic of her interlocutors, Moll does not use their narratives to bridge the divide that has marked the anthropology of Islam, but to undermine both its camps simultaneously. This approach gives the text a slightly incendiary tone, which may ire loyalists on either side.

Readers who manage to approach the text judiciously and engage it on the strength of its arguments will find the book's five chapters replete with ways to think beyond the impasses that have marked the anthropological study of Muslims. Chapters 1-3 examine how the aesthetic and technical innovations Iqraa's producers utilized started "the revolution within" the media industry and inspired novel forms of piety among the channel's young, middle-class viewers. Chapters 4-5 analyze how "the revolution within" the Islamic satellite television industry mattered for how Iqraa's producers and viewers understood and engaged the turbulent revolutionary period of 2011-13. Each chapter revolves around a single theological concept that structures how Moll's interlocutor's produce Islamic media, embody distinct forms of piety, and picture the future of the nation.

Chapter 1 explores how Iqraa's producers work towards the calibration (*dabt*) of capital and media toward moral ends. The makers of Iqraa's series are invested in producing content that is both "professional,"

meeting the media industry's quality standards, and ethical, seeking alignment with divine decrees. They must privilege piety over profits, while also attracting the large viewership needed for making a deep and sustained impact. Examining the everyday practices of media production oriented toward ethical goals, Moll illustrates how properly calibrating Islamic media demands its makers negotiate and synthesize these two endeavors, illuminating the political economy of Islamic media beyond a focus on a channel's funders.

Moll continuously emphasizes how debates around the form and content of *Islamic media* are also debates about *Islam*, something chapter 2 tackles in depth. It foregrounds how New Preachers distinguished themselves from Salafis through a positive valuation of the innovation (*bid'a*) crucial to successful media production. Recognizing "the role of human mediation in relation to revelation" (93), New Preachers and their production teams take an active role in making Islamic content accessible, relatable, and exciting to their audiences. Innovation was seen as a key element to the Islamic tradition's dynamism and persistence, something reflected in Iqraa's programming and the iterations of Islam it propagated.

By opposing the secular and Salafi ethical models available to Egyptians, New Preachers reflectively engage and demarcate between the religious and the secular; in chapter 3, Moll demonstrates how a theology of moderation (*wasatiyya*) guides these efforts. Moderation is not about being "lukewarmly attached to living as a Muslim" or "rendering religion as a matter of individual, private belief" (132), as post 9/11 US foreign policy has sought to establish. Grounded within Ash'ari theology, the moderation undergirding Iqraa's programming entails understanding disagreement as inherent to the Islamic tradition and fostering balanced forms of piety accordingly. This includes the "judicious avoidance of the extremes of *ghuluw*, a righteous excessiveness that leads to fanatical rigidity, and *ghafla*, a heedlessness toward divine parameters that leads to moral degeneracy" (131). Moll does an excellent job in demonstrating how, for her interlocutors, "ambiguity and pluralism were Islamic, not secular" (151).

Having explained how religious immoderation can arise from the “Salafi stress on devotional rituals over interactional ethics” (146), in chapter 4, Moll considers how her interlocutors prioritize the “affective, ethical, and material care” (172) of one another through the theological notion of impact (*i‘mar*). Questioning the idea that self-cultivation starts and ends with the self – a shortcoming of Salafi and neoliberal approaches, but also academic analyses of them – Moll highlights how the New Preachers and their fans reorient self-help imperatives outward. This other-oriented ethic is critical to imagining and establishing a New Egypt as the revolution unfolds, and in its aftermath.

Thinking about what it means to live a godly life in relation to others, and not only with oneself or God, is an inherently political question that chapter 5 foregrounds. It features debates about the theological meaning and significance of coexistence (*ta‘ayush*) which became prominent among Iqraa’s preachers and producers during and after the revolution. For Iqraa’s preachers and producers, the coexistence that was foundational to life in a peaceful and pluralistic Egypt emerged neither through secularizing Islam nor in claims to Islamic exclusivism. Rather, it necessitated recognizing difference as divine decree and seeking lessons for how it was managed in Islamic history.

Repeatedly and convincingly, Moll shows how her interlocutors locate Islamic precedents and rationales for what their rivals (both Salafi and secular) deem external to the Islamic tradition. In so doing, Moll offers a powerful corrective to binaries that have been naturalized within the anthropology of Islam. At the same time, in deeming Salafism and secularism the New Preachers’ key opponents, Moll overlooks another influential current in Egyptian Islam: Sufism. While Sufi figures and practices receive an occasional mention (as in chapter 3’s discussion of self-help), for the most part, both historical and contemporary Sufi iterations of Islam are absent in Moll’s account. It may be due to the fact that Moll’s interlocutors view Sufi contenders as less threatening to their own message – perhaps because Sufi practices are less abhorrent than Salafi ones, or maybe because Sufis are seen as appealing to a different audience than the New Preachers’ middle-class viewers, namely less

educated working-class believers. These are only guesses, as it remains unclear why Sufism does not mark the Islamic media landscape in Moll's telling, particularly when it has greatly impacted how Egyptians of many backgrounds have rethought Islam after the revolution.

While some more attention to intra-Muslim debates beyond the battle of New Preachers and Salafis (and secularists) could have added further nuance to the book's interventions, overall, *The Revolution Within* is a brilliant contribution to anthropology and Middle East studies. Its chapters are theoretically refined, ethnographically rich, and enjoyable to read. It brings the reader into the heart of the affective experiences and theological reflections that ordinary Egyptians undertook as they sought to envisage a New Egypt, and illustrates how, by creating content for this New Egypt, media producers tried to create it themselves.

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# Re-inventing Islam: Gender and the Protestant Roots of American Islamophobia

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258 PAGES.

DEANNA FERREE WOMACK

In Helen Moody Stuart's 1920 novel *Fatmeh: A Common Story of Mission Schools for Moslem Girls*, Stuart creates a fictional Syrian family where one day young Fatmeh tells her parents she wants to attend the Christian missionary school to learn to read. "What do you want with reading?" retorts Fatmeh's mother. Her mother scolds her and tells her to attend to her household chores. It is Fatmeh's father, however, who encourages his daughter to attend the school, as it might help her marriage prospects (129). Stuart's novel, published during the ascent of American missionary activity in the Middle East, was written to demonstrate that young Arab Muslim girls can achieve agency from a backward religion and overbearing family by converting to Christianity in early twentieth century Syria. It was intended to inspire young women to consider becoming effective and life-changing missionaries as it was to encourage congregations to support missionary activity. *Fatmeh* is only one of several fascinating

fiction and non-fiction works written by women missionaries, or about women in the mission field, presented by Deanna Ferree Womack in *Re-Inventing Islam*.

The historiography of American and British missionaries in the Near East has become an important area of research not only for mission studies but within modern Middle Eastern and American Studies as well. Ever since the seminal publications of *British Interests in Palestine* and *American Interests in Syria* by A.L. Tibawi in 1961 and 1966, respectively, the history of Anglo-American missions in the Middle East has taken a predominantly masculine approach. Aside from the important contributions of female scholars like Christine Lindner, Heleen Murre-van den Burg, Lisa Joy Pruitt, and Dana Robert, the focus of British and American mission history in the Middle East has been on men and male decisions about mission strategy. Womack's work highlights not only the writing, thinking, and work of women missionaries in Muslim lands, but it includes material that has been absent in previous research: the fictional publications and material culture collected or worn by missionaries, both men and women. Her research provides an invaluable contribution to the historical interpretation of missionaries living in Muslim majority lands in the twentieth century.

The argument that western Christians have created or "re-invented" Islam in their own image or through their own preconceptions was well noted by Norman Daniel in his seminal work *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* in 1960. Womack, however, argues that "Protestant women took on a larger role in defining and critiquing Islamic cultures," focusing on "Muslim women's experiences, often expanding or countering information male writers had provided" (99). In their critique of Islam, women missionaries "as religious leaders" played key roles in providing new perspectives "in perpetuating stereotypes about Islam" (21). Building on her previous work on American missionary views of Islam and her interest in gender studies, *Re-inventing Islam* is a welcome addition to the growing field of missionary literature on Islam by focusing on "gender discourses, images, and performances—not simply "women's issues" (13).

This well written and solidly crafted study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter one lays the groundwork, introducing the reader to

Protestant views of Islam from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Womack then jumps to the nineteenth century where English speaking Protestant missionaries began to churn out a wide variety of material about Islam. Her overarching theme is that Protestants “re-invented” Islam in each era to suit their needs for mission. Viewing this history through the lens of gender, she highlights that by “reinforcing longstanding Protestant theological discourses and solidifying American views of Muslim men and women as exotic, immoral, or threatening, missionaries re-invented Islam” (25). This is further developed in chapter two when she notes that the veil was not of concern in the sixteenth century, but became a focal point of Muslim misogyny and backwardness in the nineteenth century when compared to the Victorian view of a Christian woman. Missionary literature often says as much about one’s own personal and cultural anxieties as about the perceived detriments of the host community.

Chapter three provides an overview of standard missionary texts on Islam, focusing, however, on how gender roles in Muslim societies are viewed as evidence by “Muslim male licentiousness” and the submissive “condition of Muslim women” (77). It is here that Womack introduces an important, and often overlooked genre, that of missionary fiction, primarily written by women missionaries about women and families. Womack argues that this novel category of missionary publishing provided a fresh way to encourage young women to consider the mission field as a viable and valued career path. Chapter four follows up on this line of research by examining juvenile and young adult literature. Womack provides several examples, from Samuel and Amy Zwemer’s well-known 1902 publication *Topsy-Turvy Land*, to the less well-known missionary nurse story *Cap and Candle* by Dorothy Blatter in 1961. Womack demonstrates that this literature had the effect of evoking sympathy for the status of Muslim women and girls, as real people with contributions to make in their societies, but also “upheld western norms regarding marriage and women’s roles” (143).

Chapters five and six move into the realm of material culture, including photos of indigenous “specimens” as well as costumes and trinkets brought back by missionaries to display for supporting communities. “Dressing up” for churches became a mainstay of missionary

furloughs to teach about and create interest in Muslim cultures and lands. Womack acknowledges the tension, however, for missionaries between living authentically as westerners in their missionary lands of residence and creating exciting stories for uninformed audiences that often-held western stereotypes about Islamic gender norms. Womack examines the experience of Dr. Eleanor Taylor Caverley, a medical doctor of the American Reformed Mission in Kuwait. She includes pictures of Calverley, and her daughters decked out in what is portrayed as traditional female Kuwaiti garb, with her husband, Rev. Edwin Calverly, standing with them in his smart western three-piece suit. Calverley's pictures, and her own memoir, *My Arabian Days and Nights* from 1958, both substantiated western Protestant views of Islam as a backward religion and culture, but her stories also humanized women. Calverley was able to "re-invent Islam" for the purpose of highlighting the lives of Arab Muslim women who had real hopes and dreams and agency in their own right within a very different religious culture. Womack notes that Caverley's experience was often replicated, that such nuanced experiences led some missionaries and mission agencies to ultimately advocate for dialogue rather than following traditional models of paternalistic missionizing.

Chapter seven concludes the research, tying together her argument that western missionary literature and material culture provided views of Muslims which intrigued readers and their supporting communities but also Orientalized Muslim men and women. By the twentieth century, the well-entrenched Protestant missionary worldview began to develop diverse perspectives on Islam and gender through the writings and perspectives of a variety of men and women missionaries. The intriguing pictures, and in some cases completely fabricated stories of Muslims, sowed the seeds for some Christian denominations to begin approaching Islam through the lens of dialogue. Others used these modern resources to re-imagine and re-invent "centuries-old tropes about violent Muslim men and oppressed Muslim women" (9). Ultimately, Womack argues that these tropes continue to contribute to American views about Islam today, "re-inventing Islam through repetition, appropriation, adaptation, and the use of existing ideas about Muslims for new purposes" (14).

A final comment about this book might be made regarding the choice of *Islamophobia* as a term for this anti-Muslim worldview. Womack acknowledges that this is a contested term, but she highlights the relationship between the roots of Islamophobia and American racism, which many researchers have begun to recognize. However, I wonder if the term might not suggest that this “fear” is a benign or unusual peculiarity that can be easily overcome, that just as we might get over our phobia of spiders, we too might move beyond our phobia of Muslims. It is important to recognize that the term also denotes the reality of bigotry, hatred, and actions that lead to the intentional exclusion of Muslims from public life and the erosions of their civil rights. The same might be said of *xenophobia* in today’s American public life. The government is not only uneasy about foreigners, but is actually rounding them up and deporting them. Womack maintains that even though the term has limitations, it “conveys the way in which anti-Muslim perceptions and actions spread today through rhetoric and imagery that prey on fears about Islam” (243), that Muslim men are terrorists and veiled Muslim women are in need of saving if not only by white men, also by white women.

*Re-Inventing Islam* highlights the age-old problem of Orientalism and western Christian racist views of Muslims. However, the use of gender studies to engage this material, as well as the use of fiction, children and young adult literature, and material culture, as part of the overarching “texts” of an Anglo missionary worldview of Muslims and Islam, is fresh and most welcomed. Her research demonstrates the breadth and depth of the Protestant missionary impact that was subtle and pervasive, going beyond written strategy reports from mission conferences into church basements where foreign trinkets could be displayed and in home parlors where young girls could read stories of children in far-away lands and might aspire to be a missionary herself.

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# Witnessing God: Christians, Muslims, and the Comparative Theology of Missions

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LEIDEN: BRILL, 2025, 268 PAGES.

ALEXANDER E. MASSAD

The first thing you need to know about this book is that its author is the preeminent Islam expert on the faculty at Wheaton College, sometimes called “the Harvard of Evangelical Christians.” Wheaton College made headlines in 2015 for a controversy involving the censure of a faculty member who wore hijab in solidarity with Muslims, an act that ultimately led to her parting ways with the institution. So, it is no small feat for Alexander Massad to write a book such as *Witnessing God*. This book is a testimony to a personal journey, only some of which is reflected in the book’s pages. This review is a continuation of that journey, as Massad seeks Muslim scholarly interlocutors with whom he can engage faithfully and critically.

Massad identifies personally with “common-grace-driven neo-Calvinism” (70), by which he means a particular tradition within the larger world of Evangelical Protestant Christianity. This tradition, rooted in the writings of Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper (d. 1920) and Herman Bavinck (d. 1921), stresses the activity of Divine Grace in all aspects of life, including “non-Christian cultures” (81). What this means for

Massad is that he contends he can root his own engagement with the “sincere-truth-seeking religious other” (5) in his own Christian tradition. But in order to do so, he also engages Comparative Theology as a Christian-heavy academic discipline strongly connected to the Roman Catholic tradition. Francis Clooney, a Jesuit priest who has authored numerous academic studies of the Hindu tradition, serves as his central methodological model (4, 28). He contends that Clooney’s model avoids the “endlessly deferred act of learning” (37) about others because of *a priori* theological presuppositions rooted primarily in notions of Christian theological exclusivism. To drive home his point, Massad reviews the works of Protestant theologians that exemplify this attitude, such as Daniel Strange. What is at stake is “epistemological exclusivism” vs. “affective learning across religious traditions” (75). Put simply, if the Bible and Jesus already contains all truth and goodness, why look elsewhere? Why become theologically vulnerable by reading and reflecting on non-Christian texts, and inquisitively engaging non-Christian intellectuals? Massad asks provocatively “does attention away from Christ entail infidelity to Christ?” (49). In many ways, the book is a theoretical and practical attempt to answer that question as a distinct “no.”

Massad wants to make the case that a better response to religious diversity is to have an *a posteriori* approach (16), where the meaning of the “autobiographical” (37) scholarly encounter between the Christian and the non-Christian happens after the actual encounter. In doing so, he drives home the idea that “the individual identity of the religious other is confrontational in that it forces a recognition of another person’s existence” (15). But in order to do so sincerely, he has to tackle the missionary-focus of Evangelical Christianity head on, and acknowledge that there is a “marginalization” of “Evangelical-missiological perspective” (53) in Comparative Theology as an intellectual discipline. He extensively reviews the work of another comparative theologian, Hugh Nicholson, on the “inevitable political moment of othering” (51) in all comparative work. For Nicholson, this presents as a problem, but for Massad it is not. It would seem to this reviewer that the Catholic strand in Comparative Theology is a bit too liberal for the conservative world of Wheaton College, but at the same time Massad must speak to both audiences. The

way Massad seems to split the difference is to focus on the idea of those “inspired by their faith to seek deeper understanding of God in the midst of their missionary enterprises” (40). In doing so, he affirms that Clooney was building on previous work of Jesuit missionaries in India, and therefore the missionary spirit of encounter and the comparative theological scholarly endeavor both are part of a “dynamic dialectical process” or “dynamic dialectic” (56). The Christian encounters the Other, and then is changed in some meaningful ways by that encounter. For Massad, the faithful Christian does not have to be “preoccupied with soteriological apologetics” (72), by which he seems to mean incessant theological truncations of global religious diversity into so many demonic pathways to eternal Hellfire, in order to be a real Christian.

To demonstrate this method, Massad then engages in the later part of the book with the “Sunni Reformist” (135) thought of Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) because one should “engage with Muslim scholars and not the Islamic tradition as a reified category” (129). He focuses on Riḍā’s engagement with Christianity, Christian missionaries, and missionary institutions in the Middle East. He demonstrates that, “Christianity ... did not bother Riḍā [but]... what bothered Riḍā were the defamation of the Prophet Muhammad, the denigration of Islam, and the marginalization of Muslims” (136). Massad shows how Riḍā was responding to a world where, “non-Muslims, especially more educated Western non-Muslims, had basic knowledge of the Islamic tradition that was pretty accurate.” (162) In doing so, he coins a term - *ṭarīq al-da‘wa* (169) - to summarize Riḍā’s attempt to call both Muslims and non-Muslims to his own understanding of Islam. In Massad’s reading, “Riḍā believed in the inherent superiority of Islam...[and] that people would eventually become Muslims if they only heard the Prophet’s message correctly and in a convincing manner.” (171) This seems to be the critical link between Massad’s concern for the “sincere-truth-seeking religious other” as explained earlier in the book, as Riḍā serves as a theological counterpart from within the world of the “religious other *par excellence*” (92) for Christianity, namely Islam. It should also be noted that Riḍā articulated his views in the Middle East at roughly the same time as the foundations of Neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands, giving the book a nice historical

foundation without waxing theoretical about the nature of modernity.

Massad then turns his attention towards more contemporary Muslims voices. First, he engages deeply with Martin Nguyen's book *Modern Muslim Theology*. He uses Nguyen to "understand how Muslim intellectuals creatively engage with contemporary exigencies through rethinking the tradition while maintaining fidelity to the Muslim tradition and revelation." (183) This sets up a section where he shows how Riḍā read al-Ghazālī's soteriology in light of the modern world, contending that "the problem preventing people was not a disease of the heart, as al-Ghazālī thought, but a faulty worldview," (189) which Riḍā's writings and efforts were meant to address. Then Massad reviews some work of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022) and Fayṣal al-Mawlawī (d. 2011) on the fiqh of minorities "as the justification for globalizing Muslim *da'wa*," (194) and Tariq Ramadan's "framework for interreligious dialogue" as coming from a desire "reimagine the world as a mosque rather than a conglomeration of contested territories." (201) He concludes with centering Gamal Abdelnour's concept of *shahāda*, which "invites the religious other to reconsider her position in light of examining the Muslim's beliefs and practices." (205) This endpoint of engagement with various Muslim thinkers fits well with his own emphasis on a *a posteriori* reflection that is central to the methodology of Comparative Theology.

Given Massad's emphasis on the particularity of the *a posteriori* methodological move, this reviewer will not divulge the contents of the concluding section of the book, as that would not seem in the spirit of the text under review. Massad is inviting Evangelical Christians interested in religious diversity, Sunni Muslims interested in engaging Evangelical Christians, and the broader academic community of comparative theologians to go on a journey with him. Chances are, they have no other Neo-Calvinist *nor* Wheaton College faculty member to encounter. Buying the book and sitting with it is the only way to take the journey yourself in a way that is faithful to Massad's vision - this review is merely an invitation.

The beginning of the book focuses on intra-Christian theologizing and methodological debate, and the middle of the book on a sincere Christian encountering Sunni Muslim intellectuals with charity and accuracy. It

is only by reading the book that one can experience that dialogue, both within Christianity and between Christianity and Sunni Islam. But the upshot is clear: whereas Martin Luther, John Calvin and Daniel Strange saw Islam as primarily punishing or correcting the church (117), Massad wants to open up a deeper space for theological reflection between the church and the world of Islam. As a Muslim, it is not my place to say if he will succeed with his colleagues at Wheaton and similar Protestant colleges and universities. But as a Muslim I warmly welcome the attempt, and embrace Massad as a “sincere-truth-seeking religious other” from across the theological aisle. The world of Evangelical Christian colleges and universities is still experienced as closed off *and* inherently hostile to many Muslim scholars, and this book’s mere existence is a much-needed bridge between the two worlds. But let it be stated plainly that this book should not be written off as mere liberalizing of a conservative discourse, because Massad at no place dismisses the theological foundations of his worldview, but simply seeks to explore its contours with greater fidelity. Massad contends that Kuyper called to “our obligation to participate in the divine call to be obedient to the lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life,” (80) and that seems exactly what Massad has done from within his own tradition, as best as I - an outsider - can surmise. Comparative Theology as a whole has the potential to be a radically inclusive intellectual discipline which is simultaneously radically protective of the theological commitments of its participants. If it is ever to become that it will be because of the bold and clear work of scholars like Alexander Massad.

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# Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran: A Socio-Legal Analysis

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CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024,  
72 PAGES.

SAJJAD ADELIYAN TOUS AND  
JAMES T. RICHARDSON

*Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* is a concise, highly erudite, study that focuses on how the Islamic Republic of Iran and the confessional communities within its society grapple with transformations in religious identity, beliefs, practices, and social and political implications of change within the setting of a Ithnā-‘Asharī or Twelver Shi‘ite theocratic state. Through fifty-seven pages of facts and evaluations, Tous and Richardson insightfully investigate the impact of sectarian authoritarianism upon the majority Shi‘i Muslim community, and the Sunni and Sufi Muslim, and Baha‘i, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish minorities.

An Introduction and Relevant Background (pp. 1–6) lays out the underlying approaches to this country-specific study, namely, sociology of religion and sociology of law. It then covers theoretical frameworks which are applied by the co-authors for authoritarianism and for state-imposed regulations and restrictions on religious beliefs and expressions.

Chapter 1, Religion and Religious Freedom (pp. 6–11), focuses on the constitutional basis for control of religion and society that was made law in 1979 and revised/updated in 1989, and the judicial implementation of codes now governing religion and confessional communities within Iran. This section provides a precise overview of the religio-legal background of activist Shi‘ism that has shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran since the revolution of 1979. Chapter 2, Religious Freedom Status of Minority Religious Groups (pp. 11–23), discusses, through broad details and particular examples, the complicated situations and ever-fluid, even dangerous, circumstances of religious minorities, such as Baha‘is, who are not recognized or protected under the constitution and shari‘a legal system and those who at least in theory are, specifically indigenous Zoroastrians, Armenian and Assyrian-Chaldean Christians, and Jews. One oversight in this chapter is lack of differentiation between Christian communities viewed as historically and culturally a part of Iranian society—the aforementioned Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans—and other Catholic and all Protestant Christians who have no religious freedoms ascribed into the Islamic Republic’s legal provisions. Much of the focus of these initial chapters is on legal issues which, while thorough, would have benefitted from more attention to augmentary social issues that are interlinked and often inseparable from the law.

*Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* then transitions, in Chapter 3, Religious Life, Cultural Diffusion, and Religious Pluralism (pp. 24–32), to how and why imposition of activist Shi‘ism has resulted in both pushback against orthopraxy and diversification of orthodoxy within the religious majority. Readers are provided with a range of new religious movements that have sprung up within and outside the parameters of traditional Islam, even beyond Sufism or established Muslim mysticism, demonstrating that control over emergence of new forms of spirituality at home and from abroad (including from the West) are proving difficult for the Iranian state’s regulatory apparatus and its interconnected Shi‘i clerical hierarchy to thwart or shape. Chapter 4, Social Control of New Religious Movements (pp. 32–45), proceeds to examine, in chronological fashion, specific efforts by various branches of the Iranian government and by the Shi‘i mullahs to regulate, especially

through societal mechanisms, those ideas and practices regarded as deviations from mandated norms. In particular, the study's co-authors lay out a sequence of committees, institutes, proclamations, reports, and even proposed parliamentary bills put forth by the Islamic Republic of Iran's religio-political leaders to shape public thought. The fascinating details in Chapter 4 would have benefited from succinct historical and conceptual comparisons with efforts by the previous regime, the Pahlavi monarchy of 1925–1979, to instill its own vision of a polity through state-led efforts. An even broader historical inspection of similar endeavors which have occurred frequently in Iran's past, including by the Zoroastrian Shahs of the Sasanian dynasty (224–651) and by the Safavid rulers (1501–1736) who converted Iranians from a Sunni majority to a Shi'ite one, is beyond the scope of *Managing Religion and Religious Changes in Iran* but must be noted as relevant.

In the final Chapter 5, Conclusions, Relevant Sociological Theories, and Theoretical Applications (pp. 45–57), Tous and Richardson masterfully knit together the preceding pages to demonstrate that “In Iran, ecclesiastic power is inseparably linked with state power and is foundational to its structure” (p. 45). They acknowledge as well that “today's Iran is an increasingly pluralistic society” (p. 48). So whether, despite over four decades of increasingly religio-political despotism, the theocrats will be able to reinforce let alone maintain control of Iran in the years ahead remains to be seen (pp. 56–57).

The bibliographical References (pp. 58–72) is by-and-large a comprehensive resource of the range of scholarship on contemporary Iranian religious groups and of applicable theoretical and methodical studies. To the items listed therein Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014) should be added. One unfortunate omission from this informative volume under review is an Index, the inclusion of which would have enhanced research functionality.

Tous and Richardson have produced a theoretically complex, methodologically innovative, data driven study which yields important and relevant results. Their analyses and conclusions cannot be overlooked and should inform future studies by scholars and students of religiosity

in contemporary Iran. Their research and writing reveal continuing attempts by contemporary Iranian leaders to follow the Middle Persian or Pahlavi and Classical New Persian or Farsi maxim: “Religion and state were born of one womb, joined together never to be sundered.” The Iranians on whom the volume focuses, however, seem increasingly ready for change away from the nexus of faith and politics that produced and sustains the Islamic Republic.

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# The Divine Names: A Mystical Theology of the Names of God in the Qur'an

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NEW YORK: NYU PRESS, 2023,

656 PAGES.

ʿAFĪF AL-DĪN AL-TILIMSĀNĪ, TRANSLATED BY  
YUSEF CASEWIT

The publication of *The Divine Names: A Mystical Theology of the Names of God in the Qur'an* marks a noteworthy addition to the growing body of literature on Islamic metaphysics, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and Sufi theology. Composed by the understudied yet intellectually formidable North African Sufi ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī, this work represents one of the most philosophically nuanced treatments of the divine names (*alasmāʾ alḥusnā*) in the intellectual tradition left by Ibn al-ʿArabī. Al-Tilimsānī is directly linked to Ibn al-ʿArabī through his master Muʿayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 690/1291) and his master's master Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Ibn al-ʿArabī's direct disciple/stepson. Casewit's preface details al-Tilimsānī's multi-lingual cosmopolitan training and travels from Zayyanid-ruled Tlemcen to Seljuk/Mongol-ruled Konya to Mamluk-ruled Cairo and Damascus. These cities, we are informed, form a pan-Islamic Sunni Sufi nexus threaded across a cluster of Sunni dynasties of the time. Contextualized, edited from multiple manuscripts, translated, explicated,

and intertextually grounded by Yousef Casewit, this bilingual volume brings to light a major source that has hitherto remained inaccessible to non-Arabic-speaking audiences.

AlTilimsānī's treatise systematically engages with each of the one-hundred-forty-six Qur'anic divine names' ontological, cosmological, ethical, ritual, and epistemological implications. We are told that one-hundred-forty-four divine names, *the branches*, interpenetrate one another on multiple scales as they are grounded by two focal ur-names, *Allah* and *al-Raḥmān*. These are the first two divine names mentioned in the first Basmalah of the Qur'an, entangling canonical literary sequential orders to ontological gradational functions. In alTilimsānī's system the divine name *Allah* subsumes names of transcendence, the multi-modal divine majesty, as *al-Raḥmān* incorporates names of immanence, the Pleroma of divine beatitude. The vertical bifurcation between *root* and *branch* names is compounded to a horizontal split of apophatic *branch* majestic names, under their *root Allah*, and cataphatic *branch* beatific names, under their *root al-Raḥmān*. These names are not merely linguistic attributes but concrete manifestations of the stratified divine presence in the cosmos. As the theurgic substructure of the cosmos, the Qur'anic names of God act as loci for the spiritual ascension of the believer up the tree of divine names, culminating in the unnamable zenith. AlTilimsānī's spirituality is intertextually entrenched in predecessors such as alBayhaqī, alGhazālī, and Ibn Barraĵān (with occasional mentions of al-Niffarī). This mention of scholars who lived prior to Ibn al-'Arabī grounds his methodological allegiance to the Akbarian school in the broader Sufi historical trajectory. His commitment to this particular school allows him to tread the straight-narrow path between metaphysical abstraction and ritually grounded mystical empiricism. The metaphysical vocabulary and conceptual apparatus throughout the work reflects alTilimsānī's continuation of prior Sunni theologians/mystics' deep engagement with philosophical traditions synthesized within a ritually practiced Sufi Qur'anic worldview.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this volume is that it introduces a complex yet neglected figure to Anglophone Islamic studies. AlTilimsānī's integration of philosophical precision with mystical

insight expands the parameters of the discourse on divine names, often dominated by either devotional or lexicographic treatments. Unlike alGhazālī's more moralistic reading or Ibn Qayyim alJawziyya's polemics, alTilimsānī's engagement is ontological and metaphysically nuanced. The methodological rigor of the work is another notable strength. AlTilimsānī's treatment is systematic, and his conceptual clarity reflects the influence of the metaphysical logic characteristic of Ibn al'Arabī's disciples. Each name is not only discussed individually but also situated in a broader matrix of overlapping meanings, gradations of manifestation, and cosmic functions. Casewit's editorial and translational approach further enhances the accessibility and academic utility of the volume. His careful translation, historical contextualization, clarificatory explanations, and intertextual footnotes allows the reader to navigate alTilimsānī's dense formulations without sacrificing the complexity of the original text.

At the same time, despite its many strengths the translated work may prove challenging for readers unfamiliar with Islamic philosophy or technical Sufi metaphysics. The philosophical density and occasional abstraction—though intrinsic to the genre—may limit its pedagogical use in undergraduate settings or among general audiences. While the translation includes references to alTilimsānī's predecessors, a deeper comparative analysis with the school's founder—vis-à-vis Ibn al'Arabī's *alasmā' alḥusnā*—would enrich scholarly understanding of the subtle departures and innovations alTilimsānī's treatise introduces. Casewit alludes to these connections, but further work could explain them more directly.

This edition offers substantial contributions across multiple domains of Islamic studies: Sufi studies, Qur'anic theology, and Islamic philosophy. In Sufi studies, it provides a fresh perspective on post-Ibn al-'Arabī mystical metaphysics. In Qur'anic theology, it demonstrates a unique hermeneutical approach to divine names as multi-dimensional operative hierophanic realities, not merely descriptive labels. In Islamic philosophy, it engages with ontological and epistemic categories that uniquely bridge Peripatetic, Neoplatonic, and Illuminationist frameworks. The work invites further research into how divine names are

ritually operationalized in Sufi praxis and how they ontically inform both speculative theology and ethical conduct. It also raises important questions for comparative theology, particularly in interfaith kataphatic/apophatic discussions.

In conclusion, *The Divine Names: A Mystical Theology of the Names of God in the Qur'an* is a masterfully edited and translated work that opens a vital chapter in the intellectual history of Sufi Islam. 'Afif alDīn alTilimsānī's complex yet rewarding synthesis of philosophy and mysticism provides scholars with a new framework for understanding the divine names of the Qur'an not only as theological constructs but as metaphysical realities shaping the cosmos and the human soul. Casewit's scholarship renders this profound tradition accessible without diminishing its depth, making the volume essential reading for those engaged in Qur'anic studies, Sufi thought, and Islamic metaphysics.

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# Muhammad in the Seminary: Protestant Teaching about Islam in the Nineteenth Century

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NEW YORK: NYU PRESS, 2024,  
304 PAGES.

DAVID D. GRAFTON

David Grafton's *Muhammad in the Seminary* focuses on the nineteenth century as a pivotal period for the formation of American Protestant conceptions about Islam. Grafton identifies theological seminaries as the earliest institutions in North America to provide students with sustained instruction on Islam, and he argues that the impact of such education was considerable. The book offers a detailed historical investigation of the ways that seven Protestant seminaries in the northeastern United States presented Islam to thousands of students who would go on to shape American public discourses as clergy and missionaries. While unearthing information about the curricula on Islam in these institutions, the book's six chapters engage broadly with issues of nineteenth century education, theological studies, and American cultural history.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of early American theological education and the eventual professionalization of seminaries in the

post-Civil War period. It places the seven seminaries of focus—Andover, New Brunswick, General, Princeton, Gettysburg, Hartford, and Union—within the broader American educational landscape of the nineteenth century. Grafton charts noteworthy developments within these and other Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican seminaries while also documenting the slower emergence of Methodist and Baptist theological institutions for training clergy. Although biblical studies and theology remained the two dominant disciplines, as the numbers and specializations of seminary faculty increased, Islam became a persistent component of the curricula and a subject increasingly present on the shelves of seminary libraries.

The second chapter draws on extensive research in library catalogues, circulation records, and faculty lecture notes to review the kinds of texts on Islam that these theological libraries acquired as resources for faculty and students. As American seminary libraries expanded and faculty members built their own personal collections, a growing body of English and German Orientalist works and Latin translations of Arabic texts broadened American professors' and pastors' understandings of Islam. In describing the texts that seminary professors used in their lectures, including biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, the chapter provides insight into the growth of European scholarship on Islam and the Near East from the early modern period onward. By the end of the nineteenth century, the variety of such available resources ranged from anti-Muslim polemics to more appreciative approaches to Islam. Notably, aside from translations of the Qur'an, seminary faculty during this period did not teach from Islamic sources but rather from Christian texts about Islam.

The book turns next to Church History courses and textbooks as common vehicles through which seminarians were introduced to Islam (Chapter 3). American seminary professors, many of whom sought further education in Germany, often relied on German studies of ecclesiastical history. Examining professors' lecture notes and lists of required readings, Grafton traces the genealogy of textual sources used in Church History classes. For example, at New Brunswick Seminary in the 1820s, John DeWitt's references to Islam came from the Latin Reformation

record of Flacius Illyricus, *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559), which drew from the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor (760–818), which in turn relied on a Greek translation of a Syriac history by Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785). The chapter concludes with the contributions of the German-educated Swiss scholar Philip Schaff, whose multi-volume *History of the Christian Church* (1858–1890) became the standard text on ecclesiastical history for most seminaries. Schaff introduced students to recent Orientalist scholarship and, despite remaining critical of Islam, offered a more sympathetic view of the Prophet Muhammad than did most of his predecessors. Like the books available in seminary libraries, the content of Church History courses on Islam ultimately mixed factual information and well-worn tropes.

Chapter 4 addresses how Islam appeared in nineteenth century Biblical Studies as scholars sought to learn Arabic as a cognate language to Hebrew. Grafton documents the rising philological interest in Arabic in early modern Europe and the developing view of Arabic as a purer, more static Semitic language that was a key both for translating obscure terminology in the Hebrew Bible and for understanding the historical context of the Ancient Near East. The chapter then traces the rise and fall of Arabic language study at American seminaries. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, it had become common for Old Testament professors to assign passages of the Qur'an for students to translate as part of their Arabic learning. Although such practices survived into the twentieth century only at Hartford Seminary, where Arabic was a part of its missionary training program, this legacy is still present in the Arabic references included in the widely-used Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon of the Old Testament (first published in 1906).

Next, the book considers the information transmitted about Islam as nineteenth-century American seminaries engaged with the developing field of Comparative Religion. In giving an overview of this field's origins in Europe, chapter 5 examines the contributions of the German-born professor at Oxford Max Müller, who identified Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Semitic religions. Whereas Müller critiqued "religious Darwinism" and racial determinism, most American scholars of Comparative Religion – including Hannah Adams, Samuel Schmucker,

and James Freeman Clarke – embraced the concept of world religions evolving toward the pinnacle of Protestant Christianity. American Protestants also mapped onto Islam the negative racial characteristics they attributed to the tribes of Arabia. These ideas appeared in formal curricula and in the growing number of public lectures on Comparative Religion that American seminaries hosted.

The sixth and final chapter moves into the twentieth century, concluding with the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh as the “high-water mark” for Protestant missions. It considers missionary associations like the Student Volunteer Movement, seminary efforts to train students for missions in the so-called “Mohammedan World,” and the contributions that missionaries themselves made to seminary curricula on Islam through their publications and guest lectures and in their work as professors. Grafton features a variety of missionary-scholars who focused on Islam. Some, like Samuel Zwemer, painted Muslims as adversaries, while others, like William Shedd were more generous. Duncan Black Macdonald, a pioneering Arabist and Islamicist at Hartford Seminary, stands out as the one non-missionary who taught seminarians about Islam and as one of few Protestant scholars who engaged deeply with Arabic and Islamic sources.

What can contemporary readers learn from this historical study? While American Protestants in the nineteenth century typically relied on Christian sources and treated Islam as a foreign entity, Grafton concludes that Islam ought to be studied from within the tradition itself, using Islamic sources, and that Muslims are today part of the American experience and cannot be dismissed as “other.” He also emphasizes the absence of Arabic study in the curricula of present-day theological institutions as a loss to our understanding of the worlds of both Islam and Middle Eastern Christianity. In addition to these insights, the book makes clear that American Protestant teachings about Islam have never been uniform. The legacy of the American seminary includes biased polemic, serious academic inquiry, and expressions of admiration for the Islamic tradition. Grafton’s research thus invites readers to build upon the bright spots of this history.

For scholars and instructors in theological institutions today, *Muhammad in the Seminary* demonstrates how relevant the subject of Islam is to the history of the American Protestant seminary. For Islamicists, in turn, the book not only reveals that in the US it was seminaries that initially pioneered the research and teaching about Islam. Through its examination of nineteenth century libraries, textbook lists, and lecture notes, the book also places the contributions (and limitations) of these seminaries within a much longer genealogy of Islamic Studies in Europe and North America. The multiple lenses through which Grafton approaches the question of Islam's presence in the American seminary makes this book relevant for scholars of Islam and American Protestant history and for anyone interested in theological education, the evolution of libraries, Church History, Biblical Studies, Comparative Religion, and modern missions.

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# Covenants with Allah: Keystone of Islam

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NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2026,  
256 PAGES.

HALIM RANE AND IBRAHIM ZEIN

In an era marked by the decay of international trust, systemic injustice, and state violence, Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein's new book *Covenants with Allah* is a timely and necessary intervention. The author's draw our attention to the Qur'anic and Prophetic concepts of covenant (*'ahd* and *mīthāq*) and frame them as fundamental to both the spiritual core of Islam and its governance ethics. Through rigorous methodology and theological depth, the book offers a compelling framework for viewing Islam as entity grounded in a covenantal tradition of mutual responsibility, justice, human dignity, and accountability.

Across eight chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion, *Covenants with Allah* unfolds in a carefully constructed arc—beginning with the Qur'anic depiction of divine-human relations in primordial covenants to the use of covenants in historical peace-keeping, and finally to modern-day applications of covenantal ethics in a fractured global order as we see today. The first three chapters lay the theological foundation,

beginning with how Allah places the primordial covenant at the center of his expectations from humanity. Rane and Zein highlight how Allah places the Earth as a site of ethical stewardship, with human beings bearing the sacred responsibility as *khulafā'* under divine terms. Satan's refusal to prostrate to Adam is understood not only as an act of arrogance but as the inception of supremacist logic—a form of structural injustice, a breach of divine trust. The authors show that covenants can function as a tool to regulate free will, offering a structure that spans the self, society, and global community. These chapters convince the reader that the roots of social injustice stem not merely from flawed political structures but from the *breakdown of trust and covenant*, a theme which the Qur'an consistently associates with *fasād*—corruption and chaos. As such, covenantal violation is not just immoral—it is cosmically destabilizing.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Rane and Zein carry the covenantal paradigm into the time of the Prophet Muhammad and beyond, portraying his leadership as rooted in promise-keeping and treaty-centered administration rather than authoritarianism. Treaties like the Compact of Medina and the Covenant with the Monks of Sinai are not shown as exceptions to a political rule or peripheral acts of diplomacy, but represent the core of Islamic governance ethics. By illustrating how the later rulers, such as the Fatimids and Ottomans rejuvenated and institutionalized the Prophet Muhammad's covenants—despite imperial temptations to disregard them—the book provides historical legitimacy for governance powered by covenants as a continuing tradition, not a lost ideal. In this view, warfare is not a tool of statecraft meant to protect a state, or seek religious dominance; it is the Qur'anic response to the violation of covenants, not disbelief. This marks a departure from conventional *jus ad bellum* paradigms, as instead of grounding the rationale and legitimacy of war in self-defense, national interest or sovereignty of the state, this paradigm restructures the ethics of war around moral rupture—when covenants and treaties are broken. The book also corrects the common misunderstanding that Islam spread by military might, showing instead that the Prophet's practice of diplomacy and protection through covenants governed dynamics even with those outside the Muslim community. This

reorientation challenges both Islamophobic narratives that assume Islam as inherently militant, along with the assumptions that equate revival of Islam and well-being of Muslims with political domination.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the authors extends the covenantal lens beyond history or theology into a rather urgent crisis of the present: settler-colonialism, indigenous dispossession, and especially the moral collapse pertaining to the Israel-Palestine conflict. In Chapter 8, the “Covenant of a Just Peace” is a bold proposal that paves the way forward not in the sterile language of geopolitical calculus but in the Prophetic model of ethically grounded, trust-based coexistence. Here, *covenant* re-surfaces not only as a spiritual relic of the past but as a living political and diplomatic tool of resistance, moral repair, and collective healing. By proposing a “Covenant of a Just Peace,” the book offers not just critique but the very imagination of spiritually anchored peace and justice itself.

The final chapter synthesizes the theology, history, and present-day urgency into a profound theory of covenants in Islam. Drawing from the Qur’an, the prophetic model of conducting communal affairs, and centuries of revival and neglect, Rane and Zein reintroduce the position of covenants not as conceptual metaphor or an abstract philosophy but as a living experience and a guide for revitalizing Islamic thought, rebuilding interfaith trust and clarifying the role of Muslims in a broken world where justice and order languish in crisis.

What elevates this book beyond historical analysis to a paradigm-shifting intervention is its grounding in a theological foundation. Since the covenant is the medium through which Allah initiates and sustains His relationship with human beings, one may reasonably deduce that covenants, including pacts, promises, and treaties, can be understood as divinely authorized frameworks for maintaining human relationships across diverse communities, nations, and faiths. This grants moral and theological legitimacy to covenantal diplomacy and inter-communal ethics. This work also creates space to reconceptualize Islamic history not through the conventional lens of political succession—marked by caliphates, dynasties, empires—rather through the chronology of covenants: divine-human pact, prophets’ treaties, and inter-communal

accords. While this may not be the book's stated objective, its chapter progression—starting from the primordial covenant and ending with the proposed “Covenant of a Just Peace”—sketches a narrative arc that centers *binding commitment* over shifts in political power. In light of this, covenants emerge not only as theological constructs but as functional, portable, and decentralized models of governance for diverse and ever-evolving communities to undertake the formidable task of repairing a fractured world.

Another more nuanced insight that can be taken from the book is that the covenantal paradigm offers a reevaluation of the assumed centrality of the modern nation-state within Muslim political thought, a presumption that has often gone unchallenged. While Rane situates his thesis within the context of reforming the rules-based international order and improving governance using covenantal ethics in general, the broader implications and utility of his argument suggest that several core Islamic Institutions, such as Zakat, education, Waqf, and communal courts, have demonstrated resilience and effectiveness even in the absence of centralized state control. Instead of a structural overhaul at the macro-level, the covenantal model can serve as a complementary framework for harboring community-led, principled systems of care and accountability.

Building further on this, the modern state, more specifically in postcolonial contexts, may appear less as a neutral vessel and more as a legacy of centralized control. Its interventionist tendencies have often contributed to the distortion of Islamic values, harboring a mistaken association of Islam with authoritarian governance. As the book *Covenants with Allah* delineates, the historical spread of Islam was not a natural consequence of centralized statehood, but a byproduct of relational ethics, trust, ties, and treaties. Therefore, covenantal ethic cannot be reduced to a historical relic but is a pragmatic framework. One that is capable of restoring community autonomy and moral coherence beyond state-centric ideals.

In conclusion, *Covenants with Allah* stands as a defining contribution that not only gives life to a largely overlooked dimension of

Islamic thought and history but also opens new horizons for theological, political, and institutional renewal. It invites its reader to think beyond inherited paradigms and to reengage with the Qur'an's emphasis on mutual accountability, sacred trust, and social justice. In a world worn out of broken states and broken promises, this work reminds us that the most enduring systems of coexistence were never forged in war rooms nor shaped by force or dominance—they were written in covenants.

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# Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture

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EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025,  
216 PAGES.

ANDERS ACKFELDT

Anders Ackfeldt's *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* represents yet another welcome example of the increasing scholarly attention being paid to the representation of Islam in popular culture. Combining his expertise in the history of religions and Islamic Studies with a range of tools stemming from Media Studies and social semiotics, Ackfeldt produces a multi-layered investigation into the Islamic symbolism and Muslim identities in U.S. hip-hop. Ackfeldt's book portrays the religion as a creative resource for the articulation of social, cultural, and political expressions, especially among Black American artists.

Ackfeldt argues that hip-hop's non-doctrinal interpretation of Islam as an individually interpreted semiotic resource aligns with broader currents in religious studies that emphasize non-institutional and performative approaches to religion. This approach resonates with scholarship on Islam's role in the cultural production of Black Americans, particularly the work of authors such as Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Hisham Aidi. Ackfeldt's engagement with the topic from the perspective of Islamic Studies is especially refreshing, adding a much-needed theological dimension to an otherwise well-developed body of literature.

Accordingly, while the study's originality lies primarily in its interdisciplinary scope, many of its theoretical insights and empirical observations will be familiar to scholars of hip-hop.

The book unfolds across eight chapters. The introduction lays the foundation by outlining Ackfeldt's theoretical orientation in social semiotics, establishing Islam not as a monolithic religious identity, but rather as a polyvalent field of signs embedded in cultural production. Following a comprehensive literature review, a discussion regarding the historical presence of Islam in the African American experience outlines the transition from enslaved West African Muslims to the rise of phenomena like the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), the Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Five Percent Nation. In particular, the author emphasizes the influence of these proto-Islamic movements on Islam's reception among Black American communities prior to the emergence of hip-hop.

The central chapters provide case studies of hip-hop artists and groups who incorporate Islamic themes—most notably Five Percenter artists like Eric B. & Rakim, Wu-Tang Clan, and Public Enemy. Ackfeldt's analysis addresses these artists' (who are typically not orthodox adherents to the Muslim faith) creative incorporation of Islamic themes in terms of names, imagery, and symbolism. Ackfeldt argues that these references are not to be viewed as dogmatic statements, and instead situates them within a wider aesthetic and epistemological grammar. Subsequent chapters analyze the political and cultural climate after 9/11 and focus on the identity formation of Muslim artists amid a substantial rise of Islamophobia.

The book makes a strong point by emphasizing the functional role of Islamic symbolism throughout different media and cultural platforms. Ackfeldt's use of social semiotics specifically succeeds in demonstrating the contingent and context-specific reappropriation of Islamic themes for cultural and political purposes, and highlights the wide range of diversity and nuance in Islam's representation in hip-hop.

However, given the authors expertise in Islamic Studies, the book could have benefited from a deeper engagement with the metaphysical and esoteric dimensions of the proto-Islamic movements it references. While Ackfeldt—who is particularly interested in non-Muslim

appropriations of Islamic imagery—correctly notes that the MSTA’s *Circle Seven Koran* is derived from esoteric sources such as Levi Dowling’s *Aquarian Gospel* and the anonymously authored *Unto Thee I Grant*, he does not pursue the implications of this observation. The *Circle Seven Koran*, which represents the constitutional reference for all of the later manifestations of Black American Islam, clearly draws from early 20th-century esotericism, including Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, as well as Taoist works like *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which stresses endocrine alchemy and the spiritual regulation of vital energy. Yet these foundational influences receive no sustained analysis. This lack of contextualization can be found in other parts of the book that reference relevant esoteric currents without exploring them in detail.

This is especially notable in the case of the Five Percent Nation, whose teachings—often reduced to rhetorical or subcultural posturing—are in fact grounded in a structured cosmology deeply resonant with Islamic mysticism (Sufism), Gnosticism, and Hermetic philosophy. Their systems of *Supreme Mathematics* and *Supreme Alphabet*, their central axiom that “the Black man is God,” and their focus on “knowledge of self” reflect a metaphysical orientation toward divine immanence, gnosis, and cosmic order. These teachings align with Sufi doctrines of the *Perfect Human* (*al-insān al-kāmil*), as well as Pythagorean number mysticism (the *Tetractys*), Neoplatonic emanationism, and Hermetic concepts of microcosmic divinity. Such philosophical continuities deserve closer scrutiny.

Ackfeldt’s central argument of Islamic themes as functional, non-doctrinal, creative reformulations could have provided a base for moving the discussion toward an analysis on the influence of Black American Freemasonry, particularly the Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AEAONMS), which in many ways provided a blue print for early Black American Islam. Also referred to as the Black Shriners, the Masonic lodge anticipated much of the regalia, symbolism, rituals, and cosmology of the MSTA, which later spawned orders such as the *Noble Order of the Moorish Sufis*, founded by Rafi Sharif Ali Bey in 1957. These genealogies reverberate through the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation, and the later Nuwaubian Nation, founded by Malachi

Z. York—formerly known as Imam Isa al-Haadi al-Mahdi. York’s early teachings drew from Shaykh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, a representative of the Alawiyya Sufi Order, who arrived in the U.S. in 1907 and established the Islamic Propagation Center in Brooklyn in 1928. Despite the clear relevance of these esoteric and initiatory lineages to the hip-hop expressions Ackfeldt explores, they are absent from the analysis.

Ackfeldt’s expertise as a scholar in the history of religions could have provided an opportunity to incorporate a cross-cultural religious contextualization of the theological dimension of Black divinity. As a matter of fact, the Five Percenters’ central assertion that “the Black man is God” begs to be analyzed against the background of historical traditions that equal Blackness with fertility, divinity, cosmic origins—even dark matter? The Black Madonna of European Catholicism, the black Osiris of ancient Kemet, blackened statues of Apollo, Jupiter, and Roman emperors, as well as the veneration of sacred black stones—from the temple of Aphrodite in Cyprus to the *al-hajar al-aswad* at the Ka’ba—are not incidental. These elements form part of a perennial metaphysical system in which darkness signifies the unknowable, the primordial, the source, and the sacred—*al-nūr al-aswad*, the black light, in Sufism, or *botzina de-kardinuta*, the lamp of darkness, in the Zohar. While these patterns hardly align with orthodox Islamic belief, they are essential for a proper understanding of the cosmological conception that informs the reinterpretation of the religion in the context of Black American communities and hip-hop. A respective consideration would shift the discussion of Five Percenters from aspects of subversive statements and aesthetic expressions towards a theological interpretation.

It is this arguably rather cautious analytical scope which limits the broader intellectual contribution of this well-structured interdisciplinary effort. Much of the historical and cultural content—the artists discussed, the ideological influences traced, and the religious movements profiled—have been well documented in previous literature. However, Ackfeldt’s employment of methodologies grounded in Islamic Studies reveals new aspects of this familiar material. His training in semiotics and religious studies permits new analytical framing, though not necessarily new empirical discoveries. In consequence, the book is highly recommended

to scholars and students of Islamic Studies who are eager to explore Islam's role in the context of contemporary cultural production. For those familiar with hip-hop studies and Black American Islam, Ackfeldt's book provides more of a comprehensive synthesis rather than new empirical discoveries. Nevertheless, the book is a valuable resource—clear in prose, methodologically sound, and well-suited for interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly in academic settings that aim to bridge the study of religion with media and culture.

In summary, *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* represents an important addition to the study of Islam's growing representation in artistic expression. It explores important questions regarding identity formations, symbolism, and hybrid religious interpretations. The book provides a compelling model for analyzing the employment of Islamic symbolism in secular or syncretic cultural idioms. Yet, by privileging the semiotic signifier over the metaphysical signified, the book leaves some of the most fertile terrain—particularly that of Islamic esotericism, initiatory systems, and perennialist philosophy—largely unexamined. It is, however, this specific aspect that probably best explains the continuous and increasing representation of Islam in hip-hop. And while researchers from the fields of musicology, sociology, or cultural studies will not necessarily engage with these complexities, an Islamic Studies approach would have provided an opportunity to advance the discussion in this regard. Ackfeldt's effort brings us to the threshold of that deeper inquiry—without quite passing through.

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**FORUM**

# Filip Ćorlukić's Hermeneutics and Exegesis in his Translation of the Qur'ān

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ENES KARIĆ

*“This Kuran is not intended only for Muslims, but for all people of good will, regardless of their religion, for all those who, for any reason, want to learn about the basics of Islam. Given that it is significantly easier to read it in this form, this book is especially intended for those who wish to get more actively involved in interreligious dialogue. It is in fact indispensable for them.”*

FILIP ĆORLUKIĆ, PREDGOVOR, *KURAN*, 7.

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*“With good intentions and an open heart, I did as much as I could and in a way I knew how. I hope that this great endeavor was not in vain and that the contemporary readers gained a clear, logical, correct and interesting presentation of the entire Qur’anic thought. In addition to being a religious work, Kuran is also a work of world culture.”*

FILIP ĆORLUKIĆ, *ISLAM KAO RELIGIJA, KULTURA I CIVILIZACIJA, KURAN*, 432.

## Abstract

This essay outlines the main approaches that should be considered when engaging with the works of Filip Ćorlukić in which he examines the Qur’ān. It addresses his engagement with the Islamic holy text through its translation and adaptation into the Croatian language, through comparative analyses of the Qur’ān and the Bible, through broader comparisons between Islam and Christianity, and through Ćorlukić’s own distinctive and personal study of the Qur’ān. Particular attention is devoted to his scientific analyses, in which he seeks to reconcile “true” science with “true” religion, the texts of the Bible and the Qur’ān, the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the principles of scientism and theism.

**Keywords:** Science, Islam, the Bible, the Qur’ān, evolution

## Introduction: Filip Ćorlukić’s Contributions to Dialogue in the Post-Vatican II Era

From the early 1970s until the second decade of the 21st century, the name Filip Ćorlukić (born in 1928 in Vrhovi near Derventa, Bosnia and Herzegovina, died in 2022 in Pula, Croatia) became familiar to two distinct scientific audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia (or what were once the home countries of socialist Yugoslavia). The first

audience consisted of specialists in the natural sciences, particularly physics, chemistry, and biology, as well as related fields like parapsychology, which gained prominence during that time. During this period, Ćorlukić produced a significant body of work, built a readership, collaborated with other scientists, and gained a unique reputation. He was also recognized as an expert in paper production, the oil industry, and related industries. Following the business trends of the era, he worked in many non-aligned countries and traveled extensively. Alongside his scientific curiosity and awareness of contemporary theories—such as breakthroughs in DNA research—Ćorlukić was known for his adventurous and inquisitive scientific spirit. He explored the boundaries of human knowledge, questioning both the capabilities and limitations of science, while also engaging deeply with the philosophical questions science raises and those that science, in turn, poses to philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

It should also be borne in mind that Filip Ćorlukić was deeply familiar with European, and especially German, philosophical anthropology of his time, including its reflections on the human condition and its analyses of questions concerning the “human place in the cosmos,” to use Max Scheler’s (1874–1928) formulation.<sup>2</sup> Reading today Ćorlukić’s discussions of the human being in the Bible and the Qur’ān, in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, and especially in science, we are struck by the breadth of his learning, which he productively brought into dialogue with the works and theories of Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976), Eugen Fink (1905–1975), Erich Rothacker (1881–1965), Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), and others. In his own distinctive way, Filip Ćorlukić engages with key questions of European philosophy from the late twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century concerning the capacities and limits of scientific understanding of the world. These intellectual efforts merit special attention and would warrant a separate, dedicated study.

A second scholarly audience familiar with Filip Ćorlukić and his work may be described as theological, Islamological, religious, Orientalist, and dialogical. Dialogue, in Ćorlukić’s case, referred primarily to religious encounters among the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Through his theories, studies, essays, and books, Filip Ćorlukić became known in these fields especially among scholars, clergy, and

theologians who not only held views similar to his own but also shared and exchanged them with him willingly and productively. Although Ćorlukić was not a theologian by training, his engagement with the Bible and the Qurʾān and *eo ipso* Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, was profoundly shaped by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Council strongly influenced his careful formulation of dialogical themes, as well as his growing openness and readiness to study religious traditions to which he did not belong by origin or by academic formation. In his Croatian translation of the Qurʾān from 2001, Filip Ćorlukić wrote the following dedication to the readers:

I dedicate this book to the hopes that we will enter the third millennium with more sincere efforts to realize the ideas of inter-religious dialogue and general ecumenism. In [the] Kuran, we were invited to realize such salutary gatherings back in the 7th century:

“O sljedbenici Knjige (Biblije, ranijih objava)! Dođite da se okupimo oko jedne riječi, koja je zajednička nama i vama...” (3:64). [O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms.]

Fourteen centuries later, we are invited to this same gathering by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of his dialogical engagement with the Qurʾān, Filip Ćorlukić also represents a particularly important and distinctive phenomenon within the shared Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin linguistic and intellectual space. Through his translation of the Qurʾān into Croatian, Ćorlukić stands alongside Mićo Ljubibratić (1839–1889) and other translators of the Qurʾān in the Western Balkans. Unlike Ljubibratić, who was politically active during the final decade of Ottoman rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1868–1878) and the first decade of Austro-Hungarian administration (1878–1889), and whose Serbian translation of the Qurʾān was shaped by a clearly articulated national agenda, Filip Ćorlukić approached the Qurʾān primarily as a sacred text that confirmed

and complemented his scientific orientation, a position he articulated explicitly when he stated:

[The] Kuran certainly emphasizes more than other revelations the need to observe the magnificence of the world that surrounds us. In our modern language, it actually points us to scientific research. There are no miracles in [the] Kuran, because miracles are all around us. “Travel around the world...,” “observe the Sun and the Moon...” and much more besides are constant Kuranic messages.<sup>4</sup>

### Filip Ćorlukić: Life, Education, and Intellectual Trajectory

For the sake of clarity and accessibility, this essay limits itself to the most essential biographical information about Filip Ćorlukić, primarily as he himself presented it.<sup>5</sup> He completed his elementary education in his hometown of Vrhovi and attended secondary school in Derвента. He then continued his studies at the Faculty of Science of the University of Belgrade, where he graduated in physics. During both his secondary and university education, Ćorlukić demonstrated, alongside his interest in physics, a strong engagement with other natural sciences, especially chemistry and biology. During the 1960s and 1970s, Filip Ćorlukić worked in a range of companies, firms, and industrial combines associated with the military industry, the paper industry, oil production and refining, and related economic sectors. Available sources note that he “worked as a supervisory body on construction sites in non-aligned countries.”<sup>6</sup> The same sources indicate that in 1976 Ćorlukić was included in the register of scientific researchers in the Republic of Croatia. Over an extended period, he authored, among other works, the following books:

- *Mjerenje temperature u industriji (Temperature Measurement in Industry)*, 1966
- *Mjerenje protoka fluida (Fluid Flow Measurement)*, 1975
- *Kamo ideš čovječe (Where are you going, Man)*, 1983., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1907
- *Tehnologija papira (Paper Technology)*, 1987

- *Isus, Mesija: istina, put i život: objedinjeni tematsko sinoptički prikaz kanonskih knjiga Evanđelja (Jesus, the Messiah: the Truth, the Way and the Life: a Unified, Thematic, Synoptic Account of the Canonical Books of the Gospels)*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1996, prepared by Filip Ćorlukić
- *Kuran: s vremensko-tematski raspoređenim poglavljima (The Qur'ān: with Chapters Arranged Chronologically and Thematically)*, 2001, prepared and commented by Filip Ćorlukić
- *Stipine priče i pjesme: biseri koji su u nevoljama izrastali (Stipe's Stories and Poems: Pearls Born of Adversity)*, 2007
- *Uzroci i rasap Jugoslavije (The Causes and Disintegration of Yugoslavia)*, 2010<sup>8</sup>
- *Moje sjećanje na minulo stoljeće (My Memory of the Past Century)*, 2015
- *Objedinjeno evanđelje: četiri knjige kanonskih evanđelja Novog zavjeta u jednoj, tematski objedinjenoj knjizi grafički sinoptičkog prikaza (The Unified Gospel: The Four Canonical Gospels of the New Testament in a Single, Thematically Integrated Volume with a Graphical Synoptic Presentation)*, 2016
- *Quo vadis homo: katastrofa ili savršenstvo?, (Quo Vadis, Homo: Catastrophe or Perfection?)* 2016.

Some insight into Filip Ćorlukić's political views can be gained from an interview he gave to *Nacional* on June 19, 2016.<sup>9</sup> Based on everything that can be learned from his writings and public statements, Ćorlukić emerges as a humanistic intellectual: a man with pronounced anti-war convictions, a deep love for humanity and nature, and a particular fascination with flora and fauna. In his own distinctive way, he believes in God as “the creator and sustainer of all of us,” and, accordingly, he contemplates the Universe in its many forms and dimensions. Although he does not address all of these themes explicitly in his *Nacional* interview, they are developed throughout his books, which are consulted in this essay. In the interview itself, however, Ćorlukić draws attention to his views on contemporary geopolitics, reflects on the Second World War, emphasizes his undisguised Bosnian patriotism, and offers a critical

assessment of the Dayton Agreement. He also refers to Pope John XXIII as a “modern pope” and praises his efforts as one who “encouraged dialogue and solidarity regardless of religion, which was revolutionary.”<sup>10</sup> These remarks reveal the positive influence of the dialogical spirit of the Second Vatican Council on Ćorlukić: a worldly intellectual open to faith in God and committed to dialogue among different religions, sacred texts, and worldviews.

It goes without saying that the author of this essay on Filip Ćorlukić lacks the expertise required to engage adequately with his technical works on paper production, fluid dynamics, oil processing, or methods of measuring “temperature pressure” in industrial plants, among other specialized topics. For this reason, Ćorlukić’s oeuvre is approached here in a deliberately reductionist manner: only those works that can be meaningfully understood and assessed are discussed. Accordingly, for the purposes of these pages, the book *Kamo ideš čovječe* (*Where are you going, Man*),<sup>11</sup> later published in an expanded edition under the title *Quo Vadis Homo: Katastrofa ili savršenstvo?* (*Where Are You Going, O Human: Catastrophe or Perfection?*),<sup>12</sup> occupies a central place, alongside his Croatian translation of the Qur’ān (*Kuran*), which is frequently referenced throughout this essay.<sup>13</sup> These two works are especially important because they allow for a clear and coherent reconstruction of Ćorlukić’s views on the human being and humanity, the world and history, religion and faith, believers, sacred texts, and “divinely inspired” scriptures, as well as their interpretation.

It is regrettable that Filip Ćorlukić’s writings on the Gospels fall outside the scope of this study, especially since *Glas Koncila* also responded to some of these works.<sup>14</sup> Although it would be possible to comment on Ćorlukić’s “evangelical” views, on this occasion it seems both preferable and more appropriate to refrain from entering into these discussions, whether those advanced by Ćorlukić himself or by *Glas Koncila*. We remain confident that this “intra-Catholic” dialogue has reached, or will ultimately reach, a constructive and satisfactory conclusion. Despite the fact that Ćorlukić’s book *Kamo ideš čovječe* was written with scientific rigor, its first edition, published in 1983, had to be presented as a work

of “science fiction.” Dušan Čalić (1918–1993), a high-ranking Communist Party official in Croatia during the 1970s and 1980s, provided what might be described as ideological support for the book’s publication by contributing its foreword. In that text, Čalić stated the following about the book:

The originality of Filip Ćorlukić’s work is reflected in the fact that Ćorlukić derives his explanations from the interpretation of the basic principles of understanding Existence in general, analyzing the oldest religious texts and comparing them with the working principles of complex computer systems. In doing so, he started from a series of assumptions, which served as starting points in further analyses.<sup>15</sup>

Although he assessed the book from a “Marxist point of view,” Čalić nonetheless recommended it, emphasizing that Ćorlukić’s work offered extraordinary inspiration. In this way, Čalić’s ideological framing proved instrumental in enabling the book’s publication and in helping it reach both its audience and its subsequent reputation.

## Science, the Bible and the Qur’ān in the Filip Ćorlukić Intellectual Horizons

What follows is an introductory discussion of Filip Ćorlukić’s core starting points concerning science, the Bible, and the Qur’ān.<sup>16</sup> His book *Kamo ideš čovječe* (*Where Are You Going, Man?*) is of particular importance here, as it clearly articulates Ćorlukić’s humanistic outlook. This fact is underscored by his dedication of the book to “the idea of the United Nations.”<sup>17</sup> In practical terms, *Kamo ideš čovječe* brings the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur’ān into a single dialogical framework shaped by humanistic aspirations and goals, while also engaging the scientific currents of the period that this humanist carefully studied, valued, and appreciated. Filip Ćorlukić not only affirms but repeatedly demonstrates that the Qur’ān is not in contradiction with either the Old Testament or the New Testament. To avoid perceived contradictions among these

three sacred texts, he insists on a holistic approach that promotes integrative readings and brings to light their shared themes and overarching narratives. Accordingly, when arguing for the existence of a connected “cosmic biological community” within Existence,<sup>18</sup> Ćorlukić explicitly states that he will draw both on the Genesis of Moses and on the Qur’ān:

We will choose only the most complete text, the text on the creation of the world of one religion that came to be in historical time. That is the *Genesis* by Moses, written for the first time some three and a half thousand years ago. Not only *Genesis*, but all five books by Moses will be the basic framework for our analysis. Other known texts will be added as necessary to supplement and clarify the biblical texts. Very often the much newer *Kuran* will serve as an extremely useful supplement; *Kuran* was written 1400 years ago and, unlike other religious texts, it has survived to this day completely unchanged. In order to avoid confusion and remarks that this analysis is some kind of a mixture, I should note that *Kuran* acknowledges the Bible, and that the Hebrew and Christian texts of the Bible, as well as *Kuran*, can be considered a single text.<sup>19</sup>

Filip Ćorlukić also makes clear that his point of departure for demonstrating a single, comprehensive theme shared by the Bible and the Qur’ān (God, world, human being, and existence), received by humanity from the depths of the blue sky, is not theology. Rather, he locates this starting point in science, or in the sciences in which he places his trust. *Kamo ideš čovječe* opens with several of Ćorlukić’s key premises, formulated through deliberate simplifications, which he presents as a conscientious educator and teacher seeking to inspire confidence in his readers, whether pupils or students. In order to show that a Singular Cosmic Mind truly speaks to humanity and communicates with it, and that the Bible and the Qur’ān, among other “divinely inspired” texts, are the result of this Cosmic Mind addressing humankind, Filip Ćorlukić turns to the example of computers and the programs embedded, installed,

and stored within them. Yet, as he emphasizes, computers are creations of the human brain. And Ćorlukić states:

Today everyone agrees that the human brain is the pinnacle of development in the solar system, while for those who believe that there are no other intelligent beings in the universe, the brain is the pinnacle in the whole universe. But how is the human brain built, how does it arise and develop? The human brain, as well as all the organs in the human body, is made according to the plans and instructions contained in the DNA molecules! Everything is “written” in a newly fertilized cell. Is the peak of development the human brain itself or is it our biological programming chain that instructs the construction of the brain?<sup>20</sup>

In an accessible and receptive manner, Ćorlukić explains how the functioning of DNA (i.e., the “biological programming chain”) may be understood by drawing attention to contemporary technological applications. He points out that modern technology allows us to see clearly what a program stored in a computer is, in much the same way that DNA is stored in living beings, and how both the program and DNA are manifested and realized “externally.” In this context, Ćorlukić states:

[The] technological and economic optimization of production is carried out by computers in many plants today. Humans create programs, prescribe conditions and determine what is important for optimal work [...] Today there are fully automated factories. Production is managed by computers, while device operators in the classic sense of the word do not exist [...] In a sugar refinery, paper and pulp mill, or oil refinery, there are a number of completely separate plants. Each of these plants can be considered a technologically rounded whole.<sup>21</sup>

Ćorlukić notes that there is one “central computer” behind many of these separate plants in some production and industrial sectors:

The central computer receives information about the operation of individual plants from the plant computers and, based on this information, adjusts the operation of the plants. The central unit does not “take into account” all the details of the operation of individual plants, but only monitors and processes the information that is essential for the optimal operation of the entire factory. The operation of individual plants - to a certain level of autonomy - is managed by plant process computers, while individual parameters (pressure, temperature, etc.) are independently maintained by adequate automatic regulators, but again based on the default values they receive from their plant computer.<sup>22</sup>

We do not betray Filip Ćorlukić’s theoretical intentions if we say that he deliberately opts for metaphors, such as that of a “central computer,” in order to introduce his readers, in a heuristic manner, to reflections on God and the world, God and the Universe, or God and creation. Ćorlukić employs conceptual tools characteristic of his professional background as an engineer, constructing rich “valleys of metaphors” through which he seeks to explain the “essence of things.” He should not be reproached for resorting to deliberately evident simplifications, such as “The operating of a computer processor can also be compared to the operating of the programmer of an automatic washing machine. Both devices perform their tasks in a pre-programmed sequence.”<sup>23</sup>

Slowly but steadily, Filip Ćorlukić guides the reader from the realm of machines and computers toward God the Creator and His abundant creation of countless worlds and creatures, all ordered according to a “pre-set program”:

Emergence, growth and development of living beings on Earth occurs according to a very complex and elaborate program. Occasionally, changes happen, new characteristics appear, which later remain, so we are talking about the development from the simplest to increasingly more complex forms. This “program” has been going on for millions of years.<sup>24</sup>

For Filip Ćorlukić, there is no doubt that the DNA molecule occupies a central place in all living organisms. This “famous molecule” of DNA exists within living beings independently of their will. Ćorlukić explains:

The programming device, the device corresponding to the washing machine programmer, is the famous DNA molecule in which it is programmed what and how everything should be, down to the smallest details, but with a number of alternative possibilities. This means that in the living cell of every organism there is a series of complete development programs. In modern computer technology, the equipment itself (meaning all technical devices) is called “hardware” in English. The arrangement and system of “pressed buttons” represents, in fact, the content of the program text, or biotechnical instruction. Today, those projects, instructions and programs are typically called “software.” Thus, every living cell has “software” and “hardware” (program and equipment).<sup>25</sup>

For Filip Ćorlukić, the all-pervasive domain of DNA is by no means limited to planet Earth and its millions of living beings. He maintains that DNA is connected to the entire universe or, in the language of contemporary physics, to the multiverse:

In this work [*Kamo ideš čovječe*] we briefly wanted to draw the reader’s attention to the level and directions of contemporary thinking about the space biological community. If we accept such a thesis, then what follows is that our famous “programming chain” - the DNA molecule - is in fact programmed for the entire universe, or at least for our galaxy. A unique cosmic program for the development of the living world - from amoeba, then transitional forms, all the way to rational beings!<sup>26</sup>

These statements by Filip Ćorlukić are sufficient to indicate his intention in this and in his other books devoted to the “great secrets of the Universe,” or to that Universal Reason which stands behind it and gives

direction to all processes of unfolding, existence, and transformation. The matter of the world does not stand alone, just as a washing machine cannot set its own program. It hardly needs to be emphasized that, within philosophy and theology, from patristic thought to the Islamic *mutakallimūn* (systematic theologians), the so-called “cosmological proof” of God’s existence has long been articulated and developed.

The very existence of constellations and, beyond them, clusters of constellations leads to the conclusion that God exists and that He is. Whether such cosmic structures reveal God or instead conceal Him is a different and far more difficult question, comparable to the optical puzzle of how light fills every pore of a colorless jar while remaining light, just as the jar remains a jar. By contrast, some Islamic mystics have suggested that the cosmic void itself is God’s greatest “invention,” or act of creation. According to this view, God first created the void (an incomprehensibly vast emptiness) and then, or perhaps simultaneously, impressed within it, through His omnipresent omnipotence, creatures that flow and move, bound together in intimate interconnection.

Filip Ćorlukić is fully aware that his casuistry, drawing on DNA, software, hardware, and related analogies, constitutes a valuable form of “theoretical construction,” articulated in language in order to approach the mystery of why the Universe is, or rather, how the Universe is. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, numerous scholarly and scientific hermeneutics of the Bible emerged, giving rise to an extensive body of literature. In a similar way, scientific hermeneutics of the Qur’ān developed both in the Islamic East and in the West. Yet it has repeatedly become clear that sacred texts, in a sense, escape and elude the scientizing mind, just as the world itself continually presents that mind with new disguises, new veils of *māyā*. We never fully know which of these veils are genuine, or whether all of them are. In this respect, Filip Ćorlukić’s works can themselves be understood as carefully crafted engagements with these veils of the sacred text and with the messages conveyed through the veils of *verbum Dei*.

In his translation of the Qur’ān into Croatian, Filip Ćorlukić was searching, one might say, for a kind of DNA within this foundational text of Islam. He was delighted when he encountered the Qur’ānic analyses of

Rashad Khalifa, “an Egyptian biochemist working in the United States.”<sup>27</sup> Khalifa’s research belongs essentially to the field of statistical linguistics and is applied directly to the Arabic original of the Qur’ān. According to Khalifa, the secret structure of the Qur’ān is centered on the number nineteen. Ćorlukić was fascinated by this discovery and commented on it as follows:

First of all, *Kuran* has 114 chapters, and this number is divisible by 19 - which may just be a coincidence. All chapters (except one) are preceded by the same sentence, the so-called “seal,” i.e., *basmala*. The number of letters in this sentence in Arabic is 19! This then reduces the chance of coincidence. It is not known whether in the past 14 centuries anyone came up with the idea of the number 19 as some sort of code, but if so, it was practically impossible for them to engage in wider and more complex checks. However, Dr. Rashad had computers at his disposal and used them extensively. Here we will very briefly present the results of some of his research.

The text of the above mentioned seal in our language reads: “U ime Boga, Sveopćeg Dobročinitelja, Milostivog!” [In the Name of God—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful] These same words are found many times in the entire text of *Kuran*: name – 19 times, God – 2698 times, Sveopći Dobročinitelj [Universal Benefactor] – 57 times. All these numbers are divisible by 19, which practically excludes the possibility of coincidence!<sup>28</sup>

Filip Ćorlukić understands the “scientific interpretation of the Qur’ān” as a process analogous to the “scientific interpretation of the universe.” In several of his books, he seeks to prepare both himself and his readers for the idea that the wonder of science and the wonder of religion should be brought together in revealing the miracle of Existence. His Croatian translation of the Qur’ān was also undertaken with this aim in mind. In this translation, Ćorlukić divided the Qur’ānic text into thematic sections, such as: (A) the invitation to Muḥammad to reveal;

(B) responses to events and promises; (C) the end of the world and the reckoning; (D) prophets; (E) testimonies; (F) ecumenical interpretations of earlier revelations; and others. What emerges clearly from these translation efforts is a scientific classification of Qur'ānic discourse according to themes. This is an approach that, in English Orientalist scholarship, is described as "the thematic rearrangement of the Qur'ānic chapters."<sup>29</sup>

If we follow the direction in which Filip Ćorlukić guides his readers, it becomes clear that, in *Kamo ideš čovječe*, he accepts evolution in nature just as readily as he accepts evolution, on other planes, between the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Qur'ān. As Ćorlukić himself states: "The brain developed [evolved] according to a typical system of upgrading new elements and expanding capacities."<sup>30</sup> In this perspective, the human brain functions as a kind of central computer processor within the human being. Ćorlukić illustrates this idea through numerous examples of the human body's responses to its environment, such as the secretion of glands, the functioning of blood circulation, and similar physiological processes. The following passage from his writing is typical:

The organism as a whole has its own special sensors, with which it monitors specific events in the surroundings. These are sensors for sight, hearing, smell, touch, pain and temperature. If there is real or possible danger, then a whole preventive defense system is activated. The superficial vessels are constricted (and the person turns pale), so that in the event of injury there is no great loss of blood. The muscles are supplied with an increased amount of blood (the heart beats faster), in which the content of nutrients is automatically increased, so that, in case of need, it is possible to confront the danger more effectively, or to run away. Meanwhile, the brain can assess the situation and order appropriate measures to be taken. If a wolf suddenly jumps out in front of a person in the forest, then the person can defend itself or run away. However, the alarm can also be false. If a rabbit jumps out instead of a wolf, the person will still be scared, the preventive automatic protection will work in the same way, but

as soon as the brain realizes that there is no danger, everything returns to the default state.<sup>31</sup>

With this, Ćorlukić gradually leads us to the question: And what about the entire Universe or Multiverses? Are they one unit that has, somewhere in the back, but also here and everywhere, something that unifies, some “central computer,” in Ćorlukić’s words, that connects and consolidates everything, just like brain unites everything in human organism? Ćorlukić’s answer is affirmative, and from time to time in his writing, he both gives and hints at such answers:

Maybe all this is, in fact, much broader than we think. DNA molecules contain programs for construction of the brain. Why could they not also participate in some way in the process of thinking and imagining? Plants have no brain at all, yet they still live very complex lives. Today, there is growing evidence that plants communicate, not only among themselves, but they also react to events in the living world in general. Although the brain is the executive organ of “thinking,” it may not be the only one participating in it.<sup>32</sup>

With this passage, Ćorlukić confronts us with a series of questions: whether, behind our cognitive, intuitive, emotional, and imaginative capacities (as well as those present in the plant and animal worlds) there exists another force, another “central processor of the universe.” In other words, do the multiverses in which we exist unfold and persist according to programs that were installed in them in advance?

As we can see on many pages of his books, Ćorlukić believes that the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Qur’ān, in their way, not only point to these premordial and eternal programs in the Universe, but in a way are also their expression, and even an effectively worded information about them. In the chapters “Programi živoga svijeta”<sup>33</sup> (Programs of the living world), “Polazišta”<sup>34</sup> (Starting points), “Postanak svijeta”<sup>35</sup> (Genesis of the world), Filip Ćorlukić makes this very clear, even when he refers to the Indian Vedas: “We will also just mention that according to

the oldest Indian Vedas, Light represents the eternal expression (manifestation) of the Absolute. There is only the transformation of the Absolute in manifestation, and that is a permanent process.”<sup>36</sup>

## The Qur’ān as the Universe in Words

It is now necessary to turn more directly to Ćorlukić’s understanding of the Qur’ān and to his use of its passages, always within the broader context of his scientific interpretations of the world. At this point, two important remarks should be made in order to clarify Ćorlukić’s starting assumptions in his reception of the Qur’ān. First, for Ćorlukić the Qur’ān is a “book” or a “message of continuity.” In his view, there are no sharp contradictions between humanity’s great religious texts and the Qur’ān, which he understands as “the last Testament to humankind.” In this regard, the following passage by Ćorlukić is particularly instructive:

Choosing only the oldest and most original [for the book *Kamo ideš čovječe*], and disregarding all subsequent additions and influences, all old myths, all starting ideas of different religious philosophies merge into one single short message. From the Sumerian epic about demi-god king Gilgamesh and all the way to *Kuran* - all of it merges into such a logical whole, that even the most fantastical assumptions begin to appear as reasonable conclusions.<sup>37</sup>

From this perspective, Ćorlukić’s Croatian translation of the Qur’ān and his book *Kamo ideš čovječe* appear as a single, coherent whole, one that reads the messages of the Qur’ān alongside those found in the ancient religious traditions of India, China, Iran, ancient Greece, and the Middle East. In this regard, Filip Ćorlukić deserves recognition for his skillful linking of ancient (indeed, one might say eternal) religious texts and messages with the holistically conceived insights of contemporary science, insights that enable human beings to orient themselves meaningfully and to be guided toward paths of wonder through the sciences themselves!

A second important feature of Filip Ćorlukić's views and theoretical approach is his understanding that there are four fundamental scales of Existence. As he states, Ćorlukić understands Existence as unfolding across four fundamental levels:

- a) The basic form of Existence is energy.
- b) The "contraction" and specific organization of energy produces the second level of Existence: matter.
- c) The particular organization of matter and energy gives rise to the third level of Existence: life.
- d) The special organization of living matter creates the foundation that, under certain conditions, enables the manifestation of Reason, which constitutes the fourth and highest level of Existence.<sup>38</sup>

Starting from this sequence: Energy, Matter, Life, Reason Ćorlukić maintains that "in the universe there exists a unified, general Reason in some form."<sup>39</sup> He further claims that this "cosmic Reason is in a constant state of expansion and development,"<sup>40</sup> that the "universal cosmic program is programmed into the DNA molecule,"<sup>41</sup> and that "development is ongoing everywhere in existence and throughout the universe wherever the necessary conditions arise."<sup>42</sup> Human brains, in this view, are "respective elements of Cosmic Reason."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, he argues that "active interventions on Earth [by the Cosmic Reason] began in the period that the Bible [and the Qur'ān] describe as the appearance of Adam,"<sup>44</sup> and finally, that "ancient texts and myths were transmitted to us, in one way or another, by representatives of the Cosmic Reason."<sup>45</sup>

As will be discussed later, Filip Ćorlukić understands the angel, or *malak*, Jibrīl (Gabriel) to be a significant member of these representatives of Cosmic Reason.

All that has been said thus far is a kind of preparation for us to consider the outlines of an "exegesis and hermeneutics of the Qur'ān," which Filip Ćorlukić offered in a comprehensible and logical way. Regarding the very phenomenon of the revelation of the Qur'ān to the

Prophet Muḥammad, (in the chapter *Kuran* in his book *Kamo ideš čovječe*) Ćorlučić points out that “in a state of trance, Muḥammad lost connection with the environment.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover:

Communicating, or receiving messages [of the Qur’ān], was usually not achieved through a direct conversation with Jibrīl, whom Muḥammad saw in his visions only a few times. However, as for the very method of receiving messages, Muḥammad was told that Gabriel

[...] *po Božijoj zapovijedi stavio tebi na srce Kuran* [...]

[He revealed this (Qur’ān) to your heart by God’s Will]

(Q. 2:97)

In order to strengthen the claims about the origin of *Kuran*, it is said:

*Donio ga je Ruhul-kudus od tvoga Gospodara* [...]

[The holy spirit has brought it down from your Lord]

(Q. 16:102)

Or

*Njega je dostavio Er-Ruhul-emin na tvoje srce...*

[which the trustworthy spirit (Gabriel) brought down]

(Q.26:193-194).<sup>47</sup>

Ćorlučić describes the phenomenon Qur’anic revelation as follows:

People surrounding Muḥammad saw something divine in his trance, while his enemies - and he had many in the beginning - saw in it signs of possession, similar to the trance of sorcerers. The most important thing for Muḥammad was what was said to him in a trance state. The messages came from God, and the very words were spoken by the voice of an angel on behalf of God.<sup>48</sup>

In several passages of the chapters he devoted to the Qur’ān, Ćorlučić shows, in his own distinctive manner, that the Islamic holy book itself bears witness to the core or essence of Existence. The Qur’ān, in his

view, proclaims and discloses the truth of Reality, essentially conveying the same message that was revealed to Moses in the Torah and to Jesus Christ in the Gospel. This is precisely what Ćorlukić argues:

The purpose of revealing *Kuran* is clear. It in no way constitutes the creation of a new religion or the preaching of a new truth. *Kuran* entirely accepts that which was revealed starting from Moses to Jesus, while not accepting certain later interpretations of those revelations. Above all, *Kuran* primarily interprets the earlier revelations and corrects those elements that, according to this view, were subsequently altered by human intervention.<sup>49</sup>

In his hermeneutical and exegetical approach to the Qur'ān, Ćorlukić follows a line of interpretation that was dear (and still is!) to Muslim modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: namely, the view that the Prophet Muḥammad did not come in order to perform miracles, but rather to proclaim a profound trust placed by “aliens,” or by the transcendent, in human reason:

Muhammad's action significantly differs from the action of earlier prophets. There is no trace of miracle work. It appears that aliens have stopped using the psychological shocks induced by miracles. The fact is that it was miracle work that most often led in unintended or misguided directions. The very manner of revealing the Qur'ān underscores the wish to avoid miracles.<sup>50</sup>

Ćorlukić emphasizes the integrative nature of the Qur'ān regarding the religious figures of Judaism and Christianity. Ćorlukić points out this integrative “position of Muhammad in that [this was] Jibrīl's [Gabriel's] last intervening action.” He mentions the many lines of the Qur'ān that are characterized by their worldliness:

“Svi ljudi bili su samo jedan narod...” (Q. 10:19)  
[Humanity was once nothing but a single community]

Svaki narod ima svoj rok... (Q. 7:33)

[For each community there is an appointed term]

I prije tebe smo slali ljude, kojima smo objavljivali isto što i tebi... (Q. 21:7)

[We did not send (messengers) before you (O Prophet) except mere men inspired by Us]

Recite: ‘Mi vjerujemo u Boga i ono što nam je objavljeno i što je objavljeno Ibrahimu (Abrahamu), Ismailu (Izmaelu), Ishaku (Izaku), Jakubu (Jakovu) i potomcima njihovim i vjerujemo onom što je dao Musau (Mojsiju) i Isau (Isusu)... Mi ne pravimo razlike između ni jednog od njih...’ (Q. 2:136 & 3:84).

[Say, (O believers,) “We believe in Allah and what has been revealed to us; and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and his descendants; and what was given to Moses, Jesus... we make no distinction between any of them...”]

Filip Ćorlukić was delighted with the completeness and integrativeness of the Qur’ān, or rather, the inclusiveness of the Qur’ān. After reading such passages of the Qur’ān, Ćorlukić said: “Everything is clear [from these verses of the Qur’ān]. In contrast to previous revelations, this time the alien Jibril revealed the contents of the whole, part by part, for 23 years.”<sup>51</sup> Regarding the Qur’ān, Filip Ćorlukić claims that this holy book persistently “emphasizes the continuity of revelations and the uniqueness of ideas that have been revealed since ancient times until Muhammad.”<sup>52</sup>

Ćorlukić suggests, albeit indirectly, that the completeness of the Universe is manifested in its submission to God. In this sense, he is particularly drawn to the very term *Islām*, which literally means “submission to God,” and he accordingly understands the Qur’ānic call for humanity to be “submitted to God.” As most Muslim philosophers and theologians would affirm, Ćorlukić grasped the meaning of *Islām* correctly in its literal sense. Using his own conceptual language, the “alien Jibril” (the angel Gabriel) asks of God’s messengers, and of their peoples and communities throughout history, nothing more than this submission to

God. It should be emphasized that the expression “alien Jibrīl (Gabriel)” should not be understood as implying a “spaceman” or extraterrestrial being; such an interpretation was never intended by Ćorlukić. With this clarification in mind, we may turn to the following passage in which Filip Ćorlukić interprets the Qur’ānic verse calling humanity to communicate with God through Islām, to express Islām before Him (“Kod Boga je prava vjera samo islam...” Q. 3:19) [Certainly, God’s only Way is Islam]:

So what is Islam? Is it something different [compared to Judaism and Christianity]? Does this ayah cancel out all the numerous ayahs that speak about its continuity? According to the interpretation of the translator of *Kuran*, Dr. Čaušević, Islam means: entering into true peace and embracing it. A follower of Islam must live with God and people in complete peace, giving everyone what they deserve and what must be given to them. Well, is this not put differently in the first and second commandments, which Jesus claimed to be fundamental and the most important? Is this not the same Rule of Conduct, which Buddha, Zarathustra, Akhenaten, and even the ancient Gilgamesh preached in their own words? Islam is not a different religious philosophy, just an Arabic term for the way of conduct preached by all the prophets before Muhammad.<sup>53</sup>

It is useful to end this part of the essay with Ćorlukić’s remarks that reveal his insistence that the messages of the Bible and the Qur’ān, as well as other ancient religious texts, are in a way, to put it metaphorically, the DNA supported by Cosmic Reason (or “Cosmic Community,”<sup>54</sup> as Ćorlukić puts it). This gives everything meaning and sense, and even - when it comes to humans - moral purpose. Heavenly books, heavenly texts, arrive to morally revive people. These moral revivals of humanity cannot occur without the “intervention of aliens.” As Ćorlukić said:

All interventions by aliens, and even the extreme interventions of biological selection and destruction of the least successful kinds, always came down to turning a half-human into a human,

a reasonable and social being in the broadest sense of the word. Apart from destruction, which the aliens stopped using a long time ago, there are only [moral] incentives left. There, at the level of reason, automaticity is powerless. The most important among numerous suggestions and persuasions is the endeavor to accept the Planetary and Cosmic Rule of Conduct, which the Bible calls 'love' and the *Kuran* 'Islam'. That is a line, a rope that has been thrown to us.

*'I svi se držite Božjeg užeta, vjere islama [predanosti Bogu] i ne razilazite se u razne grupe.'* (Q. 3:103) [And hold firmly together to the rope of God and do not be divided].<sup>55</sup>

## Ćorlukić's Translation of the Qur'ān into Croatian

The publication of Ćorlukić's translation of the Qur'ān in Croatian in 2001<sup>56</sup> did not surprise those who knew about the scientific commitments and achievements of this learned intellectual, cosmopolitan and engineer. All that has been said in this essay thus far is, in a way, Ćorlukić's commentary on the phenomenon called the Qur'ān. Once again, Filip Ćorlukić was delighted by the messages of the Second Vatican Council, especially its dialogic implications and the recognition that Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same, one and only living God! From the mid-sixties, Ćorlukić began studying world-famous religious texts, the Avesta, the Vedas, the Bible, the Qur'ān etc., then the Talmud and the Hadith. He also studied the extensive commentary and hermeneutic literature about these "divinely inspired religious scriptures." There is not enough space here to show all the European and Western sources Ćorlukić used in his analysis of the Qur'ān, but it is important to mention one English translator of the Qur'ān - John Medows Rodwell (1808-1900).<sup>57</sup> Namely, Ćorlukić found Rodwell's translation of the Qur'ān interesting because of his effort to include in the translation the chronological sequence of surahs or chapters in the revelation of the Qur'ān.

Classical Muslim commentators were familiar with the organization of the Qur'ān according to the sequence of revelation in historical time. However, there is a sacral / sacred Qur'ān (*al-qur'ān al-muta'abbad*),

which is an eternal Qurʾān, as it is written on the heavenly ‘Tablet Carefully Preserved’ (*Tabula Secreta*). That is, the Qurʾān that is not arranged according to the chronological order of revelation, but rather its Arabic original is the one in the *Tabula Secreta*, the one that a *ḥāfiẓ* knows by heart. The Qurʾān arranged by people “according to the time sequence of revelation” contains the identical words and sentences as the Eternal Qurʾān. The difference is entirely in the form, the first collection of the Qurʾān is read chronologically (or one could say historically), and the second collection of the Qurʾān is read as if one were closely reading the Carefully Preserved Heavenly Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz - Tabula Secreta*).

Why did Filip Ćorlukić opt for a chronological arrangement of the chapters in his translation of the Qurʾān into Croatian? From the literature on the Qurʾān - Islamic as well as Judeo-Christian-European and Western - Ćorlukić learned about the complex problems in understanding the Qurʾān if a person reading the Qurʾān in its Arabic original, or in its translation, is not familiar with the temporal development of themes within the Qurʾān. Those intellectuals who have “philosophical inclinations” say that this is about finding the temporal “development of ideas in the Qurʾān” if the Qurʾān is read according to the chronological order of the revelation of its surahs. Of course, for traditional Muslims, the Qurʾān is not a philosophical book, and it is thus not a compendium of ideas in the philosophical sense of the word. Be that as it may, this discussion about the need for temporal arrangement of the chapters of the Qurʾān is still ongoing in what could be called the hermeneutics and exegesis of the Qurʾān in Europe and the West.

In addition to the first characteristic, marked by chronology, of Ćorlukić’s Croatian translation of the Qurʾān, another important feature worth noting is the terminology, nomenclature, or conceptual apparatus he employs throughout the book. Ćorlukić keeps in mind the broadest possible Croatian readership, seeking to make the Qurʾānic text linguistically accessible while also striving to present the Qurʾān as an intelligible and acceptable book for his readers.

Turning now to sociolinguistics, Ćorlukić either develops or offers his own “Croatian adaptation” of the translation language used in the *Kuran*. There are many examples. For instance, Ćorlukić translates the

Arabic syntagm *yuqīmūna al-ṣalāta* in Croatian as “mole se” [they pray] (i.e., those who believe in God “pray to God”).<sup>58</sup> Typically, the literature on Islam written by Bosniaks uses “obavljaju *namāz*” [they perform *namāz*] for the aforementioned syntagm *yuqīmūna al-ṣalāta*. Of course, *namāz* is a Persian word meaning prayer. “Obavljati *namāz*” [performing *namāz*] entered the Bosnian language more than five centuries ago. But in the Croatian language, *namāz* is a less familiar word, so Ćorlukić opts for “mole se” [they pray] or “obavljaju molitvu” [they offer prayer]. However, Bosnian Muslim translators of the Qur’ān believe that *namāz*, when referring to “communicating with God,” has a higher status than *molitva* [prayer]. The Persian word *namāz* (and the Arabic word *ṣalāt*) is, in a way, in the Islamic Weltanschauung the highest form of communication with God by humans. Furthermore, *namāz* and *ṣalāt* also have the intention of God communicating with people. The semantics of the word *molitva* [prayer] does carry such a broad “mystical meaning” (at least among Bosnian Muslim translators of the Qur’ān). Ćorlukić treats the word *zakāt* in almost the same way. In Islam: the mandatory giving of wealth to the poor, the needy, those trapped in debt bondage, etc. Of course, using the word *tax* to translate *zakāt* would be very clumsy, but, in essence, *zakāt* in Islam is a type of compulsory giving of money or material assistance, for example in grain, fruit, food, clothing, to the poor! *Zakāt* is primarily given or distributed to the poor in money, but it is not uncommon to give *zakāt* in kind. Ćorlukić decided to translate the word *zakāt* (in Bosnian this word is often written as *zekjat*) as “milo-dari”<sup>59</sup> [alms]. Elsewhere, however, it is evident that Ćorlukić translates the word *zakāt* as “doprinos” [material contribution]. Thus, the syntagm (surah 2:42) *wa-aqīmū al-ṣalāta wa-ātū al-zakāta* is translated: “Molite se, i dajte [materijalni] doprinos...”<sup>60</sup> [Pray and make material contribution]. At times, however, Ćorlukić translated the word *zakāt* as giving or gifting,<sup>61</sup> while parts of the Qur’ān that in the Arabic original read *aqīmū al-ṣalāta*, Ćorlukić translated into Croatian as: “Klanjajte se svome Svedržitelju [Bogu].” [Worship your Pantocrator (God)].

Ćorlukić opts for ‘Svedržitelj’ [Pantocrator] to translate the Arabic Qur’anic word *rabb*, in order to avoid the common word ‘Gospodar’ [Lord] that is very common in many Bosnian translations of the Qur’ān

when translating the word *rabb*. Throughout his translation, Ćorlukić is more or less consistent in translating *rabb* as “Svedržitelj” [Pantocrator]. The influence of European translations of the Qur’ān on Ćorlukić is evident here. For instance, in his translation of the Qur’ān, *The Message of the Qur’ān*,<sup>62</sup> Leopold Weiss (*alias* Muhammad Asad) translated the Arabic word *rabb* into English as *Sustainer* (*Uzdržitelj*, *Uzdržatelj*), and not as *Lord* (*Gospodar*). Ćorlukić believed that in Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) the relationship between God the Lord and man the servant (or slave) did not exist. Rather it was a relationship between the ‘Svedržitelj’ [Pantocrator] and ‘Uzdržitelj’ [Almighty] (God) on one side, and the worshiper, or *službenik* [servant] on the other. Consistent with his decision to translate ‘*abdullāh*’ with the syntagm “Božji službenik” [God’s servant], Ćorlukić translates Īsā al-Masīḥ’s (Jesus Christ’s) cry: *Innī ‘abdullāh!* – from surah Maryam/Mary as follows: “Ja sam službenik Božji” [I am a servant of God].<sup>63</sup>

In his translation, or *Kuran*, Ćorlukić thus wanted to emphasize the meaning of *Islām* as *devotion* to God, which he wrote about extensively in his book *Kamo ideš čovječe*. In addition, in *Kuran* Ćorlukić sought to ensure the readability of his Croatian translation of Islam’s foundational text, while at the same time conveying the receptiveness and expressive appeal of the Qur’ānic style through his Croatian adaptation. Consider the opening surah in the Qur’ān in Ćorlukić’s Croatian translation:

U ime Boga,  
Sveopćeg Dobročinitelja,  
Milostivog!  
Tebe Boga hvalimo,  
Svedržitelja svjetova.  
Sveopćeg Dobročinitelja,  
Milostivog, Vladara Dana sudnjega.  
Tebi se klanjamo i od Tebe pomoć tražimo.  
Uputi nas na pravi put,  
na put onih kojima si milost Svoju darovao,  
a ne onih koji su protiv sebe izazvali Tvoju srdžbu,  
niti onih koji su zalutali!<sup>64</sup>

In a large number of translations of the Qur'ān, the word *rabb* - which Ćorlukić translates as *Svedržitelj* [Pantocrator] - is translated as *Gospodar* [Lord]. Ćorlukić believed that in the translation of the Qur'ān, when rendering the word *rabb*, one should not include the meaning of *the rule of God* on Earth, in the Universe and elsewhere. In other words, what should be emphasized is God's *mercy, care, compassion, love*. Perhaps Filip Ćorlukić's most daring move in his translation is, for the sake of the comprehensibility, his opting for biblical names in the translation of Islamic names contained in the Qur'ān. This, in Ćorlukić's translation *Hārūn* is *Aaron*, *Mūsā* is *Moses*, *Yūsuf* is *Joseph*, *Ibrāhīm* is *Abraham*, *Ishāq* is *Isaac*, *Ya'qūb* is *Jacob*, *Yūnus* is *Jonah*, *Nūḥ* is *Noah*, *Maryam* is *Mary*, *Zakariyyā* is *Zachariah*, *Īsā* is *Jesus*, etc. Through these decisions, Ćorlukić aimed to ensure the readability of his work for a readership that is culturally Christian (or more specifically Catholic) and accustomed to biblical names, nomenclature, and terminology. It should also be noted that Ćorlukić translated the Qur'anic term *al-kitāb* ("the Book") as *Bible* whenever the context made clear that the Qur'ān was referring to *al-kitāb* in the sense of the Bible, whether the Old or the New Testament. Translating proper names from the Arabic original of the Qur'ān is always accompanied by certain dilemmas, and it is ultimately up to the translator to decide whether or not to employ biblical equivalents. The editors of *The Study Quran*,<sup>65</sup> published in the United States and produced entirely by traditional Muslims and Muslim converts, chose to use biblical names throughout the text whenever it was clear from the Qur'ān that the figures or terms in question had direct counterparts in the Bible. One effect of such translation strategies is the emergence of a kind of "congenial" and mutually intelligible reading of the Bible and the Qur'ān. We are fully convinced that this was precisely the intention Filip Ćorlukić had in mind.

## The Theology of Ćorlukić's Translation of the Qur'ān

Although it can be established that the translator Filip Ćorlukić was drawn to the study of the Qur'ān by what he perceived as the "non-theological" character of Islam's foundational sacred text, no translation of

the Qurʾān can entirely avoid a certain degree of “theologizing” the text. For this reason, the theological particularities of Ćorlukić’s *Kuran* will be addressed here in a preliminary manner. Anyone who has engaged seriously with the Qurʾān soon discovers that its language, discourse, and narratives readily lend themselves to various forms of “theological navigation,” as well as to translational shifts that may move away from the text’s initial or original intention. To illustrate, albeit only briefly, the kind of hermeneutical challenges involved, let us cite a single example from the Qurʾān. Surah *Yāsīn* (36:35), in Arabic reads:

*Li-ya’kulū min thamarihī wa-mā ‘amilathu aydihim.*

This Arabic original can be translated in two basic ways:

“Neka ljudi jedu od plodova koje dariva Bog, i od onoga što sami svojim rukama priprave!”<sup>66</sup> [Literally: Let people eat from the fruits that God gives, and from what they have prepared with their own hands!]

“Neka ljudi jedu od plodova koje dariva Bog, a te plodove ljudi nisu svojim rukama pripravili!” [Literally: Let people eat from the fruits that God gives, but these fruits were not prepared by people with their own hands!]

The Arabic particle *wa* in the original text, and in this particular Qurʾanic passage, may be translated either as a coordinating conjunction (“and”) or as a disjunctive or adversative conjunction (“but”). As is evident, reading version A affirms human diligence, activity, and creativity: in the production and cultivation of fruit, human beings cooperate with God by irrigating gardens, orchards, and fields. Reading version B, by contrast, offers an interpretation that firmly asserts that everything lies in God’s hands and that human beings play no role in the fruits God provides other than to consume them. There are thousands of such passages in the Qurʾān in which the original text allows for a wide range of translational solutions and interpretive possibilities. A specific hermeneutical discipline, known as *qirāʾāt al-Qurʾān* (the readings of the Qurʾān), or variant readings of the Qurʾanic text, is devoted precisely to this multivalence. It is therefore the responsibility of Qurʾān

translators to preserve the integrity of the text, that is, to avoid distorting it theologically, philologically, or exegetically. It is worth recalling, in this context, that the first Catholic translation of the Qurʾān into Latin (1143), produced by Robert of Ketton (*Robertus Ketenensis*), is marked by deliberate distortions of the Qurʾānic original. A recent study by Óscar de la Cruz Palma, entitled “*Robert de Ketton, traditore...*” (“Robert of Ketton, Traitor...”),<sup>67</sup> revisits this translation by playing on the well-known Latin adage *traduttore, traditore* (“translator, traitor”).<sup>68</sup>

Naturally, once this point is made, the most important question immediately arises: who determines what the “original intentions of the Text” actually are? There are many possible answers, yet within Islamic hermeneutics and Qurʾānic exegesis it is generally maintained that these original or initial intentions are determined by the Islamic tradition itself: understood broadly as a pious, religious, ritual, philological, theological, theosophical, and mystical tradition.

In *Kamo ideš čovječe*, as well as in the extensive essay “Islam kao religija, kultura i civilizacija” (“*Islam as a Religion, Culture, and Civilization*”)<sup>69</sup> and in his other writings on Islam and the Qurʾān, Ćorlukić presents himself as an author who approaches the foundational text of Islam with boldness and seriousness, writing in an engaging style and with evident knowledge grounded in scientific inquiry. In short, he demonstrates that he is a figure worthy of presenting himself as a translator of the Qurʾān into the Croatian language. As has already been noted, Ćorlukić approaches the Bible and the Qurʾān as a unified work of what he calls a “Semitic religious genius.” In his view, the Qurʾān does not reject the profound teachings and testimonies of the Bible; rather, it confirms and transmits them. Moreover, the Qurʾān appears as a text that safeguards what is understood to be a divinely revealed heritage prior to the seventh century, from the time of ʿĪsā al-Masiḥ (Jesus Christ). Ćorlukić is fully convinced that the biblical legacy of the Ten Commandments is equally a Qurʾānic legacy, that the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible blossom anew in the Qurʾān. Consequently, in Ćorlukić’s formulation, the Qurʾān emerges as both the primary inheritor and interpreter of the Bible, as well as of the monotheistic Divine Tradition which, renewed and strengthened, continues to convey to humanity knowledge of God, the

Universe, and Existence. This, in essence, constitutes the theology from which Ćorlukić proceeds in his translation of the Qur'ān. Everything else that appears in the *Kuran* (that is, in his Croatian translation) presents the realization or implementation of this theology. The following translations of two Qur'anic passages illustrate the translator's careful effort to render the monotheism of Islam faithfully:

Bog je jednoća, osim Njega nema Boga. Vječni je i Živi! Ne obuzima ga ni drijemež ni san. Njegovo je ono što je na Nebesima i ono što je na Zemlji. Tko je taj koji bi se mogao kod Njega zauzimati, osim s Njegovom dozvolom?<sup>70</sup>

[Literally: God is oneness, there is no God except Him. He is Eternal and Living! Neither drowsiness nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who could possibly intercede with Him without His permission?]

Bog je svjetlo nebesa i Zemlje. Primjer Njegova svjetla je kao udubina u zidu u kojoj je svjetiljka; svjetiljka je u staklu, a staklo se pričinja kao blistava zvijezda, koja se pali iz blagoslovljenog maslinova stabla – ni istočnog, ni zapadnog – čije ulje skoro da svijetli i ako ga vatra nije dohvatila. Svjetlo nad svjetlom! Bog vodi Svojoj svjetlosti onoga koga odluči, i Bog navodi ljudima primjere. Bog znade svaku stvar.<sup>71</sup>

[God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from (the oil of) a blessed olive tree, (located) neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! God guides whoever He wills to His light. And God sets forth parables for humanity. For God has (perfect) knowledge of all things.]

Indubitably, Ćorlukić's translation is both clear and inspired. By introducing the word "jednoća" [oneness], i.e., that God is - *jednoća* [oneness],

Ćorlukić relies on his knowledge of physics, those disciplines of physics that state that all Existence, that entirety of Being, is at the same time united in one continuous tonality of existence. Essentially, *Božanska jednoća* [God's oneness] - to use Filip Ćorlukić's terminology - permeates all Being, all Existence. In Islamic philosophy this is called *tawhīd* (*jednoća, jedinstvo Božija*; in English *the Oneness*, in German *die Einheit*, etc.). The long-ago discovery of the Sufis of Islam about the relationship between God and the Multiverse was mentioned above; namely, the Sufis claim that light permeates the colorless jar, just as God exists Always and Everywhere in the world. Practically, in every pore of a colorless jar, light is present as oneness (wholeness!) that unites the jar. But, a jar remains a jar, and light remains light!

Moreover, as Islamic mystics have observed, divine light permeates even a colored jar, transforming pure, colorless light into colored light. This image suggests that between God's oneness (or God as wholeness) and Existence (or Being, or the Worlds) there unfolds an astonishingly rich and multifaceted cooperation! God is not separated from the world, yet He never becomes the world; He does not become what He creates! Indeed, Filip Ćorlukić should be congratulated and recognized for respectably conveying the mysticism of the Qur'anic text. This is also evident in his insistence to translate the Arabic and ancient Semitic word *Allāh* with the Croatian (and Serbian, Bosnian, Montenegrin...) word *Bog* [God]. Undeniably, Ćorlukić thus ensures for the Croatian readership of his *Kuran* an accessible comprehension and intimacy in their reading experience. Ćorlukić said:

We [Croats], like any other people, have our own word and term: *Bog* [God]. Why should we then write and say the Arabic word *Allah*, when the meaning is exactly the same, and the Qur'ān specifically says that it is the same God. In this way, by claiming that "Allah is the Muslim God," we are in danger of accepting this to be two different gods! Besides, in the Bible in Arabic, the word *God* is written in Arabic, i.e.,: *Allah*. The same goes for numerous names that are mentioned in the Bible and in the Qur'ān. These biblical names were accepted in a certain form in the entire

culture of the West, so it is logical that we also adopted these names which were adapted to the Croatian language - *Mojsije*, *Isus* and others. If these names were adopted into our language in this form, then writing the same names [in the translation of the Qurʾān into Croatian] in the Arabic variant not only goes against the rules of language, but it also seems confusing.<sup>72</sup>

This passage confirms Ćorlukić's wish, as a translator of the Qurʾān into Croatian, to prioritize accessibility in understanding this holy book. Ćorlukić did not specifically discuss the Arabic language of the Qurʾān as the holy language of Islam and Muslims in the texts that he provided in his translation as a commentary. This topic was generally left aside. Although the nomenclature, terms and names in Ćorlukić's translation of the Qurʾān remain affected by the long-term cultural influence of the Bible in the Croatian language, Ćorlukić's translation of the Qurʾān is readable in an "Islamic way," and a Muslim reader would not perceive *Kuran* by the translator Ćorlukić as a type of "Christianization of Islam and the Qurʾān."

Finally, in his translation choices, Ćorlukić opted for mild rationalizations of Qurʾānic discourse. There are several instances of this approach. For example, when translating the ninety-sixth surah of the Qurʾān, *ʿAlaq*, Ćorlukić (like other translators) sought the most appropriate way to render the meaning of the word *ʿalaq*. Qurʾānic commentaries emphasize that *ʿalaq* conveys the sense of "clinging" or "germination," such as a seed taking root and sprouting in fertile soil. For this reason, some interpreters suggest that the opening lines of this surah *iqraʾ bi-smi rabbika lladhī khalaq—khalaqa l-insāna min ʿalaq* mean: "Read, (O Prophet), in the Name of your Lord Who created—created humans from a clinging clot..." Ćorlukić's translation of these lines (96:1-2) reads: "Objavljuj, u ime tvoga Svedržitelja koji stvara, stvara čovjeka od embrija!"<sup>73</sup> Literally: "Proclaim, in the name of your Almighty who creates, creates man from the embryo!"

As a man who was familiar with the basic principles of embryology, Ćorlukić believed that the Arabic-Semitic word *ʿalaq* should be translated as embryo. Of course, Ćorlukić is right. But other translation

solutions for this term (and for many others) are also valid, such as *zametak* [germ], *ugrušak* [clot], etc. Indeed, when it is said in the Qurʾān that God creates people from something that is *ʿalaq*, i.e., from something that is germinating in something, attached to something, then this means that the person itself is that *ʿalaq*. That is, a human being in its mother’s womb is attached to its mother by the umbilical cord, then, after birth, it is dependent on air with its lungs, then it is dependent on food, water, etc. At times, Ćorlukić also appears as a translator who is influenced by particular philosophical conceptual frameworks. Thus, he translates the word *al-šamad* from surah 112, which refers to God’s absolute independence, thus: “On je Vječni, Neprouzročeni Uzrok” [He is the Eternal, Uncaused Cause]. Here, it is worth recalling that neither patristic theology, nor the extensive debates of Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*), have never solved all the problems of defining the notion of an “Uncaused Cause.”

One distinctive innovation that Filip Ćorlukić introduced into the tradition of Qurʾān translation in the Western Balkans consists of brief signals or instructions placed in the margins of his translation—a kind of synopsis indicating the central point of the text on each page. Thus, the marginal note “Kažnjavanje vojske sa slonovima” (“Punishing an army with elephants”)<sup>74</sup> invites readers to reflect on how the small “flying creatures, Abābil,” dispersed the infantry that marched with elephants. “Kada dođe pobjeda” (“When victory comes”)<sup>75</sup> alludes to the continuing spread of Islam, or, more broadly, to the spread of devotion to the One and Only God. “Kada se sunce smota” (“When the Sun folds up”)<sup>76</sup> signals the Qurʾānic imagery of the end of the world, when the Sun will be rolled up, darkened, and extinguished. Other marginal cues serve similar interpretive functions. “Svakom prema njegovu ponašanju” (“To each according to his behavior”)<sup>77</sup> points to passages emphasizing that human actions on Earth are not in vain and that individuals are morally responsible beings. “Abraham razbija idolske kipove” (“Abraham breaks the idols”)<sup>78</sup> refers to the episode in which the monotheist Abraham confronts his oppressive polytheistic community, exposing their inability to recognize that the One and Only God is the Creator of all beings, and that respect for creation flows from this fundamental truth. The marginal question “Je li teže stvoriti vas [ljude, čovječanstvo] ili nebo?” (“Is it

harder to create you [humanity] or the sky?")<sup>79</sup> highlights the Qur'anic assertion that the creation of the Universe is a far greater act than the creation of human beings. There are several hundred such marginal notes in Ćorlukić's translation. Together, they serve as a practical and effective guide, helping readers grasp the messages of the Qur'ān as clearly and directly as possible.

## Concluding Remarks

Filip Ćorlukić's Croatian translation of the Qur'ān (*Kuran*) demonstrates that the universality of the Qur'ān is accessible even to intellectuals who do not possess a strictly defined vocation as Arabists, Orientalists, or Islamologists. Over several decades, Ćorlukić studied religions and religious phenomena, devoting particular attention to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These scholarly interests led him, through sustained and focused engagement, to examine Islam and the Qur'ān in depth. In 2001, his translation of the Qur'ān (*Kuran*) was published. It is, without doubt, written in beautiful Croatian: clear in idiom, accessible in expression, and marked by receptiveness and inspiration. Concerning his use of Croatian, Ćorlukić himself remarked:

Regarding the translation into Croatian I tried to consistently follow the logical Qur'anic approach: "To the Arabs in Arabic," and accordingly: "To us in our language." In addition to the strict "proofreading" of Čaušević's<sup>80</sup> and Korkut's<sup>81</sup> translations, I also strove to make understandable those parts of the text that were incomprehensible due to the linguistic clumsiness of the translator. In those cases where the meaning of a text by these two translators was different, I used the much better English translation by Muhammad Asad, and I chose the meaning given by two out of these three. If, perhaps, all three of them translated the same text differently, I then turned to mufti Ševko Omerbašić,<sup>82</sup> who knows the Arabic language well.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, Filip Ćorlukić's translation of the Qur'ān is accompanied by numerous supplementary notes, footnotes, and interpretive signals

placed in the margins across nearly four hundred pages. These translational cues function much like intertitles, enlivening the reading experience, lending coherence to the translated text, and highlighting the internal structure and interconnectedness of the Qurʾān. The decision to publish the translation according to a probable chronological order of the sūrahs further enhances its accessibility and significantly contributes to the book's readability. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Ćorlukić's translation underscores the idea that sacred texts are precious repositories of human identity and cherished values. Through his Croatian translation of the Qurʾān (*Kuran*), Filip Ćorlukić demonstrates that dialogue, including interreligious and interfaith dialogue, can be deeply fruitful, especially when one seeks to understand what coexistence with God looks like for others. We believe that Ćorlukić's translation will yet have its moment of renewed recognition, a second appearance in the public eye. It is with these hopes that I conclude this text, written in days that are bringing Muslims ever closer to the month of Ramadan.<sup>84</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 This essay originated as a talk delivered in Bosnian at the International Scientific and Professional Symposium “Filozofija islama,” held on November 10 and 11, 2023, at the Islamic Cultural Center in Zagreb. The event was organized by the Majlis of the Islamic Community in Croatia, the Scientific Research Institute “Ibn Sina” in Sarajevo, and the Bosniak National Community for the City of Zagreb and Zagreb County. The essay was written and finalized between late 2023 and early 2024. During its composition, the author assumed that Mr. Filip Čorlukić was still alive, having heard years earlier from the retired mufti of Zagreb, Mr. Ševko Omerbašić, that Čorlukić had reached an advanced age and resided in a retirement home in Pula. It was only recently that the author learned of Čorlukić’s passing on December 18, 2022, in Pula, at nearly 95 years old.
- 2 Usp. Max Scheler, *Položaj čovjeka u kozmosu* [The Human Place in the Cosmos], preveli Vladimir Filipović and Sulejman Bosto, published by Logos, Veselin Masleša, Sarajevo, 1987.
- 3 Posveta, *Kuran s vremensko-tematski raspoređenim poglavljima*, priredio i komentirao Filip Čorlukić, izd. Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, Zagreb, 2001., 5. This book will hereafter be referred to as: *Kuran* (in italics).
- 4 *Kuran*, 424.
- 5 This information is based on what is written on the back cover of Čorlukić’s book *Kamo ideš čovječe*, Prosvjeta, Zagreb, 1983.
- 6 Cf. [https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filip\\_Čorlukić](https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filip_Čorlukić), Accessed on 21 January 2024.
- 7 The foreword for the 1983 edition was written by Dušan Čalić.
- 8 The preface (prologue) for this work was written by Asaf Duraković.
- 9 Cf. Tamara Borić, *Interview: Filip Čorlukić – O crkvi, religiji, državi, genetici, ratovima*, published in Nacional, 19 June 2016.
- 10 See Filip Čorlukić’s interview with *Nacional* (June 19, 2016).
- 11 Published by Prosvjeta, Zagreb, 1983.
- 12 Filip Čorlukić, *Quo Vadis Homo: Katastrofa ili savršenstvo?*, izd. Fokus komunikacije d. o. o., Zagreb, 2016.
- 13 *Kuran: s vremensko-tematski raspoređenim poglavljima*, 2001, priredio i komentirao (edited and commentary by) Filip Čorlukić.
- 14 In an interview for *Nacional* (June 19, 2016), Filip Čorlukić mentions that *Glas Koncila* criticized him because he had his own views on the “unified Gospel.” *Glas Koncila* (“*The Voice of the Council*”) is a Catholic weekly newspaper published in Croatia, closely associated with the Roman Catholic Church.
- 15 Dušan Čalić, *Predgovor, Kamo ideš čovječe*, 7.

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- 16 Regarding Čorlukić's interpretations of the Qur'an, it is useful to remember Maurice Bucaille and his book *Biblija, Kur'an i nauka* [The Bible, the Qur'an & Science] (*La Bible, le Coran et la Science*), cf. edition in Bosnian, Sarajevo, 2001.
- 17 Cf. Filip Čorlukić, *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 5.
- 18 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 50.
- 19 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 70-71.
- 20 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 28.
- 21 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 30.
- 22 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 31.
- 23 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 31.
- 24 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 32.
- 25 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 33.
- 26 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 50.
- 27 *Kuran*, 414.
- 28 *Kuran*, 414.
- 29 Many works have been written about this, cf. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Bibliotheca Islamica, Minneapolis, 1994.
- 30 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 35.
- 31 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 35.
- 32 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 43.
- 33 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 44-50.
- 34 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 51-63.
- 35 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 67-71.
- 36 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 70.
- 37 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 19.
- 38 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 53.
- 39 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 53.
- 40 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 53.
- 41 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 54.
- 42 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 54.
- 43 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 54.
- 44 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 54.
- 45 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 54.
- 46 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 306.

- 47 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 306.
- 48 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 307.
- 49 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 309.
- 50 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 312.
- 51 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 314.
- 52 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 315.
- 53 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 317.
- 54 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 323.
- 55 *Kamo ideš čovječe*, 323.
- 56 That is *Kuran*: s vremensko-tematski raspoređenim poglavljima, priredio i komentirao Filip Ćorlukić, published by Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, Zagreb, 2001.
- 57 The Koran, translated by John Medows Rodwell, published by Bantam Classic, New York, 2004.
- 58 *Kuran*, 273.
- 59 *Kuran*, 304.
- 60 *Kuran*, 276.
- 61 *Kuran*, 278.
- 62 Cf. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, published by The Muslim World League, Geneva, 1964.
- 63 *Kuran*, 164.
- 64 *Kuran*, 26.
- 65 Cf. *The Study Quran*, translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (editor-in-chief), Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard i Muhammed Rustom, izd. HarperOne, New York, 2015.
- 66 In his translation of *Kuran*, Ćorlukić opts for this reading, and his translation reads: "...da bi oni jeli njihove plodove, i od onoga što su proizvele njihove ruke..." (*Kuran*, 94) [Literally: that they may eat their fruits, and of what their hands have produced].
- 67 Cf. Óscar de la Cruz Palma, *Robert de Ketton, traditore: Manifestations of anti-Islamic Radicalism in the First Latin Translation of the Qur'ān*, published in: *The Latin Qur'ān, 1143-1500., translation, transition, interpretation*, edited by Cándida Ferrero Hernández and John Tolan, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2021, pp. 111-121.
- 68 Let us also briefly mention that the saying in French "belle infidèle" (*beautiful unfaithful!*) refers to translation. Namely, if the translation is beautiful, it is not faithful to the original, and if it is not beautiful, then it is faithful to the original.
- 69 Cf. Filip Ćorlukić, *Islam kao religija, kultura i civilizacija*, pogovor *Kuranu*, izd. Nakladni Zavod Matice Hrvatske, Zagreb, 2001., str. 391-432.

- 70 *Kuran*, 294.
- 71 *Kuran*, 359.
- 72 *Kuran*, 430.
- 73 *Kuran*, 20.
- 74 *Kuran*, 31.
- 75 *Kuran*, 32.
- 76 *Kuran*, 34.
- 77 *Kuran*, 37.
- 78 *Kuran*, 55.
- 79 *Kuran*, 69.
- 80 Mehmed Džemaludin Čaušević (1870-1938), a Bosnian translator of the Qur'ān.
- 81 Besim Korkut (1904-1975), a Bosnian translator of the Qur'ān.
- 82 Ševko effendi Omerbašić (born in 1945) was a mufti in Zagreb (Republic of Croatia) in the period 1990 – 2012.
- 83 *Kuran*, 430.
- 84 This essay was written between December 2023 and January 2024.



# OBITUARY

# Obituary for M. Yaqub Mirza (1946-2025)

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YOUNUS Y. MIRZA

It is with deep sadness that I write about the passing of Dr. M. Yaqub Mirza, who was also my father. Dr. Mirza was so many things such as a businessman, philanthropist, institutionalist, mentor, educator, intellectual and sage. He contributed to various sectors from business to finance to non-profits. Nonetheless, this obituary will focus on his contributions to education, institutional development and Islamic studies.

Dr. Mirza was born in the small town of Chak Jhumra in Panjab, Pakistan and graduated from the University of Karachi with a master's degree in physics (1969). His studies took him to the United States and the University of Texas Dallas, where he earned a Ph.D. in Physics (1974). However, as a graduate student, he was drawn to the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and to the question of how to live out and articulate Islam in the modern world. His interests eventually led him to leave his academic career and focus on business and institutional development. He became involved with organizations such as the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and

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the International Institute for Islamic Thought (IIIT). While participating in national and global organizations, he always kept an interest in the local and was an important contributor to the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) in Northern Virginia, helping with its governance and construction. He further supported FAITH Social Services and established an endowment for their staff and facilities. Moreover, it was in this period that he founded Amana Mutual Funds with his good friend Nicholas Kaiser (d. 2025) and eventually became Chairman of the Board managing approximately \$8 billion in assets. The fund works to provide long-term growth and income by investing according to Islamic (Shariah) principles, focusing on financially strong companies with low debt, ethical practices, and sustainable operations and has demonstrated that values-driven investing (ESG) can achieve a strong financial performance while benefiting wider society.

After 9/11, he became increasingly interested in connecting with the greater American society and educating the public at large about Islam and Muslims. Through his work at IIIT and with his close friend Dr. Jamal Barzinji (d. 2015), he helped endow chairs in Islamic studies at George Mason University, Nazareth College and Huron University and supported Islamic and Interreligious Studies programs at Hartford Seminary. He later facilitated a gift to the Global Islamic Studies Center at George Mason, which was later renamed the AbuSulayman Center after the late Abdul Hamid AbuSulayman (d. 2021), one of IIIT's founders and a trusted friend. He eventually became a board member at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia. At Shenandoah, he was a member of the Finance Committee, Chairman of the Investment and Endowment Committee, and Chairman of the Academic Affairs Committee. Under his committee leadership, Shenandoah launched a myriad of new initiatives and programs, including undergraduate degrees in engineering, and animal health & science; master's degrees in mental health counseling, speech-language pathology, and nutrition & dietetics; and online program offerings.

Among his major contributions to Shenandoah was establishing the Mirza-Barzinji Fund for Global Virtual Learning, to support the ongoing work of the Barzinji Institute for Global Virtual Learning, named

after Jamal Barzinji. The fund ensures that the Barzinji Institute's mission — bringing together institutions from around the world (especially from Muslim-majority countries) for cross-cultural dialogue and service projects — will continue in perpetuity. Through the Barzinji Institute, he became a member of the International Advisory Council of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). He also helped award an honorary doctoral degree with his close colleague, Shenandoah President Tracy Fitzsimmons, to his good friend, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Together with his family, he also funded the Mirza Family Endowed Chair in Global Learning, which functions as an annually rotating chair supporting global outreach and research at Shenandoah.

While he was active in finance and management, he was an educator, as evidenced by his various writings and books, such as *Five Pillars for Prosperity*<sup>1</sup> and *Heavenly Returns: What the Abrahamic Faiths Teach us about Financial and Spiritual Well-Being*.<sup>2</sup> The books represent his practical approach, where he sought to make complex ideas accessible to the general public, and his commitment to Islamic and religious principles for wealth building and giving. In his *Five Pillars of Prosperity*, he discusses five elements to wealth: earning, saving, investing, spending, and giving. Themes that run through the book include education, charity, and long-term planning. For instance, he discusses how Zakat (alms) can help financially struggling students with their educational expenses and how Muslim communities could develop a new tradition of starting educational savings accounts (ESA) on the ceremony of their child's birth (*aqiqah*). He spends the most time on the final chapter of giving and emphasizes "giving while living," not hoarding wealth until someone dies: "Because giving while living provides you with an opportunity to see the effects of your gift. You can redirect if a project fails. You can choose purpose over pure distribution through estates. Imagine if everyone only gave through their wills. Recipients would be praying for donors to die just to receive the charity to fulfill their needs."<sup>3</sup> He frequently cited the prophetic report (hadith) that "It is better for a man to give a dirham as *sadaqah* (charity) during his lifetime, than to give

a hundred at the time of his death.”<sup>4</sup> A significant argument he makes in the book is that Zakat from active investments and those that do not require labor should be 10 percent of the profit (or 10.3 percent per solar year) rather than the standard 2.5 percent (or 2.58 percent per solar year) applied on uninvested capital, annual income and passive investments.<sup>5</sup>

In one of his last writings “On Halal Investing,” he emphasized combining the spiritual and material worlds and living a financially ethical life: “When we align our financial choices with our spiritual values, something remarkable happens – our investing becomes an act of worship, our wealth becomes a vehicle for good, and the artificial boundary between ‘world’ and ‘spiritual’ concerns begins to dissolve.”<sup>6</sup> He would continue to state that “Rather than seeing Islamic financial guidelines as restrictions, I’ve come to view them as a compass – pointing us toward investments that are not only permissible but beneficial, not just for ourselves but for society as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> He did not see Islamic guidelines as a “limitation” but providing a structure and moral compass to act ethically in the world.

Another key aspect of his thinking was long-term and strategic thinking, such as perpetual charity (*sadaqa jariyya*) and planning for the future, even for one’s death.<sup>8</sup> He encouraged community members to create wills so that family members would not dispute the inheritance or have the courts distribute the wealth. One of his last public lectures was on endowments (*waqf*) where he introduced the concept, explained how endowment assets are invested, and showed how effective stewardship can generate long-term social and economic benefits. He helped create various endowments for the organizations he belonged to, believing that institutions should live beyond the lifetime of their founders and any single individual. He also emphasized that there is “no success without a successor” and that organizations need to plan for succession and cultivate a new generation of talent committed to the institution’s mission and vision. He was critical of boards that held onto power, believing they would live forever, and failed to incorporate new ideas, personalities, and programs.

His educational interests led him to found and then become President of the Center for Islam in the Contemporary World (CICW), which “is an

academic center engaged in research, teaching, training, and outreach on issues related to Islam and Muslims in contemporary contexts.” It works to be “a model academic center that advances contemporary scholarship of Islam for community development.” Similar to his writings, the Center attempts to translate academic and research into community institutions and development. The Center organizes various programs related to research, teacher training and scholarships. The Center distributed his various writings and lectures and published a revised version of his book, *Five Pillars of Prosperity*, in the last several months of his life.

Through the Center and towards the end of his life, he was drawn to researching Zakat, how it was calculated, and how the Qur’anic categories (9:60) could be applied in the contemporary world, specifically in North America. He sponsored and participated in the “Zakat: Implementation & Impact in a Contemporary World, An International Conference” at Huron University in London, Ontario and then created a research fellowship in the same subject later that year. He believed that while many Muslims heard about Zakat, they often neglected to practice it and were unsure of how to implement it. He sought to provide more education about Zakat to make the process of giving easier and understandable.

Those who knew him are aware of his kind, humble spirit and his jovial, joking nature. In various speeches, he would share lessons from his life, wisdom from various traditions, rhyming pithy statements and jokes to amuse and entertain the audience. For instance, when somebody gave him a generous introduction, he would share a joke about three parrots. A man went to buy a parrot and went to a shop and asked, “How much is this parrot?” The shop owner said that it was 50 dollars. The man then asked, “Why?” The shop owner said, “Because it knows keyboarding.” The man then inquired about a second parrot and asked, “How much is this parrot?” The shop owner said it was 200 dollars. The man asked, “Why?” The shop owner said, “Because it knows programming.” The man then inquired about a third parrot and asked, “How much is this parrot?” The shop owner said it was 1000 dollars. The man asked, “Why?” The shop owner said, “This parrot doesn’t do anything, but the other two call him boss.” The joke spoke to his humility in seeing himself as the third

parrot, but also to the idea of surrounding himself with talented, competent people and a larger team. Another joke he would frequently share is that somebody made it to heaven and he met an angel there. The angel then said, "Let me show you your place." So, they began walking down a road and saw beautiful homes and large houses. Then at the end of the road, they came to a hut, and the angel said, "This is your place." The man then said, "Why can't I have these beautiful houses? Why this hut?" The angel then looked at him and said, "Well, with the money you sent us, this is the best we can do." The joke's lesson was to be conscious of God, invest in the hereafter, and to be generous in one's lifetime. Moreover, he would frequently joke that his first career was being a physicist, his second was a businessman, and now he was aspiring to be a comedian. The joke alluded to his ability to adapt throughout his career and bring joy to those around him.

I end this obituary as he ended his book *Five Pillars of Prosperity*: "If you have found [my work] useful, please pray for me and, just like me, make a donation to your favorite charity. I'd like to end the book with the following hadith and a verse:

The Prophet (pbuh) said: 'O Allah! I seek refuge with You from worry and grief, I seek refuge with You from weakness and laziness, I seek refuge with You from cowardice and miserliness, and I seek refuge with You from being heavily in debt and from being overpowered by [other] men.'

'Our Lord! Accept [this service] from us: for thou are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.' (Q. 2:127)<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Yaqub Mirza is survived by his wife Tanveer Mirza and his children Fatima, Younus, Asma and Sana Mirza. We pray for his peaceful abode and that people live out his legacy by implementing his values and teachings.

## Endnotes

- 1 M. Yaqub Mirza, *Five Pillars of Prosperity: Essentials of Faith-Based Wealth Building, Revised Edition* (Leesburg: Center for Islam in the Contemporary World (CICW), 2025).
- 2 M. Yaqub Mirza and Gary Moore, *Heavenly Returns: What the Abrahamic Faiths Teach us about Financial and Spiritual Well-Being* (Leesburg: Center for Islam in the Contemporary World (CICW), 2023).
- 3 Mirza, *Five Pillars*, 95.
- 4 Mirza, *Five Pillars*, 95.
- 5 Mirza, *Five Pillars*, 89.
- 6 M. Yaqub Mirza, "On Halal Investing," *Critical Muslims* 56, (2025): 229–39.
- 7 Mirza, "On Halal Investing," 230.
- 8 M. Yaqub Mirza, "Legacy Planning in Islam," in *Faithful Giving: The Heart of Planned Gifts*, ed. James W. Murphy (La Vergne: Church Publishing, Inc., 2022), 17–24.
- 9 Mirza, *Five Pillars*, 121.

# **INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT (IIIT)**

IIIT is the premier international organization focusing on providing a platform for the unique perspective of Muslim thinkers, scholars, and practitioners in the humanities and social sciences. For almost 40 years, IIIT has been a voice for moderation, diversity, and modernity in Islamic thought, with an emphasis on concepts such as co-existence and building the capacity of communities to address their common global and local challenges. Today, IIIT is the voice of the Muslim intellectual tradition in the west, and a champion for scholarship, knowledge, and learning in Muslim societies across the world.

IIIT was established in 1981 as a US non-profit 501(c)(3) non-denominational organization. Its headquarters are in Herndon, Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, DC.

## **Vision**

Give individuals in thriving societies the opportunity to pursue and realize their fullest potential through transformative learning, social development, and personal growth.

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To conduct and disseminate educational research to empower Muslim societies with data-driven recommendations for transformative education policy and practice.

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