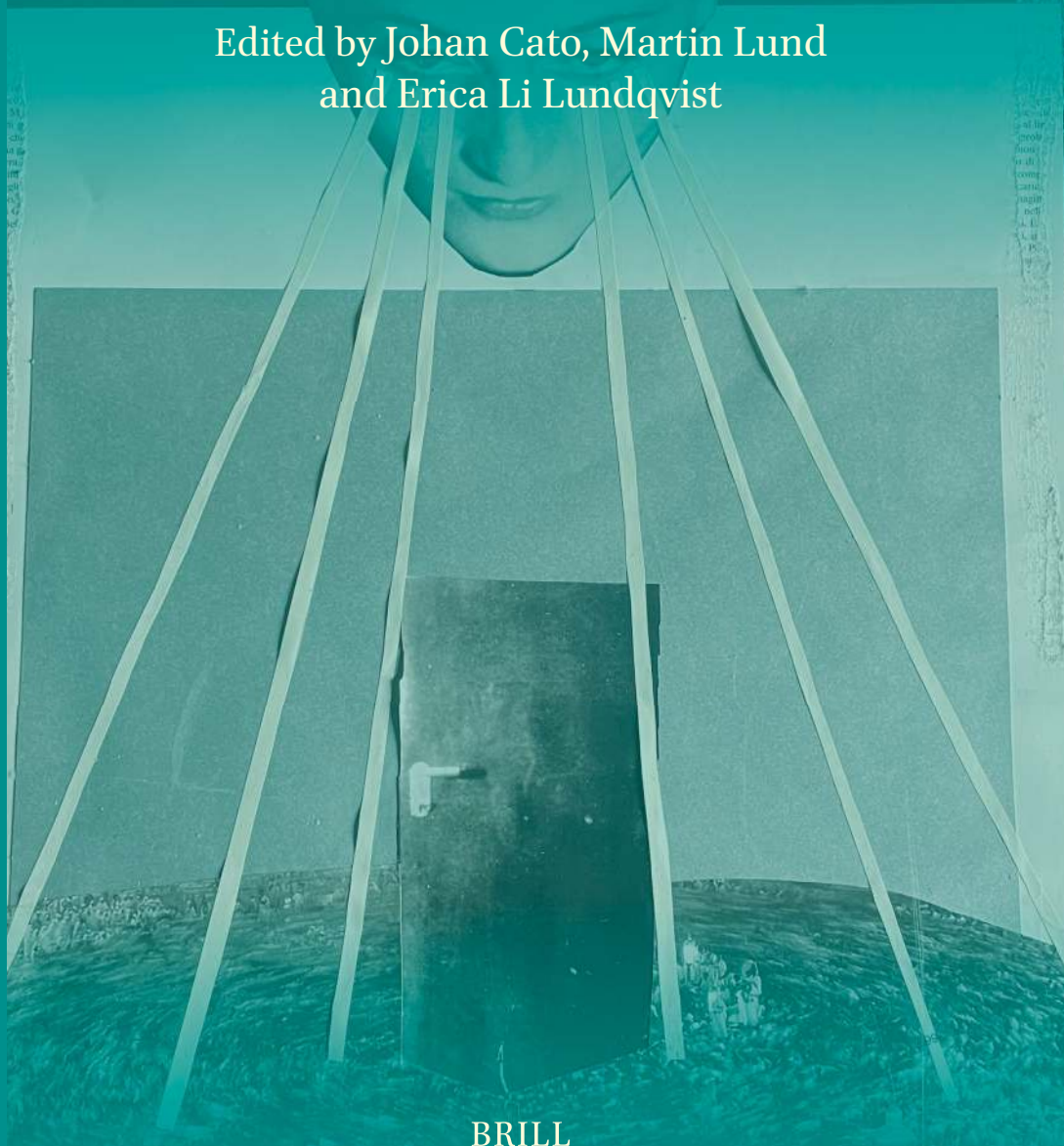


BEYOND ISLAMIC STUDIES

*Interdisciplinary Approaches to Method,
Theory, and Culture*

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF JONAS OTTERBECK

Edited by Johan Cato, Martin Lund
and Erica Li Lundqvist



BRILL

Beyond Islamic Studies

Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion

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Preface

This book was conceived as a *festschrift* for Jonas Otterbeck, professor of Islamic Studies and holder of the Rasul-Walker Chair in Popular Culture in Islam at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Civilizations at Aga Khan University in London. Recognized for his innovative methodological thinking and his emphasis on theoretical rigor, Otterbeck has inspired countless students and researchers throughout his career. As a mentor and as a colleague, he has been instrumental in shaping a generation of scholars who are redefining the understanding of what Islamic studies is and can be. He has also left a deep and abiding imprint on scholarship on material and popular culture, as well as on theoretically grounded scholarship on music and other soundscapes.

Although the book was born as a celebration of a beloved teacher, colleague, and friend, it is not only a celebration of Otterbeck's career and research and a testament to the impact of his scholarship; it brings together an impressive array of scholars from all career stages, from emerging voices to internationally renowned researchers, all of whom have been asked to take Otterbeck's work as a starting point for their contributions, and as such constitutes a theoretically and methodologically generative field guide to interdisciplinary scholarship on Islam, religion and/in culture, and more.

Most contributors have worked, studied, and/or undertaken doctoral studies at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, at Lund University, where Jonas spent a significant part of his career. We approached many more colleagues and friends of Jonas who were unable to contribute, and some who first agreed to commit were sadly unable to do so thanks to the vicissitudes of academia or life in general, both of which sometimes force us to be more realistic about our commitments than we would like to be. The original line-up for this volume consisted of more than thirty names and chapter titles, not counting the many people we approached who responded with enthusiasm but politely declined to participate. We, the editors, all had the pleasure of having Jonas as our supervisor when we worked to get our PhDs. Johan started before Erica and Martin and defended his thesis before them, but our time under Jonas overlapped significantly. We owe much of who we are as scholars today to his patient, generous, open-minded, and enthusiastic supervision. We count ourselves lucky for the time we have spent under his uncommonly attentive and giving guidance.

In Jonas' honor, we did a not insignificant part of our planning and outlining work over craft beers at various venues in Lund and Malmö. Cheers Jonas, we love you!

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Notes on Contributors

Anders Ackfeldt

holds a PhD in the History of Religions with a specialization in Islamic Studies from Lund University. He currently serves as Deputy Director of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul. His recent publications include *Islamic Themes in US Hip-Hop Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025), as well as the edited volume *The Production and Consumption of Non-Muslim Islams* (Edinburgh University Press, 2025), co-edited with Jesper Petersen.

Jenny Berglund

is a professor in Religion Education at Stockholm University. Her research centres on Islamic education in Europe, with a particular focus on Islam in Sweden and how Islam is taught within both Muslim supplementary settings and the public school system. From 2020–2025 she served as General Secretary of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR).

Johan Cato

is a senior lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Sweden. One of his main fields of research is Islam and Muslims in Sweden in contemporary times, with a particular focus on representations of Islam and Muslims in Swedish politics.

Ive Brissman

holds a PhD and is a researcher in the history of religions at Lund University. She works with contemporary religion, ecology, and environmentalism from an eco-critical perspective. Her thesis, “Wild Enchantment in the Anthropocene,” was based on fieldwork conducted in Dartmoor National Park, Devon, UK. She studies folklore, popular culture, and politics, with a particular interest in the English landscape and identities, both historically and in contemporary contexts. She is currently engaged in a research project on cemeteries.

Anthony T. Fiscella

has a PhD (Lund University) in the “history of religion.” His theoretical work has addressed decolonialism, ecologies of violence, and Critical Freedom Theory. He has written peer reviewed articles, chapters, essays, opinion pieces, and dissertation work on Islamic anarchism, Jewish anarchism, Muslim punk, the MOVE Organization, Unitarian Universalists, taqwacore, Black ecology,

degrowth, and the anarcho-primitivist religiosity of Lynyrd Skynyrd. Due to extreme and ongoing assaults on animals and ecosystems upon which we depend, he shifted emphasis from academia to pragmatic degrowth-oriented work and addressing the roles that addiction (especially to profit, consumption, and violence) play in our shared global and national crises.

Olav Hammer

is Professor Emeritus of the study of religion, University of Southern Denmark. He has published extensively on new religious movements, esotericism, and New Age phenomena. His recent publications include *New Religious Movements and Comparative Religion* (co-authored with Karen Swartz-Hammer, 2024).

Anne-Christine Hornborg

is Professor Emerita at History of Religions, Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University. She has carried out field work in Mi'kmaq First Nation, Canada, in Tonga in 1998 and 2001, and in the Peruvian Andes and the Amazon in 2004, which has generated several articles about indigenous cosmologies, animism, the phenomenology of landscape, the anthropologist in the field, as well as ecology and religion. She has also developed the subject Ritual Studies, including ritual practices and new spirituality.

Aaron W. Hughes

is Dean's Professor of the Humanities and the Philip S. Bernstein Professor of Religion at the University of Rochester.

Joel Kuhlin

is Doctor of New Testament Exegesis and currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CTR) at Lund University. He is part of the research project "Scripture and Secularism" and the research program "At the End of the World," both housed at the CTR.

Rickard Lagervall

teaches Islamic studies at Lund University and religious studies at the teacher education program at Jönköping University.

Göran Larsson

is a professor in Religious Studies at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and a guest professor at the Faculty of Police Work at the University of Borås.

One of his main research interests Islam and Muslims in Europe, both historically and in contemporary contexts. His most recent work has focused on the impact of global conflicts on Sweden.

Paul Linjamaa

is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in the History of Religions at Lund University, specializing in ancient Gnosticism and its reception in modernity.

Erica Li Lundqvist

PhD in Islamic Studies from Lund University. She is currently Senior Lecturer in the study of religions and head of subject for the teacher's program in Education and Religion at the Department for Society, Culture and Identity at Malmö University. Recent publications include chapters on heteronormativity in Beirut and queer perspectives on leaving Islam, as well as collaborative work on academic integrity and student agency in higher education.

Martin Lund

is a senior lecturer in religious studies at Malmö University and an associate professor in the history of religions at Lund University. He has published extensively on topics related to the production, circulation, and consumption of comic books in the USA and is co-editor (with Julia Round) of the book series *Encapsulations: Critical Comics Studies*, from the University of Nebraska Press. His most recent work is the upcoming edited collection *Comics is ... Debating the Subject of Comics Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Maria Frederika Malmström

has published on and organized several workshops about affect and the new materialism in Alexandria, New York, Rabat, London, and Lusaka. Her work has explored the affective dimensions of urban experiences under authoritarian rule, where the built environment plays a key role in shaping political and sensory experiences.

Douglas Mattsson

PhD in the Study of Religions from Södertörn University, is currently a senior lecturer at Malmö University. His recent publications include his dissertation, *To Praise Disgrace: Islamic Semiotic Resources in Turkish Black Metal* (Södertörn University, 2025), and "Spreading VX-Gas over Kaaba: Islamic Semiotics in Turkish Black Metal," in the anthology *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

Susanne Olsson

is Professor of History of religions at Stockholm University, Sweden. Her main field of research is Islamic Studies.

Jesper Petersen

PhD in History of Religions with a specialisation in Islamic Studies from Lund University, is Associate Professor at Copenhagen University and Starting Grant research leader on the 'Non-Muslim Islam' project. His latest book, *The Islamic Juridical Vacuum*, was published by Brill in 2025.

Oliver Scharbrodt

is Professor of Islamic Studies at Lund University, Sweden. He has published on the intellectual history of modern Islam, Sufism, Twelver Shiism and Muslim minorities in Europe in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *Die Welt des Islams*, the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *Contemporary Islam* and the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. He is the author of *Islam and the Baha'i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdul-Baha 'Abbas* (London: Routledge, 2008) and co-authored *Muslims in Ireland: Past and Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Together with Yafa Shanneik, he co-edited the volume *Shi'a Minorities in the Contemporary World: Migration, Transnationalism and Multilocality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). His latest book *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity* (London: IB Tauris, 2022) illustrates 'Abduh's complex engagement with Islam's diverse intellectual traditions in his reformist discourse. From 2018 until 2023, he was the principal investigator of the project "Creating an alternative *umma*: clerical authority and religio-political mobilisation in transnational Shii Islam" which was funded by a Consolidator Grant of the European Research Council.

Garbi Schmidt

is a professor of Cultural Encounters at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research focuses on migration and religion, as exemplified by her recent book *Towards a Critique of Methodological Presentism: A Focus on Denmark* (Routledge, 2025).

Simon Sorgenfrei

is a professor of religious studies and the director of the Institute for the Study of Multireligiosity and Secularity (IMS) at Södertörn University in Sweden. His main research areas are religion and migration, Islam and Sufism in the past and present, in the East and West.

Jonas Svensson

is a professor in the Study of Religions at Linnaeus University. His main research interests are contemporary Islam, the cognitive science of religion, and the consequences of generative AI for both humanistic research and society at large.

Andreas Johansson Weber

is a scholar of the history of religions focusing on religion and politics in South Asia and on religion and tattoos. He received his PhD from Lund University in 2016 with a dissertation on the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, examining the use of religious language and symbols in politics. His work includes postdoctoral research with extensive archival studies in the UK and ethnographic fieldwork documented in *Yakuza Tattoo* (2017). He served as Director of SASNET at Lund University (2016–2021), leading multiple research projects and international collaborations, as researcher in history of religion at Lund University.

Introduction – What Lies beyond Islamic Studies? An Invitation to Interdisciplinary Dialogue and Critique

Erica Li Lundqvist, Martin Lund and Johan Cato

“This line terminates here.” These words announce the end of the line for buses and trains in London’s public transportation system. In the hands of a scholar, properly philosophical and playful in equal measure – like Jonas Otterbeck, who was the former doctoral supervisor for all three editors of this book and authors of this introduction – it can also give rise to ontological and epistemological questions. What does it really mean to “terminate here”? It can, for example, be taken as an ontological and utterly destabilizing performative speech-act, imposing on passengers the thought that they cannot be *here* (where they clearly are) but will have to continue their lives *there*, somewhere else (which is also unavoidable). Nevertheless, many people are attached to their *here* even when they’re on the way to some other *there* and, as the Swedish children’s show *Fem myror är fler än fyra elefanter* (*Five Ants are More Than Five Elephants*, 1973–1975, 1977) has taught generations of children:

Där är där man inte är
Här är här där man är
Åh här har man alltid med sig
Här har man alltid med sig

There is there where one is not
Here is here where one is
Oh, one always brings here along
One always brings here along

If “here” is terminated, then – to borrow from Gertrude Stein – there couldn’t possibly be a there *there* – wherever there is – because “there” loses any relative orientation, even as the hereness of here is so strongly emphasized precisely in the announcement of its termination. The announcement, then, can force a reckoning with not only language but, perhaps, with life, the universe, and everything, in those passengers who aren’t inclined to take it for the descriptive and rather banal claim about public transport services that it’s probably intended to be.

It turns out, however, that the termination of “here” is itself coming to an end (Corfield 2024). As of 2024, railway executives in the UK have told staff to avoid “old-fashioned terms” and “strip out confusing wordings.”¹ The phrase under consideration here is listed among the “jargony” and “bureaucratic” language to be taken out of service. Others have reservations about this step because they think that the complexity of the phrasing – and the word “terminate” in particular – encourages people to be more attentive and to listen more carefully. Conversely, one passenger said that they “thought information was produced by railway people for railway people”. Moreover, the process of rolling out new announcements is complicated and is expected to take several years, partly “because those who originally recorded the voiceovers used today have since died, making it harder to insert new words and phrases.”

No doubt at least some readers have already felt a twinge of recognition forming. The phrase “this line terminates here,” the Otterbeckian musings about the announcement, and its current ups and downs offer more than a potentially amusing anecdote; they offer an image of Islamic, religious, and cultural studies in microcosm (and many other fields as well). The railway executives’ position sounds remarkably similar to recurring struggles over “jargon” and overly and unnecessarily complicated terminology in many academic fields (e.g., Hirst 2003; Higgins 2003; Fischer 2010). The counterargument that the language encourages attention is reminiscent of arguments for terminological clarity (e.g., Satlow 2005). The dismissive passenger is a dead ringer for people outside academia who – perhaps rightly? – think that what we do as scholars has little or no relation or relevance to anything remotely “real” or practical (e.g., Fraser 2014; Patton 2019; Pulliam 2020). Moreover, the remark about the death, and consequent and simultaneous absence and manifest presence of the original announcer-enunciators is easy to construe as a reminder of the “enduring presence of our pre-critical past” in religious studies (McCutcheon 2022, 11–60), the still-strong influence of exotifying Orientalists (cf. Said 2003),² and the ongoing influence of anti-intellectual populists or “post-theory” proponents in cultural studies (e.g., Singer 2018, 5–12; Tally 2022).

Furthermore, the phrase is entangled in questions of language use and propriety. As one Reddit-user (or “Redditor”) responded to another, who had asked if the phrase was grammatically accurate: it “is a correct and commonly used phrase in English, especially on public transport announcements. It means that the train will not continue beyond this point and all passengers must disembark” (“Can You Say ‘This Train Terminates Here.’?” 2024). In this comment,

1 All quotes in this paragraph from Corfield 2024.

2 See also the discussions on this topic in Hughes and Scharbrodt’s chapters.

common and correct usage are conflated in a way that might sound familiar to scholars working in fields like Islamic, religious, and cultural studies, a topic we'll return to presently. At the same time, however, which we'll discuss more below, it highlights how ideas about "correct and common" language signify an endpoint, a boundary that's difficult to move beyond. Difficult, but not impossible. The key, we contend, lies in how one approaches language, terminology, and, ultimately, scholarly enunciations and that which they, for different reasons, leave unspoken.

1 Here Is Here Where One Is: Positions and Contestations

This book takes the field or discipline of Islamic studies as its point of departure, but in a way that acknowledges that it is not easy to say precisely what that field or discipline is. Islam, it is common to read, is both – or, perhaps more accurately, can be defined and understood as simultaneously – a religion and a culture (and more), making what is arguably a tenuous distinction between spheres of human action that may not be separate at all. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that, if its object of study is multiply conceived, Islamic studies also cannot be understood as the study of Islam and only Islam, but rather always also as a form of religious *and* cultural studies (and, again, perhaps more).

But it's hard to say what the academic study of Islam, religion, or culture is or should be, because it's far from clear what the words "Islam," "religion," or "culture" "properly" or "correctly" designate. The question ultimately comes down to scholars' second-order position-takings as much as it does to anything inherent in the categories themselves (cf. Bourdieu 2010; 1993, esp. 30, 35, 58–59). Leslie Dorrough Smith's observation about scholars of what some of us call religion is apropos here, that "in the sentence 'What do we study?,' the object 'we' is more important than the subject 'what'" (L.D. Smith 2019, 4). It is no less important to consider *how* we as scholars study whatever our interests latch onto, and to what ends we do so, than what data we work with or what conclusions we reach. It's not an overstatement to say that the former considerations provide the conditions of possibility for the latter.

The histories of academic scholarship on – or starting from – each of these categories bear Smith's contention out, again and again. Scholars' positions are indelibly rooted in our historical and political situatedness. They are always staked in relation to factors that are neither endemic to our scholarship as practice and process nor divorceable from others' positions and position-takings. New positions and position-takings cannot force everyone to "disembark" from earlier ones. For this reason, it's equally important to focus on the gaps that

scholars' choices produce, and the ways that each choice lingers – perhaps sometimes just out of sight but nevertheless looming over us – beyond the enunciation of each challenge to established doxa or introduction of a new imaginary.

Take Islamic studies, for example. At least in the so-called “West,” “Islam” has traditionally been understood as the religion of Muslims, and “Muslims,” in turn, as adherents of the religion Islam (Muslims, conversely, have been further conceived as primarily, or most “authentically,” as Arabs). It is from these premises that “Western” scholarship on Islam and Muslims has historically been conducted. Initially, this scholarship was primarily philological and performed under the purview of Christian theology. It was, in no small part, tied to the colonial projects and aspirations of European “great powers” (with the notable exception of Germany³). By the early nineteenth century, academic societies dedicated to studying Islam and academic positions in the field of Orientalism opened up for more rigorous and (ostensibly) less confessional scholarship.

By the end of that century, as religious studies began to take shape as a separate academic discipline, a semi-autonomous field of Islamic studies started to emerge, albeit one that was primarily devoted to previously established topics and approaches. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, however, as an effect of geopolitical changes, increased international migration, the rise of identity politics, and the spotlight trained on Islam and Muslims after the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, the scope of Islamic studies as an international venture has increased significantly. Few arguments have been as impactful or as highly debated as Edward Said's critique of “Western” representations and perceptions of the “Eastern” world in the book *Orientalism* (1978); almost half a century after its publication, it remains near-impossible to ignore for scholars in the field, as much for its influence as for its discontents. Today, Islamic studies across Europe and the USA covers a wide range of subjects, from traditional topics like philological analysis, historical studies, and studies with a post-colonial approach to scholarship on gender, sexuality, popular culture, and Islamophobia.⁴ The situation today is, as Leif Stenberg and Philip Wood note, diverse:

There is certainly no homogenous approach from ‘the West’ towards the study of Islam and Muslims. Distinct national approaches have evolved in response to the various ways in which Muslims and the ‘Islamic or Muslim world’ have been

³ Cf. Scharbrodt's chapter in this volume.

⁴ For a more detailed account, see Stenberg and Wood 2022.

encountered and imagined, and in response to years of transnational migration. (Stenberg and Wood 2023, 1)

One of those national approaches, particularly pertinent to this volume in light of its contributors and their backgrounds, is the one adopted in Sweden and, arguably, in Scandinavia more broadly. The study of Islam and Muslims in Scandinavia and Sweden initially followed Orientalist research with a strong emphasis on philology and history. It was first institutionally located in history of religions departments, where it was advanced by Nathan Söderblom, a theologian and early proponent of “*religionsvetenskap*” (religious studies or “the science of religion”), historian of religions and Orientalist (as well as clergyman) Tor Andræ, and Geo Widengren. However, the focus shifted in the 1970s due to the Iranian revolution, changes in the Muslim world, labor migration, and the reception of refugees. The increased visibility of Islam and Muslims in Swedish society influenced scholarship, leading to a growing recognition of the heterogeneity of what some of us call Islam and its link to political upheaval. The institutionalization of Muslim organizations in the 1970s led to a greater focus on migration and integration issues. In 1983, Lund University established a professorship in “Islamology,” with Jan Hjärpe as the inaugural holder starting in 1984, focusing on the Islamic world in the past and present (Otterbeck and Stenberg 2012; Larsson, Olsson, and Sorgenfrei 2024, 85–87).

The new “disciplinary ethnonym,” to borrow Bruce Lincoln’s phrase (1996), highlighted not only a measure of Francophilia but also – and more importantly – named a theoretical debt to sociology and anthropology that has shaped the field since (Otterbeck and Stenberg 2012, 7). Since that time, Islamic studies or “Islamology” in Lund and elsewhere in Sweden has developed toward treating Islam as a political, social, and cultural phenomenon, covering historical and philological questions, contemporary and “lived” Islamic social formations, and non-Muslim Islams (Petersen and Ackfeldt 2022; Ackfeldt and Petersen 2025). This approach has come to dominate scholarship on Islam and Muslims (cf. Larsson, Olsson, and Sorgenfrei 2024, 88–89). It has grown into an inter- and multidisciplinary field and has created space for others than CIS-male scholars to pursue their research questions. While it remains largely populated by white-presenting scholars of European descent, it has gradually also expanded to include scholars from non-European and majority-Muslim countries. This “insider” perspective has been both fruitful and contentious for the discipline’s ongoing development.

As such, and through its decisive break with the normative, theological study of religion, Islamology also connected (albeit somewhat peripherally at first) with the then-emerging, critical study of religion, and helped pave the

way for the introduction of this approach in Sweden (cf. Larsson, Olsson, and Sorgenfrei 2024, 86). The academic study of religion also grew out of, and perhaps in opposition to, confessional theology, a normative practice primarily intended to promote and authorize dogma, doxa, and practices for various groups and their adherents, mostly within social formations whose members self-identified in some way as Christians. In Sweden, where university theologians were primarily associated with the state church, a sharp dividing line between theology, which is still primarily associated with Christianity, and “religionsvetenskap”/“religionshistoria” (history of religions), which encompasses most other topics or subjects thought to be associated with religion, remains in place (cf. Bogdan and Larsson 2024).

Since the late 1800s, the non-theological study of religions has branched into a variety of – sometimes mutually exclusive – approaches, schools of thought, and theoretical camps.⁵ A good measure of these differences can be seen in the (perhaps somewhat too simplistic) division between substantive and functional definitions of religion. The former focuses on what religion *is* or *contains*, while the latter focuses on what religion *does* for people, what function it serves. Each approach allows for the construction of different concepts and, by extension, different constitutions of the world being observed and studied. These differences have also led to both dialogue and critique, both internationally and in various local contexts – in Sweden, for example, there have been conflicts, both hot and cold, between scholars of religion at Lund and Uppsala Universities, based in no small measure on methodological and theoretical disagreements.⁶ This is only to be expected, and perhaps to some extent, celebrated: both amicable and tense kinds of intercourse and exchange are both unavoidable and crucial to the development of any field.

Case in point, the above-mentioned critical study of religion, sometimes characterized as a discursive study of religion (cf. Horii 2020; Taira 2022), emerged in part as a reaction to what is sometimes called the phenomenology of religion (or “comparative religion”), and has come to focus as much on the constitution of categories like “religion” and many cognate terms – such as “world religions” – which have been increasingly problematized as modern constructs, created to serve colonial and scholarly ends rather than simply describing a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, as many still

5 For an overview of some of the most influential figures in the formation of religious studies as a discipline, see Pals 2022.

6 For more on the study of religion in Sweden, see Larsson and Bogdan 2024.

understand the concept (e.g., Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2007; Masuzawa 2005; Nongbri 2015).⁷

Perhaps most famously, Jonathan Z. Smith has claimed that,

while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his [sic] imaginative acts of comparison and generalizations. (1982, xi)

“Religion,” Smith adds, “has no independent existence apart from the academy.” This is not the same as rejecting the world as it presents itself to us as scholars in our observations of everyday life: many people self-identify as religious, and talk of religion, religions, and the religious surrounds many of us everywhere we look. Rather, it's a way to put a fine point on the understanding that scholars, who study that world in order to better understand it, cannot use the same language – or use common first-order terms – in the same way it is (or they are) used in the contexts we study if we hope to say something new about it.⁸ And, crucially, it's a way of highlighting that not all people mean the same thing when they speak about what some of us call religion. This type of scholarship has also become increasingly common in Islamology and Islamic studies in Sweden, and can be said have reached its purest distillation (so far) in Otterbeck's argument that,

that which we call Islam is a discourse consisting of a multitude of power practices – enunciations in words, deeds, texts, symbols, even emotions – backing up or challenging what is taken to be Islam. These power practices give rise to multiple interpretations of Islam that can both be studied as overlapping discourses with their own internal logics or as one highly diverse super-discourse [...] containing all interpretations living in compliance, competition or ignorance of each other. Consequently, we need to understand how discourses order enunciations and set up scripts that are difficult to challenge. (2021, 48)

Otterbeck's discursive framing, with its focus on words, deeds, texts, and symbols, brings the third operative term introduced above, “culture,” into the mix.

⁷ This is not to imply that “critical religion” comprises a single, unified field, as discussed in the roundtable discussion published in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* vol. 36 no. 3–4.

⁸ Cf. Bourdieu 1993.

“Culture” is a notoriously slippery term. Raymond Williams famously described it as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language [...] mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought” (1976, 87). Today, the term is often used in at least three different, but somewhat overlapping ways: as an abstract noun ostensibly describing a personal trait based on intellectual and aesthetic development, as part of a hierarchical social status system (a person might be called “cultured” by other “cultured” people if they consume the “right” types of literature, music, etc.); as an independent noun to describe the accumulation of practices, traditions, and other aspects that characterize a given social formation’s “way of life” in a specific period (e.g., “Swedish culture”⁹), or it can be used to name a set of supposedly shared beliefs, values, and norms that influence or constrain the behaviors and practices of group members (e.g., “workplace culture,” “organizational culture”); or as an abstract noun that refers to one or more art forms, or other intellectual or aesthetic achievements, collectively (e.g., “popular culture,” “high culture”) (cf. Hughes and McCutcheon 2022, 60).

Unsurprisingly, the study of “culture” is also slippery, not least because each of these senses is so deeply embroiled with discourses of “value” and “quality,” and because it has, historically, been guided by ideological assumptions in relation to the hierarchies of cultural capital and power practices that shape each domain.¹⁰ Scholarship on “culture” in the first and second sense has largely been conducted under the auspices of sociology, anthropology, and ethnography, as well as in political science focused on nation-states and nationalism. The third sense has been the focus of cultural studies, which arguably names (at least) two different fields with a shared focus but highly different approaches, many of which have worn their politics on their sleeves. For instance, although both were highly critical and often theoretically sophisticated, the work done by most members of the so-called Frankfurt School critiqued mass culture and the culture industry for perpetuating capitalist ideologies,¹¹ while the scholars who comprised the Birmingham School and their heirs often emphasized the

9 In everyday speech, this conception of culture as a “way of life” is often used in an essentialistic way, to designate a supposedly transhistorical essence.

10 Storey 2003, for example, focuses on the discursive and hierarchical power struggles involved in the creation of “popular culture” as a category. Cf. Bourdieu 1993; 2010.

11 The chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in Horkheimer and Adorno Horkheimer 2002 is often considered a paradigmatic example of the Frankfurt School.

role of culture in reflecting and resisting social power dynamics.¹² In response to these more critical approaches, a primarily but not exclusively US-based populist cultural studies has emerged, in which the “discipline’s assumptions have hardened into a mode of cultural populism that celebrates any and all manifestations of popular culture while dismissing their critics as elitist” (Singer 2018, 9).

All of this shows us that there is no “proper” and “correct” way of understanding any of our three operative terms or the forms of scholarship associated with them. There are only contested and contestable positions, which different people find more or less convincing and useful. This raises the question: how should scholars use these concepts? Is there a definitive way to understand and employ them? The answer is likely no, and if there is, it has yet to reveal itself. What some of us call Islam, especially when understood as a discursive category, offers a useful way of illustrating the ongoing and always situated construction of academic objects of study. As noted above, Islam is often described as a religion, a culture, or, often, both. The study of Islam, then, should also be described as a form of religious or cultural studies, or both. The way the field is framed in any given situation influences how any topic can be approached. For instance, if what some of us call Islam is to be considered a culture, in what sense do we use the latter term? Islam has certainly been understood as the “the culture of Muslims” and, in a broader sense, as a variety of “Islamicate” cultures, to borrow an increasingly criticized term coined by Marshall Hodgson to (artificially separate and) describe the cultural and social complex historically associated with Islam, encompassing elements beyond the ostensibly “strictly religious” (Hodgson 1977; cf. Ahmed 2016). But Islamic or “Islamicate” “culture” can also be framed as a trait; after all, just as in any social formation where specific intellectual or aesthetic values are emphasized, and hierarchies take shape in their wake, there have also formed Islamic or “Islamicate” cultural elites – some of which, like imams, mullahs, and ayatollahs, might be categorized by some as religious. Some scholars have focused on what they describe as “Islamicate” beliefs, values, and norms, such as “Islamicate sexualities” (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008) or “Islamicate masculinities” (Najmabadi 2005). And, depending on where the scholarly gaze is trained, everything from textiles (Shirazi 2023) to Awakening Records’ “pop-nasheeds” (Otterbeck 2023) to the Qur’an or Muhammed portraits (e.g., Gruber 2009; Gruber and Shalem 2014) can be framed as Islamic or “Islamicate” cultural products, rather than inherently or necessarily religious ones. The

12 Hebdige 1979 and Hall 1997 are often considered paradigmatic examples of the Birmingham School.

upshot of all this is that, whether one is considering what some scholars construct as data for Islamic cultural and religious studies or the practices of those who view themselves as practicing that scholarly craft, we are always, inevitably and unmistakably, looking at a contentious economy of signification. No single stock in trade is ever the only one on offer.

2 There Is There Where One Is Not: the Beyond

The inscription of rules in a sphere without a beyond [...] is as difficult to understand as the idea of a finite universe. (Baudrillard 1990, 34)

A central concern of critical and discursive approaches to religion is the question of what “counts” as religion and who decides this. While some scholars attempt to circumvent the challenge of defining religion (or of engaging in definition at all¹³) this avoidance still begs the question of how to define religion, since scholars must contend with the “reality” of religious practitioners’ experiences, which sometimes run counter to “mainstream,” common-sense understandings or dominant academic frameworks and labels (McCutcheon 2019), which highlight tensions between scholarly categorizations and religious self-understandings, i.e., the so-called emic/etic divide or “insider/outsider problem” in the study of religion.¹⁴ Rather than viewing so-called religious self-understandings as static declarations of absolute truths, critical and discursive approaches recognize them as dynamic. Thus, “*the discourse on religion*, which signifies more than just words by also including a host of other interconnected judgements, practices, and institutions – *is not passively descriptive but actively constitutive*” (McCutcheon 2019, 108; emphasis in original). In short, what Muslims (and other people who self-define, or are defined by scholars, as “religious”) write, think, or practice cannot be reduced to eternally fixed dogmas or traditions, but must be understood as evolving within particular historical and cultural contexts.

This perspective also aligns with what Titus Hjelm describes as a “world in discourse” (Hjelm 2016, 18), which rests on a recognition that there are as many definitions of “religion” as there are of “discourses.” Discursive religious studies, then, focus on how the use of language contributes to one-sided construction of “truths,” often serving the interests of particular social groups or academic

13 Cf. Lincoln 2006, 2; Hughes and McCutcheon 2021, 1–2.

14 For different perspectives on this “problem” or, to some, “debate,” cf. McCutcheon 1999; Chryssides and Gregg 2019.

traditions.¹⁵ In a foundational text for this type of thinking – his “Theses on Method” – Lincoln goes so far as to claim that when a student of religion “suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths’, ‘truth-claims’, and ‘regimes of truth’, one has ceased to function as historian or scholar” (1996). Scholars shouldn’t be concerned with adjudicating the “authenticity” of any claim about Islam, religion, or culture, but study the rhetoric through which those claims are constructed (Hughes 2016). In the process, however, we must remember that our own claims are equally situated and are only ever as robust as our adherence to the intersubjectively testable practices of academic rigor that support them (cf. Lincoln 1999, 209).

Equally important is therefore the study or awareness of what remains unsaid – those aspects of what some of us call religion, Islam, and culture (and, in all cases, discourse) that are taken for granted and thus escape critical scrutiny, that which lies *beyond*. By staking any particular position, scholars always relate to other, alternative, and often oppositional positions. Sometimes, the awareness of this relationality is construed as a binary – rather than as multiple – which is sometimes a necessity, but no less a potentially hampering move. After all, moving *beyond* labels, categories, and frameworks can quickly become problematic, as the act of conceiving of a beyond requires one to imagine a definite category or a finite end. It’s impossible to define something without putting it into relation with whatever it is considered to *not* be or to exclude. This is particularly clear in the traditional conception of the so-called “insider/outsider problem” in religious studies. Until recently, it was a widely accepted truism that *the* (singular) insider perspective was at odds with *the* outsider perspective, which was framed as a type of ideal, objective and neutral degree zero. This position is becoming increasingly untenable, as Russell McCutcheon and Aaron Hughes note: “there is likely no such thing as a unified insider or outsider standpoint but, instead, [...] varying degrees of both, with members of groups often drawing internal distinctions of their own based on who is or is not thought to best represent the group” (2022, 77). There are, in short, more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in any of our philosophies.

With this in mind, we chose the title *Beyond Islamic Studies* for this book in recognition of the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts attached to concepts and labels in general and the terms “Islam,” “religion,” and “culture” specifically, as well as the ongoing shifts in their academic use and understanding. It reflects the necessity of moving beyond conventional frameworks and embracing a more interdisciplinary and reflexive exploration of what some of

15 This is concretely and pedagogically illustrated by Smith and Ramey 2024.

us call Islam as intertwined with discourses about what some of us call religion and culture. And, or so we hope, it invites scholars to consider the multifaceted construction of Islam (or “Islam”), religion (or “religion”), and culture (or “culture”), and encourages a deeper engagement with the diverse contexts and interpretations that shape not only their study, but also how that study can, in turn, inform the study of other moving signifiers and the objects, social formations, and phenomena they are used to name. In sum, the discursive and the critical study of Islam, religion, and culture, as sought in this Introduction, is still under construction. By foregrounding the constructed nature of religious, Islamic, and cultural categories and critical studies, and examining the forces that shape them, this book offers a lens through which the authors analyze religion in general and Islam in particular, not as a fixed category, but as an ongoing, contested and socially formative process of meaning-making.

3 Mind the Gap: Disposition

Returning to the London public transport systems, the auditory warning to “please mind the gap between train and platform” is also a helpful metaphor for the study of Islam, religion, and culture. For example, minding the gap between “east”/“west,” “north”/“south,” “male”/“female” – to name just a handful of historical and local binary pairings that have historically proven highly useful to social actors who have sought to guide and shape social formation in the direction of their particular interests – is important, as is minding the gap between different methodologies and theories of Islam, religion, and culture. Again, the “emic”/“etic” divide is instructive:

If a scholar is interested in the reason why someone claims something, bringing to their analysis a theory about the workings of the psyche or society, for example, that may well be alien to the participant’s own self-understanding or picture of the world, then it is rather difficult to overlook the gap between the insider’s claims and those of the scholar who does not necessarily subscribe to their worldview. *What scholars do about the gap – whether accept it or, perhaps, moderate and try to minimize it – is the difficulty of the so-called insider/outsider problem.* (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022, 75; emphasis added)

This idea of a gap reminds us that there’s always something beyond what each of us is able or willing to see, or at least capable of viewing and accepting as worth studying (McCutcheon 2018, 4–10). And it reminds us that it is always important to be as reflexive as possible about other understandings of,

conceptualizations of, and approaches to whatever we're focusing on, because they are always there. We always risk falling into the gap between our conceptions and others' when we take our own for granted. Academic reflection on this gap is therefore crucial in the absence of a device to fill the gap and serves as a warning to all of us, "of the risk of being caught unaware" (Horne 2013). We harbor no illusions that the gap can ever be filled, nor do we think that trying to bridge it is particularly desirable – especially when so many positions, explicitly and emphatically, are mutually exclusive. All that would do is produce yet another faux-ecumenical dead end. Instead, we hope to highlight the importance of minding the gap.

With this in mind, and from a discourse-focused and critical perspective, we maintain that the contributions in this volume, while arguably eclectic in the aggregate and covering a range of topics, are part of an ongoing dialogue that reflects the dynamic and contested nature of "religion," "Islam," and "culture" as categories. The dialogical connection between the first chapter by Jesper Petersen and the last one by Anders Ackfeldt and Andreas Johansson exemplifies this. Petersen's methodological musings address his personal and intellectual connection to and affinity with Ackfeldt, exemplifying how such relationships can impact scholarly contributions. This interconnectedness underscores that there is no party line toed by even the closest of colleagues, and no single way to some unvarnished truth in the study of what some of us call Islam, religion, and/or culture (the slash here, for those who view it as meaningful, can be of tremendous importance). Instead, while these chapters connect with each other – explicitly and implicitly – in constructive, dialogic ways, they also – in ways both implicit and explicit – exist in tension and mutual critique.

As editors, we have framed the chapters in terms of alignment and similarity, as is conventional in the "anthology introduction" genre. However, it's crucial to note that, just as each scholar has constructed their data and object of study based on their interests and curiosities, so too have we constructed our notion of a beyond as a reminder that our scholarly claims are always contingent and constructed as much by what they are not as what they are – they are, in short, dependent on the negative space that surrounds them (cf. Ikegami 2000). The title *Beyond Islamic Studies* is intended to reflect the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts attached to concepts and labels, as well as the ongoing shifts in their academic use and understanding. We hope it might invite scholars to consider the multifaceted construction of "Islam," "religion," and "culture," and encourage a deeper engagement with the diverse contexts and interpretations that shape their study. By foregrounding the constructed nature of these categories and both examining and embodying the forces that shape them, this

book offers a critical lens through which the authors analyze what some of us call religion more broadly and Islam in particular, not as fixed categories, but as ongoing, contested, and socially formative processes of meaning-making. Although many of us who have contributed to this volume know each other personally, we don't necessarily agree on everything. And while we are united in some measure by a mutual respect for Otterbeck, whose presence permeates the volume, we are by no means card-carrying members of a mutual admiration society.

Part 1 begins with a methodological reflection on the study of Islam and other subjects, setting the stage for exploring theoretical and methodological dilemmas and advances particular to the field of Islamic studies. The first chapter by Petersen explores a generative methodology for scientific research, advocating for curiosity, boldness, and enjoyment to foster creativity and serendipitous discoveries. The following chapter by Hughes examines the evolution of Islamic studies post-9/11, emphasizing the need to theorize "lived Islam" and "decoloniality." Oliver Scharbrodt's contribution critiques the hegemonic position of "Western" academia in Islamic studies, drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, while Garbi Schmidt critically engages with the concept of superdiversity, calling for a historically informed and sensory approach to understanding societal complexity. The two closing chapters in this section on theory and method both address the concept of Islamophobia, but from different angles and with distinct foci. Johan Cato examines the evolution of political discourses on Islamophobia in Sweden, highlighting a shift towards questioning and rejecting the term. In contrast, Martin Lund's chapter takes a discursive approach, emphasizing the need to understand Islamophobia as a socially and historically situated phenomenon. Lund critiques a recurring tendency to reify and dehistoricize Islamophobia and proposes an alternative definition that frames it as a discursive fabrication serving socially formative interests. Together, the chapters in this section provide a broad overview of the theoretical and methodological challenges in Islamic studies, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection and different perspectives. By addressing these issues, the authors collectively skew the field ever so slightly and offer new positions and approaches that engage in direct ways with what has come before.

Part 2 follows a trajectory that literalizes the title's reference to what some of us call Islam and phenomena and social formations that some would consider to be lying beyond the boundaries of "Islam." It begins in more "traditional" Islamic studies and moves, through a series of methodically rich case studies, to the boundaries of the field as commonly understood. This section opens with Susanne Olsson's examination of the development of Hanbali Sunni

Islam through Ibn al-Jawzi's biography of Ibn Hanbal, highlighting the creation of a sanctity cult around Ibn Hanbal and its differentiation from Sufism and 'Abbasid traditions. Simon Sorgenfrei then examines the intricate interplay between Islamic and non-Islamic elements in Inayat Khan's Universal Sufism, highlighting the fluidity of religious identity. Jonas Svensson utilizes generative AI to analyze the perspectives of synthetic Muslim young adults on Islamic pop music, revealing tensions between authenticity and commercialism. Erica Li Lundqvist investigates the quest for love and authenticity on Muslim dating platforms, highlighting the negotiation of Islamic norms in digital spaces. Rickard Lagervall revisits the representation of Islam in Swedish textbooks, noting developments and ongoing challenges in presenting nuanced views of the religion. Joel Kuhlin delves into Malcolm X's biblical rhetoric during his time with the Nation of Islam, illustrating his use of biblical references to support NOI theology and mobilize Black Americans. Olav Hammer surveys interpretations of Islam within Theosophy and Anthroposophy, showing how these imaginal versions of Islam reflect and promote the core teachings of their respective traditions. Finally, Paul Linjamaa critiques the use of Gnosticism as an analytic tool in early Islamic studies, arguing that it has obscured and confused the understanding of Islam in the West. Together, these chapters poke at the established boundaries of Islamic studies, exploring diverse expressions and interpretations of Islam in various contexts.

Part 3 treats music and other soundscapes – including noise and the sound of silence – primarily in relation to Islam or Islamic contexts. It moves from concrete, biographical considerations through non-Muslim signification into topics such as addiction, power, absence, and change. The section opens with Göran Larsson's exploration of Idris Muhammad's conversion to Islam and its impact on his life and music, highlighting the nexus between jazz and Islam. Douglas Mattsson then examines the use of Islamic semiotic resources in European extreme metal, focusing on the figure of Dajjāl to convey anti-Islamic messages and challenge normative religious positions. Anthony Fiscella delves into the intersection of noise subculture and Islam, analyzing how noise artists incorporate Islamic references in their work as a form of resistance against societal norms. Maria Malmström investigates the affective impact of sonic rhythmic changes in Cairo and New York during significant events, revealing how changes in urban soundscapes can induce profound emotional and physical responses.

Part 4 ventures most manifestly into the “beyond” referenced in this volume's title, weaving together approaches and topics that resonate throughout the book while remaining connected to the overarching themes of the project. Jenny Berglund begins with an exploration of the complex and evolving

relationship between dogs and religion in multi-religious societies, highlighting their varied significance across traditions and the impact of globalization on perceptions of dogs. Anne-Christine Hornborg then examines the ritual language embedded in contemporary Sweden's neoliberal market society, focusing on how therapeutic and individualistic practices create new performances designed to attract modern individuals. Ive Brissman analyzes Ben Wheatley's film *A Field in England*, exploring its representation of historical and contemporary themes through popular culture, and the concept of "the new eerie" in landscapes haunted by their pasts. Finally, Ackfeldt and Johansson investigate the role of wristwatches in religious contexts, highlighting their symbolic meaning and the ethical concerns raised by high-end watches among religious leaders. Together, these chapters expand the project's boundaries, exploring diverse expressions and interpretations of religion and spirituality in various contexts.

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PART 1

Theory and Method



The Methodology of Play Around, Fuck About, Have Fun, and Be Bold – a Serious Approach to Scientific Discovery

Jesper Petersen

Years later, when I became a tutor myself, I taught a young woman who affected an unusual habit. When asked a question which required deep thought, she would screw her eyes tight shut, jerk her head down to her chest and then freeze for up to half a minute before looking up, opening her eyes, and answering the question with fluency and intelligence. I was amused by this, and did an imitation of it to divert my colleagues after dinner. Among them was a distinguished Oxford philosopher. As soon as he saw my imitation, he immediately said: “That’s Wittgenstein! Is her surname ___ by any chance?” Taken aback, I said that it was. “I thought so”, said my colleague. “Both her parents are professional philosophers and devoted followers of Wittgenstein.” The gesture had passed from the great philosopher, via one or both of her parents to my pupil. I suppose that, although my further imitation was done in jest, I must count myself a fourth-generation transmitter of the gesture. And who knows where Wittgenstein got it? (Dawkins 2000, vii)

All PhD students inherit from their supervisors, but an inheritance that is unique and can be traced back to its source after multiple generations – like Wittgenstein’s idiosyncrasy – is rare. It is much more common for the inheritance to be shared among PhD students, even if they had different supervisors, reflecting broader academic traditions or disciplinary norms. To take an example, when I wrote my PhD dissertation, Otterbeck insisted that I write a publishable book rather than adapt to some formulaic (and boring) academic standard. He argued that there is no reason to teach PhD students how to be poor writers – a reasonable argument, I would say.¹ However, Otterbeck’s standpoint is not unique, even if it is rare.

¹ In case poor writing should ever become a sought after skill as the formulaic requirement of a PhD dissertation suggests, students who have not learned this craft may consult Michael Billing’s (2013) book *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*.

Like any other academic, Otterbeck adopts stances within a great number of debates, but none of these standpoints make him unique. His uniqueness lies in the combination of standpoints, but this means that everyone – and thereby no one – is unique. This was a disappointing realization, particularly given the expectations inherent in an invitation to contribute a chapter to a book of this kind.

Yet, I soon realized that my instinctual response to the invitation to write this chapter was a bit strange, even if it followed the training I received from Otterbeck. I wanted to write about the concept of traditions within the study of religion, because I know this is a term with which Otterbeck has a strained relationship. So, I bought two books on chimpanzees, two on evolutionary theory, and one on bees. I did not try to be quirky; it came naturally to me that this was an approach conducive to research, and it sounded fun. It was not until I told colleagues about my book chapter that I realized that this may not be a normative approach.

My idea was to gain an understanding of what a concept of tradition among chimpanzees, birds, and bees may look like, and use this as a starting point. Retrospectively, I could argue that if I had simply read all the books on tradition within the study of religion, I would likely not come up with anything new, and this is why my approach makes a lot of sense. However, this was not part of my conscious thought process – I merely thought it sounded interesting, and the idea was fun, so I went along with it. It took me three weeks to read through all five books and a few research articles that caught my interest along the way. Then I began to write this book chapter, while consulting Steven Engler's (2024) recent publication *Tradition: A Critical Primer* to get an understanding of the state of the art.

When I told another of Otterbeck's former PhD students, Anders Ackfeldt, about my chapter, he replied, "that sounds fun." and started to play along with the idea while asking questions regarding chimpanzees and birds. To Ackfeldt, this was not a strange starting point. Neither did I find it strange that Ackfeldt was writing on "the semiotics of wrist watches" with a colleague, and I could hear that this approach had led him to interesting observations.

Then it dawned upon me that we were following the same methodology of play around, fuck² about, have fun, and be bold – something both of us have learned from Otterbeck. I genuinely believe that these four principles are among the most important elements necessary for conducting good research and triggering one of those serendipitous moments in which scientific discoveries are made, even if the chances are still low. Nevertheless, excellent

2 Apologies to anyone who may take offence because of this word, but I refuse to call it "wasting time" or something similar. Fucking about is important work, not a waste of time.

academic work and a great number of scientific discoveries have been made because of disruptions to normal academic life. Dawkins, for example, writes in his magnum opus *The Selfish Gene* that:

I began the book in 1972 when power-cuts resulting from industrial strife interrupted my laboratory research. The blackouts unfortunately (from one point of view) ended after a mere two chapters, and I shelved the project until I had a sabbatical leave in 1975. (Dawkins 1976/2016, xxi)

Similarly, Jane Goodall made groundbreaking discoveries by challenging the prevailing assumptions about chimpanzees and venturing to Gombe, Tanzania. Her research strategy was refreshingly commonsensical: observe the chimpanzees and see what unfolds. Why had no one else pursued this before? Despite consistently producing empirically grounded breakthrough research, she faced significant resistance from the academic community. In her retrospective account *Through a Window*, she reflects on this resistance and summarizes several of her early findings – once controversial but now accepted as foundational knowledge:

How naïve I was. As I had not had an undergraduate science education I didn't realize that animals were not supposed to have personalities, or to think, or to feel emotions or pain. I had no idea that it would have been more appropriate to assign each of the chimpanzees a number rather than a name when I got to know him or her. I didn't realize that it was not scientific to discuss behavior in terms of motivation or purpose. And no one had told me that terms such as *childhood* and *adolescence* were not to be used when referring to young chimpanzees. Not knowing, I freely made use of all those forbidden terms and concepts in my initial attempt to describe, to the best of my ability, the amazing things I had observed at Gombe. (Goodall 1990/2020, 16–17)

During my PhD training, Otterbeck would regularly say “play around with it and see what happens,” “just go with it and see where it leads you,” “if you are not having fun, you are doing it wrong,” and “be bolder,” or as I call it: play around, fuck about, have fun, and be bold. Boldness is particularly crucial because it empowers researchers to challenge conventional wisdom – such as choosing to observe chimpanzees in their natural habitat rather than solely relying on established literature. At times, academic doctrines can be rigid and counterproductive, making it essential to break free and pursue innovative paths, even if they seem merely commonsensical. Standing firm against skepticism from a research community while advocating for one's discoveries demands even greater boldness. As I understood Otterbeck during my PhD

studies, his philosophy was clear: don't wait for a power cut; act as if there was one – and be as bold as Goodall if you discover something of value.

Academic conversations become dull and mind-numbingly boring when nothing is at stake, and participants merely recycle the same old ideas that have been discussed countless times before. The best seminars keep people on edge, challenging them with fresh perspectives and ideas they have never encountered. To spark this kind of energy, facilitators must invite bold³ academics, introduce unorthodox viewpoints, and encourage provocative questions. In contrast, a lackluster seminar feels like a series of rehearsed monologues, while a truly dynamic discussion thrives on genuine curiosity and unpredictable insights. In a great seminar, you never know where you will end up – but a boring one almost always leads to predictable conclusions. Or, to use the terminology of this chapter: a good seminar is playful, it has no predetermined aim (fuck about), it is a lot of fun, but it takes boldness to embark on such conversations, because everyone is thrown off their game from the outset.

The only person I know of who consciously applies something akin to the methodology of play around, fuck about, have fun, and be bold is the fictional character in *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon Cooper. When his research in quantum mechanics reaches an impasse, he “takes” a job in a restaurant where his neighbor, Penny, works:

- PENNY What are you doing here?
- SHELDON A reasonable question. I asked myself: “what is the most mind-numbing, pedestrian job conceivable,” and three answers came to mind: a toll booth attendant, an Apple store Genius, and what Penny does. Now, since I do not like touching other people's coins and I refuse to contribute to the devaluation of the word genius, here I am.
- PENNY You just walked in, and they hired you? Just like that?
- SHELDON No. God heavens, no. Since I do not need to be paid, I didn't need to be hired. I simply came in, picked up a tray, and started working for the man.
- PENNY Sheldon, this is ridiculous.

3 Boldness is not about personality; it is an attitude towards research. Introvert academics may also be bold, even if they express themselves in different ways than loud academics. Boldness is not about making noise; it is about having the courage to start new conversations.

- SHELDON Well, is it? Just a moment ago, I had a minor epiphany regarding the polymer degradation phenomenon while scraping congealed nachos off a plate.
- PENNY Wait, Sheldon, this isn't even what I do. I am a waitress, not a busboy.
- SHELDON You are right, that is more menial.⁴

When Sheldon soon after drops some plates on the floor, he has his eureka moment: “Good Lord, the interference pattern in the fracture; the motion of the wave to the molecular structure. I have been looking at it all wrong. I can't consider the electrons as particles – they move through the graphene as a wave. It's a wave!”⁵ The story of Sheldon is interesting because he takes no monetary pay. His only motivation for taking up the jobs of a busboy and later a waiter is that it may lead him to a major scientific discovery. In other words, he fucks about on purpose.

Sheldon makes his discovery by mobilizing boredom, which is the opposite of Otterbeck's approach, but nevertheless a similar one. So, if versions of the methodology of play around, fuck about, have fun, and be bold are so widespread that they even appear in Hollywood productions, what is so special about Otterbeck? I would say that teaching these as skills and framing them as important and serious work to PhD students is special. Working with Ackfeldt, I have on multiple occasions received the following response when presenting an idea to him: “It is a really great idea, but it is also boring. Let's do something else.” Taking “having fun” so seriously – along with play, fuckaboutery, and boldness – is to me an inherited idiosyncrasy. When I meet students who talk like that, I ask them if they know Otterbeck by any chance.

Anyway, it is now time to play – otherwise my reading up on chimpanzees, evolution, and bees will go to waste.

1 Let's Play

When playing around, fucking about, and having fun, one seldom ends up where one intended. This is also the case with my intention of writing about tradition. I was intrigued by Dawkins' and Susan Blackmore's idea of seeing the

⁴ *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 3, Episode 14.

⁵ People interested in physics may notice that this is indeed a great discovery, but it is certainly not new.

world from “a meme’s eye view” (or from the eye view of a semiotic resource). Blackmore explains that “We humans, because of our powers of imitation, have become just the physical ‘hosts’ needed for the memes to get around” (Blackmore 2000, 8). That is, Dawkins and Blackmore understand memes as units that are copied from person to person, downplaying the agency of humans and emphasizing the active role of memes. According to Dawkins and Blackmore, memes are replicators just like genes, and therefore, “Memetic evolution is inevitable” and happens by mutation (Blackmore 2000, 16). Dawkins provides an example of such mutation:

I suppose the scholar of the Septuagint could at least be said to have started something when they mistranslated the Hebrew word for “young woman” into the Greek for “virgin”, coming up with the prophecy: “behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son ...” (Dawkins 1976/2016, 21)

Dawkins’ observation furthers the argument that theological evolution is not driven by human cognition, but rather by memetic mutations that occur through serendipity,⁶ and this particular serendipity produced a superspreader meme in the form of Christianity.

It follows from Dawkins and Blackmore’s evolutionary approach that memes will not flourish because they are good at anything but replicating, or as Blackmore formulates it: “With a meme’s eye view we ask not how inventions benefit human happiness or human genes, but how they benefit themselves” (Blackmore 2000, 27). This puts an entirely different perspective on missionary activity – and it suggests that people are being led by memes rather than the other way around. Dawkins explains that memes such as religion have a higher survival value than fashion and music singles (which may be the reason why Bronze Age mythology is still widely disseminated in contemporary religion):

Some memes, like some genes, achieve brilliant short-term success in spreading rapidly, but do not last long in the meme pool. Popular songs and stiletto heels are examples. Others, such as the Jewish religious laws, may continue to propagate themselves for thousands of years, usually because of the great potential permanence of written records. (Dawkins 1976/2016, 252)

I should probably come clean and admit that I object to Dawkins and Blackmore’s idea, even if I find it interesting to play around with. I admire

6 I believe that Dawkins is to some degree right: serendipities are an important source of religion (Petersen 2022).

Dawkins' boldness in entering the social sciences as a biologist, and I believe that he has made a contribution – his thoughts still make my head spin and see the world in new ways, even if I do not agree with his concept. I found Dawkins' idea of God particularly playful: "God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or ineffective power, in the environment provided by human culture" (Dawkins 1976/2016, 250). Unfortunately – as intriguing as this idea of the meme may be – there is no indication that memes spread in the same way as a virus. In fact, when Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) wrote *Spreadable Media* – a landmark in spreadability theory – they jestingly declared that they had found a cure for viral media. Rather, memes spread depending on whether they are useful to humans who want to express themselves, and therefore, memes are typically retrofitted by the people who spread them. This fundamentally changes what a meme is: it is no longer a replicator, but may be called a mutator. All this being said, I still believe that there is more to be said about Dawkins' approach than what can be found in Jenkins, Ford, and Green's book (2013, 18–19).

Playing around with Dawkins' concept of a meme's eye view led me to a question, which I struggle to formulate without using the linguistic approach that I have just objected to: what is the smallest unit of discourse that is sufficiently meaningful in and of itself to migrate from one discourse to another? I use the word "sufficiently" advisedly because no unit will be meaningful in and of itself once it is detached from the discourse within which its meaning is being produced. Still, in order for a transplantation to happen, some meaning must "survive." In other words, there must be some sort of unit of meaning that is transplantable.

Take the meme of karma. Once detached from its Vedic discourse, it only describes a causative relation between actions and their consequences. In a Euro-American context the causative relationship is typically taken to be: do good and good things will happen to you, and vice versa – a concept that is widespread in popular culture such as the TV-series *My Name Is Earl* in which the protagonist makes up for bad deeds in his early life to create a better life for himself in the present, and when he fails, punishment is instantaneous – like in John Lennon's "Instant Karma!" or English idioms such as "karma is a bitch" or "what comes around, goes around." Karma has even been transplanted into religious discourse and displaced ideas about the afterlife. In 2017, nearly 25 percent of the Danish population believed in reincarnation, including many Christians and at least one priest (Birk 2016; Frederiksen 2019).

The above leads to questions regarding how severing happens, why more or less of the original discourse is not part of the meme that migrated, and how transplantation into another discourse takes place. Furthermore, it is not

clear why karma has flourished while other memes, such as dharma, chakra, and nirvana, have spread much less, while others have not spread at all. This may be where Dawkins is right: some memes – for example, ones that describe simple technical relations such as karma – are more easily transplanted than other memes.

In anticipation of Otterbeck's critique, I have already included multimodal examples but let me take it a step further: on the face of it, Yoga seems – as a consequence of its migration – to have gone through a transformation from a method among others to reach *moksha* into a health and physical exercise program. However, Mark Singleton (2010) argues that the health and exercise program known as yoga has a history in Europe and America, and that parts of this Euro-American tradition migrated to India. He points out that many core postures and stretches have no history in Indian Yoga, but they have a well-documented history in, for example, Danish and Swedish gymnastics, British and French military training, and American strong-man competitions. If we apply Dawkins' terminology, it seems that a meme of gymnastics – containing just postures and stretching exercises – migrated to India, where it was transplanted into Yoga philosophy and produced a meme with high survival value – a super replicator – that has spread around the world (today known as Yoga).

2 Play with Caution

During fieldwork on sharia practices in Denmark, I have often been told by informants that before issuing an Islamic divorce without a husband's consent, the *qadi* (Islamic judge) must send three warning letters to the husband. This is a practice that has been copied from British sharia councils (Petersen 2025, 286–88). When John R. Bowen inquired with British qadis about the origin of this practice, he was told that it emerged from a reading of the Qur'an 18:82–86, in which Moses journeys with and learns from a character commonly understood to be Khidir (Bowen 2016, 81). The story goes that Khidir stipulated that Moses was not allowed to ask about anything before Khidir himself had mentioned it. However, Moses broke this stipulation three times, and therefore Khidir stated that their paths must part. Similarly, a qadi must send three letters to a reluctant husband before he issues a divorce without his consent.

Khidir is a character whose long history predates the Qur'an and may even be traced back to the Epic of Gilgamesh (Wensinck 2006). The notion of Islamic divorce is, of course, not present in Gilgamesh nor in the production of the Qur'anic story of Moses and his travel companion. I understand this story

as a semiotic resource that may be mobilized to do things in the world through retrofitting of its content, like instituting women's Islamic divorce rights – in fact, at the time of writing, I have recently published a book that says exactly that (Petersen 2025, 286–288). However, games can be powerful, and I am no longer sure that my analysis is correct.

First of all, the concept of semiotic resources no longer seems as well-defined as I used to think it was. I have taken it to mean a resource with which one can produce meaning, but this says something about the meaning-making process but very little about what a semiotic resource is. Unfortunately, I see no clear definition in the literature – only further abstractions (Halliday 1978; Leeuwen 2005; Vannini 2007).

Otterbeck's PhD supervisor, Jan Hjärpe, argued that when Muslims act, they draw from what he called the Islamic basket to produce Islam, and he advised that we pay attention to what Muslims pick from this basket. However, he never explained what we would find if we looked inside the basket, and simply calling the items semiotic resources or memes does not clarify it. It seems as if these concepts are just abstractions that obscure vision. Maybe I fell in love with the idea of semiotic resources – I really did – because it resolves all the empirical problems I couldn't solve. But after experimenting with it in the above, I now realize that it did so by obscuring the problem. It may be another abstraction that exempts the researcher from being empirically specific. Or, perhaps, social semiotics is just a brilliant way of analyzing meaning-making processes with one's back turned to the place where the resources go into the machine. Either way, I believe the game produced a problem that can be investigated empirically and may lead to new insights. That is, the problem of units of meaning that are transplanted from one discourse to another, and the realization that social semiotics lacks an empirical grounding for the concept of semiotic resource.

3 Be Cautious with Questions

It is sometimes more important to find the object of research and sensitize oneself to making good observations than it is to ask research questions (Otterbeck 2021). While the latter sometimes constitutes a well-chosen research strategy, it may hinder scientific discovery in other contexts. As Martin Heidegger observes, researchers are guided by their questions, which inherently limit their potential discoveries to what is already anticipated (Heidegger 1953/2010, 1–14). This is why playing around, fucking about, and having fun is important. By getting distracted and side-tracked, researchers

may end up answering questions they do not currently have the knowledge to ask. Or, as Bertrand Russell puts it, after having formulated two questions at the outset of his analysis in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*,

Neither of these questions is, as it stands, a very precise question. I do not pretend to start with precise questions. I do not think you can start with anything precise. You have to achieve such precision as you can, as you go along. (Russell 1972, 16)

Although I have conducted only two ethnographic studies in my career – one on the Mariam Mosque with female imams and the other on parallel legal practices in Denmark (sharia) – I have come to find the notion of entering the field with clearly defined research questions odd, because it anticipates what one will find. In my study of the Mariam Mosque, I imagined that the founding activists were institutionalizing Islamic feminist discourse as a mosque and thereby converting discourse into bricks and mortar, so to speak. However, shortly into this study I discovered that the activists were not familiar with this literature, so something else was going on, and therefore, I had to abandon most of the ideas that I entered the field with and just study what was there (Petersen 2022). Similarly, when I embarked on my study of parallel legal practices, I imagined that imams and Islamic authorities had a sort of judicial power, only to discover, for the most part, their vulnerability and impotence. Something else was going on, and power was typically centered in families or influenced by patterns of coercive control. The absence (or instability) of jurisdiction was evident to a degree, and so important to understanding parallel legal practices that I ended up titling my book on sharia in Denmark, *The Islamic Juridical Vacuum* (Petersen 2025).

In other words, I have done my research by following the method of playing around, fucking about, having fun, and being bold, which I learned from Otterbeck, and because this approach has worked so well, I continue following it. In my current research project on non-Muslim Islam, I have ended up reading literature on marketing to get a deeper understanding of research epistemologies – it may sound odd, but it works. Rory Sutherland – an influential thinker within marketing – explains that “if you expose every one of the world’s problems to ostensible logical solutions, those that can easily be solved by logic will rapidly disappear, and all that will be left are the ones that are logic-proof” (Sutherland 2019, 8). Similarly, I believe that it is often the case that all the research questions we currently have the knowledge to ask have been answered, so there is no point in asking further questions. At this point, another approach is called for, and many great discoveries have been made when researchers stumbled upon them. Playing around, fucking about, and having fun increases the likelihood of such serendipitous events taking place.

4 Final Remarks

As a significant part of this chapter emerged from a game played with Ackfeldt, during a conversation on 18 December 2024, I feel obliged to write this brief acknowledgment. I have cleaned up the conversation, post-rationalized it, and made it presentable, but the core ideas were developed in unison.

In case anyone is wondering, I can disclose that animals do have traditions: chimpanzee cultures have been demonstrated to differ across geography, and some even seem to engage in behaviors that, in humans, are often understood as religious (Boesch 2012; Goodall 1990/2020; Harrod 2014). Birds have song traditions and every generation samples the previous generation's song, thus creating catalogues (or albums) of songs (Blackmore 2000, 48–50; P.F. Jenkins 1978). And bee behavior is genetically coded, which means that their traditions are not grounded in culture; i.e., not passed on from bee to bee through learning (Tautz 2008).

Finally, to anyone who believes that playing around, fucking about, and having fun is easy, I say: this requires significant effort and dedication; approach it with the seriousness it deserves, and do not underestimate its importance. And if you make great discoveries along the way, be bold!

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Authenticity, Inauthenticity, and Finding the Space Between

Aaron W. Hughes

What you say about the study of Islam is like how we talk about religion in general and Islam in particular in Sweden, so I have no idea why you are given such a difficult time in North America.

These words, or at least words to this effect, come by way of Jonas Otterbeck – my friend, colleague, and fellow craft beer aficionado. I am, however, never sure whether to take them as a compliment or as an insult. With his comments in the background, I present what follows either as a novel argument or a repetition of what everyone, or at least everyone in the Scandinavian countries, already knows.

1 Introduction

My very first week on the job as a young, naïve, and wet-behind-the-ears assistant professor of Arabic and Islamic studies coincided with the events of September 11, 2001. I was then employed at the University of Calgary, a rather large urban Canadian institution with a lot of students from the Muslim world and, given it was Canada, tended to be staffed by a rather large non-American professoriate that at least historically has tended to look rather critically and often with contempt at American neo-colonialism and imperialism.

While the events of 9/11 did not seem all that important to me at the time – I mean, it was certainly confusing and surreal for those first uncertain weeks thereafter – it ended up casting a long shadow on my career.¹ I do not think it an exaggeration to say that those events threw everything scholars of religion

1 While there have been several books and edited collections that try to make sense of these events – to say nothing of dates that mark attacks in Europe – we still await an overall assessment, at least from a critical perspective. My favorite take on the events remains Lincoln 2006.

do into disarray. How, framed most succinctly, was one supposed to engage the study of Islam or the study of religion more generally after such an act that was committed in the name of religion? It would seem safe to say that the field of religious studies has been struggling massively with this over the course of the past twenty some years and is only now, roughly a generation later, coming to terms with what transpired on that day (and, of course, on other related days, such as 7/7/2005 in London or the Paris bombings in 2015). Yet, if the study of religion has had to deal with 9/11 from the larger and more general perspective of religion, those of us engaged in the study of Islam have had an even more difficult time, often called upon to function as both defenders and cheerleaders (or, framed alternatively, as “caretakers” and “insiders”) of the tradition. “Real Muslims” did not do this, or so we heard from many of our colleagues, but “political actors” who “hijacked” the beautiful tradition of Islam did. I opted to resist this latter temptation. I’m not sure why, but something did not sit right with me in denying the motivations and actions of those responsible for the events in question. If critics of Orientalism charge that the field deprives social and historical actors of their agency, weren’t the exact same critics now doing something similar when they said the perpetrators were not “real” or “authentic” Muslims?

What surprised me more than anything, and this provides the subtext to so many of my subsequent interventions, was the study of Islam’s collective response to 9/11 (which would be repeated after the attacks in London and Paris). That response tended to pivot on two key points: 1) that “real” Muslims could not possibly have been responsible for such events; and 2) Islam was a “religion of peace.” On the one hand, I could not have agreed more (Islam, after all, wasn’t and isn’t more prone to violence than any other tradition, and the majority of the world’s Muslims are peaceful); on the other, I was surprised that we had missed an opportunity for a nuanced discussion of religion as a social (and political) construct. Missing in so many analyses in those days was the fact that some individuals or groups could code their malfeasance using religious discourses and do so, moreover, in a manner that made themselves out to be the only “real” Muslims.

My comments here are, I think, straightforward, and I trust I made my case well enough in a trilogy of books: *Situating Islam* (2007); *Theorizing Islam* (2012); and *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity* (2015). I have, thus, spent considerable time and energy articulating my intervention; indeed, I have just rehearsed its main argument here, which now strikes me as rather obvious. The following two examples that I want to introduce, however, are somewhat different and take my original discussion in rather interesting directions.

2 Example One: “Lived Islam”

Recent years have witnessed the field, for better or worse, shed its Orientalist and textualist skin. Many graduate students now work on contemporary Islam; indeed, so much so that historical studies of Islam risk disappearing. If Orientalism was all about texts and the desire to uncover “*the Muslim mind*,” Islamic studies today would seem to be more interested in understanding the lived experiences of Muslims in the MENA region, in Iran, and in secular European contexts. This can involve examining everything from integration, secularism, and gender roles, among others. I imagine topics such as the latter are much more relevant to the lives of young European graduate students than, say, examining the prosody of Abu Nawās (d. 814) or Abu Tammam (d. 845), to say nothing of the historical Muhammad.

But, and this is my second observation, this comes with a potential methodological problem. It may well be that our interest in all things modern might affect our understanding of the past because the past now risks becoming something that we can selectively return to, to make a modern point (see Hughes 2012; Robinson 2009). In the discipline of History this is known as presentism, namely, the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts. This means that rather than become custodians of the past, the keepers of humanity’s collective memories, we risk running roughshod over it for our own ends.

3 Example Two: Decoloniality

In the Spring of 2023, and to invoke a slightly different twist on the rhetoric of authenticity, I was on a panel devoted to the future of Islamic studies. The contents of my presentation or those of my fellow panelists need not concern us here. Instead, I wish to touch very briefly upon a set of comments that unfolded during the Q&A session following the panel. One person seemed to have been more interested in the color of my skin than what I had actually said and stated something to the effect that if my ancestors, like his, had been forcefully removed from their homes in colonial Bengal, I might have a rather different take on the nature of Islam and how to study it. These comments really get under my skin for a host of reasons. How does one respond to them? – meant as they are to silence conversation as opposed to opening it up to interrogation. His identity was obviously very important to him; whereas I was, to him at least, just another white guy invested in grand project Orientalism or some

version thereof. I didn't have the heart to tell him that my mother is a Twelver Shi'i whose parents were born in Lebanon and that my father was raised in poverty in the infamous east end of Glasgow – what good, after all, would that do? I was to him just another upper-class white male whose ancestors presumably dined with Queen Victoria as they swapped slaves with one another and got rich off the backs of his ancestors. Here, once again, was the rhetoric of authenticity, which now seems to be invoked to argue whose ancestors were darker or had suffered more at the hands of colonial imperialism. The answer or set of answers to these questions leads to a place where authority (i.e., who is allowed to speak and who isn't) – to say nothing of the imagined authenticity that powers it – is based on identity. This identity, moreover, is always complex and theorized using the latest post-colonial jargon, while those with whom we disagree can simply be written off as “white” or “European.”

Obviously, and this is why I mention it in the present context, my interlocutor's comments were tapping into what, in some quarters, are the now familiar calls to decolonize the study of Islam and begin the task of replacing traditional Orientalism with what are frequently referred to as more Indigenous epistemological forms. I think this is qualitatively different from the rhetoric of authenticity and identity recounted in my previous example and makes me realize that this rhetoric has shifted remarkably in the past decade. While I will leave this example to one side for the moment with the intention of returning to it near the end of the chapter, I mention it in the present context to flag what I consider to be the most recent iteration of the tyranny of authenticity.

4 Choice and Freewill

Allow me now to step back a little and come at this from a rather different angle that will, I hope, shed some additional light on our problem. In the academic study of religion, we talk a lot about “religion.” That would, in theory at least, seem to be rather straightforward. Historians, after all, talk about history; sociologists about sociology; psychologists about psychology; biologists about biology; mathematicians about mathematics; and so on and so forth. But this is where the analogy potentially – perhaps even irrefutably – breaks down. While I am certain that historians or mathematicians, for instance, have a lot invested in their chosen fields, I would go so far as to suggest that they are not so invested that they all but ignore the rules of scientific objectivity and instead talk about “authentic history” or “veritable mathematics.” They do not expend significant intellectual energy, in other words, in sorting through various historical documents or mathematical problems with the aim of telling us

which ones are the best based on some hidden standard that only they know because they intuit it. Nor would they be interested in adjudicating which documents or formulae are the most reflective of the wishes and desires of historical actors or which ones can lead to world peace.

The academic study of religion, however, would seem to be of an entirely different order. Indeed, some might even go so far as to question the place of the study of religion – at least as presently conceived – within the contemporary university. Some of us have tried to fight the good fight, as it were, but I am not entirely sure how successful we have been (see Dubuisson 2003; Nongbri 2013; Masuzawa 2005; and, most recently, Hughes and McCutcheon 2022a and 2022b). What other field, after all, talks about the “sacred” as if it actually exists as opposed to being a sociological, psychological, or taxonomical category? Philosophy seems to have shed its theological roots, but – and this, for me, is a central question – has the academic study of religion, even in largely secular places such as Canada or perhaps even Sweden? Theology, after all, was about the articulation of truth claims, what consists of proper (and improper) belief and practice, and who is a believer and who a sinner or heretic. And this language has, perhaps rather surprisingly, and certainly stubbornly remained at the center of the field that many of us know as the academic study of religion.

Collectively, many in the field seem quite content to articulate, comment on, and disseminate to others what counts as a valid religious expression and what does not. We regularly hear about how religion can function as a catalyst for social justice, for example, but rarely about how it justifies, legitimates, and maintains all sorts of gendered, racial, economic, and social hierarchies (see, for example, Peterson 2024). Likewise, I have seen countless takes on the role that religion can play in combating our environmental crisis (see, e.g., Tucker, Grim, Trapani, Snively, Powell, and Riley 2023), but rarely about how religion has played just as large a role, if not even larger, in contributing to this ecological crisis in the first place.

In *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity*, I tried to call attention to some of these issues. While the focus of my labors was on the way this played out in the study of Islam, especially as carried out in the larger field of religious studies, I also tried to use Islam as my “e.g.” that others might hopefully strip of some of its particularities and be able to recognize in their own chosen subfields. The point that I tried to make was that the job of religious studies scholars – as opposed to, say, their doppelgängers, to wit, theologians – is to understand and contextualize religion as a social phenomenon, not to judge who is or is not a good practitioner of religion. Religious studies, as I and many others conceptualize the field, is not about articulating the “sacred” or finding eternal

meanings of human existence in the world's religions and how such meanings can promote world peace and/or social justice, while also averting ecological disaster. It is, instead, about examining the social worlds people make for themselves and how they often do so by manufacturing a set of discourses that they imagine as somehow transcendent to themselves.

5 That Was Then, This Is Now

With these comments in the background, allow me now to return to the two examples I raised earlier, with an eye towards giving them some theoretical content. The first, it will be recalled, is “lived Islam.”

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world. Currently, there are close to two and a half billion people who identify as Muslims scattered across every continent and in nearly every country on the planet. These numbers inevitably beg the following question: Do they all believe and – even more importantly – practice their religion in the same manner? I think we could all safely agree that they do not. While we might well say, rather problematically, that all these Muslims subscribe to the so-called five pillars and the six articles of faith,² as so many introductory textbooks claim, this tells but part of a much larger and far more complex story (see the important remarks in Reinhart 2020, 1–15).

My grandparents, to cite one very concrete and personal example, were Twelver Shi'is from what is today South Lebanon and who eventually made their way to the Canadian Arctic, where my grandfather became a fur trader, with neither a fellow Muslim nor Arab in sight. When he joined forces with other Muslim families in Edmonton to build Canada's first mosque in 1938, what did Islam mean to him or them? I am certain that the way they thought about Islam, if they even did so beyond trying to maintain a sense of local community amidst a predominantly Christian and white majority, was surely different from how Muslims conceptualized Islam in, say, Saudi Arabia at the same period or even how most Muslims do in Edmonton (and, of course, in other places) now.

When we reduce Islam to convenient formulae, in other words, we treat it as if it were a monotheistic monolith. Such reductions, while perhaps making the majoritarian *ulama* or more conservative religious elites happy, overlook the incredible regional, national, and local variations that comprise Islamic traditions within Islam. Some might argue that all these variations represent

2 Even this, however, is a misnomer. Twelver Shi'a, for example, combine certain prayers so that many only pray three times a day.

different manifestations but share the same essence. Others might take an anti-essentialist position and argue that there is not some Platonic form of Islam that all variants tap into. Yet, others might maintain that these variations are so distinct as to represent distinct – radically distinct – Muslim traditions (the classic formulation remains Geertz 1971; see also Reinhart 2020).

Perhaps the easiest, accessible, and most recent way to deal with such regional and local variations – at least from the perspective of academic study – has been to invoke the term “lived Islam.” This, of course, is not to say that the study of ‘lived Islam’ is a completely new phenomenon, even if the name is. Early iterations of this approach include the late Clifford Geertz’s idea that culture is comprised of the everyday meanings people find to make sense of their lives and guide their actions, and that it is the goal of scholarship to attempt to engage those meanings, something that he did (and did very well) through ethnographic study, and which he called “thick description,” a term he inherited from Gilbert Ryle, the English philosopher of language (Geertz 1971; see also Rosen 1989; and Gade 2004).

So popular has the study of “lived Islam” become that, in a recent intervention into issues of “theory and method” in the field of Islamic studies, Abbas Aghdassi, an Iranian colleague, and I ended up devoting over half of a volume to the topic (Aghdassi and Hughes 2022). Magdalena Pycińska’s chapter in that book, “Everyday Islam,” for example, begins with a premise that we see in the work of Robert Orsi, one of the most astute interpreters of “lived religion,” that we should first focus on our informant’s understanding of his or her relations with God and the saints. Such understanding, she further argues, provides insights into specific intersections of social and individual categories that might not otherwise be apparent, such as issues of race, gender, class, and age (Pycińska 2022).

Lived Islam would, thus, seem to be directly related to the larger subfield of “lived religion.” Beginning in the later decades of the twentieth century, this new subfield aimed to correct what was perceived as a traditional overemphasis on the interpretation of texts and a preoccupation with studying (mainly male) elites. This shift, or so it was reasoned, allows scholars to discover that, contrary to long-held assumptions in the field about the “sacred” being a unique or distinct domain, clearly set apart from the profane, religion is actually integrated into people’s wider practices and self-understandings. Predictably, perhaps, those now studied – primarily through ethnographic methods of participant-observation – often turn out to be members of the working or lower classes as well as women and members of minority groups, i.e., people who, although historically overlooked in much of traditional scholarship, are now said to be granted by scholars a new sense of agency and thus

worth (see Hall 1997; Orsi 2006: 1–18). For some, most notably Orsi, “lived religion” as a method undermines Protestant Christian norms and assumptions in the study of religion, such as the priority put on the individual and private belief over practice (i.e., ritual) (see Orsi 2006, 187–192).

Here, however, it might be worth drawing attention to the comments of Joan Wallach Scott, who argues that making the category of experience the key to scholarship is problematic (this paragraph builds on Hughes and McCutcheon 2022a, 156–158). She asks us instead to think about often much larger historical, socio-cultural, and thus contingent conditions that determine what gets to count as an experience in the first place (Wallach Scott 1991). We should, thus, not imagine the scholar’s work as neutrally conveying observed facts since any social actor’s experience is often much more complex than supposedly uncovering authentic and subjective realities. So, rather than simply describe practices from a participant’s point of view, we ought to theorize them and their much larger social and political contexts. Wallach Scott, therefore, proposes that studying the conditions that enable the creation of things being reported as experiences should instead be the scholar’s aim. She writes, and I quote, “the evidence of experience [...] reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems,” such as those that produced the so-called experiences in the first place. The problem with such work, then, is that “the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation” (Wallach Scott 1991, 778).

Experience, the basis for the lived religion movement, therefore turns out to be a discursive product that, like any other, requires its own historicization. Those working on “lived Islam” ought to keep this in mind and theorize accordingly and as necessary.

6 Decoloniality

I now want to return to the second example I raised earlier, namely, that based on skin color, inherited trauma, and the need to decolonize the study of Islam, in addition (of course) to all other fields in the humanities.

I certainly have no problem, at least in principle, with the concept of decolonization. The Euro-West, after all, has long tended to privilege its own epistemologies over those of others. And the West has come to the collective decision that whereas the former (i.e., its own) is universally binding, the latter is imagined as particularistic and thus of limited utility. There are certainly other ways of knowing and classifying the world, however, all of which are

neither better nor worse than those systems developed in the so-called West (see the comments in Rizvi 2021). And I like to think that the two volumes that Russell McCutcheon and I recently wrote together – *Religion in 50 Words* and *Religion in 50 More Words* – show precisely that how we, i.e., the so-called West, conceptualize the world is far from universal but grounded in our own local and often parochial contexts. At the same time, and this is the proverbial other hand, the Western university – our major site of knowledge production, mobilization, and dissemination – is predicated on certain (for the most part) and agreed-upon systems of rationality (see the comments in Nye 2019). While I doubt we would ever attempt to decolonize mathematics, for example (though see Editorial 2023), the situation becomes somewhat different when it comes to the social sciences and the humanities. A canon, whether of literature or of philosophers, for example, that includes only white men, is increasingly problematic.

I certainly understand that a “decolonial” approach is an attempt to undo the logic of colonialism, something that is now associated with the Enlightenment project. The great paradox, though, is that these calls to decolonize emerge from the epicenter of the Enlightenment: the modern university. This would seem to mean that any attempt to decolonize must not simply revert to so-called indigenous epistemologies, but actually translate these epistemologies into idioms that make sense to the modern Western academia. Whether or not we can do that, of course, is the crucial question. And, if it cannot be done – or done only facilely – it will simply exclude, and we will be unable to talk to one another. Perhaps one of the more provocative attempts to do this in recent years may be found in Joseph Lombard’s “Decolonizing Qur’anic Studies” (2022). He is certainly correct to note that “the extensive research in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Indonesian and other languages is rarely cited in work written in European languages” (Lombard 2022, 2).³ Western approaches to the Qur’an (and Islam), he argues, tend to be imagined as superior to these indigenous traditions. Lombard continues, stating that,

[w]ithin this structure of Qur’anic Studies in the Euro-American academy, one is still required to subscribe to a universal epistemological hierarchy in which secular Eurocentric approaches to the text are given pride of place. Such privileging ensures that indigenous Muslim approaches to the text are relegated to the status of “information supply.” They are seen as efficacious when they serve

3 My comments in this paragraph build upon Hughes 2023, 2, though the point I make here is significantly different.

the purposes of, and can be incorporated into, a Euro-American epistemological hierarchy, but in and of themselves, they are not permitted to generate alternative epistemic discourses, much less call into question the ideological foundations of Euro-American scholars who selectively draw vittles from their larder. (Lumbard 2022, 3)

This returns us to the question of who gets to speak for and about Islam. And this question, whether we like it or not, now seems to be omnipresent.

Lumbard's comments above are significant here because they allow me to address briefly something that I maintain remains central to the argument in *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity*, namely that of the role of the academic convert to the religion that he or she studies, something that takes us to the heart of the insider/outsider paradox that often strangleholds the larger field of religion (Hughes 2015, 57–74, esp. 62–67). I tried to begin the process of theorizing this in the volume, and noted how difficult it can be to do so, but more work needs to be done on this. Blurring the line between insider/outsider, the academic convert has found some sort of religious or spiritual connection with what he or she studies, something that is more than just academic. Yet, in converting, I would hope that one would be aware, acutely aware, of one's new scholarly voice. One cannot just pass over this in silence or pretend that it is neither unimportant nor insignificant.

Like the dentist in Seinfeld who admits he converted to Judaism for the jokes, there must be some sort of acknowledgment. It is not simply irrelevant to scholarly practices because it involves so-called "spiritual" states. Indeed, one could argue that there can be no pure or proper "spiritual" state since every state, to return us to the above-mentioned comments by Joan Wallach Scott, is ultimately socially and politically constructed and understandable. The convert-scholar – and their calls for decoloniality – obviously imagines something in Islam that his or her old tradition neither had nor could provide. What was it? How, just as importantly, does this presumably spiritual lack in their old religious tradition color their judgment of Islam, on the one hand, and the tradition they left, on the other? And, speaking of color, can one simply change one's skin or one's background through conversion?

I submit this is as relevant today as when I broached the subject ten years ago, and it is something that we need to think about, especially in contexts such as those mentioned in Lumbard. He seems to take on the language of coloniality, post-coloniality, and decoloniality in a body that is otherwise marked as white. This, it strikes me, is highly significant in religious studies in particular and the humanities more generally.

7 Conclusions

The two examples I examined in this chapter reveal, I trust, that to study “religion on the ground” (another name for “lived religion”) or to engage in projects of decoloniality, as important as they can be, must not go un- or undertheorized. Both reflect much larger social, economic, and political (read: ideological) forces that, if we simply ignore them, will lead to superficiality.

By way of conclusions, allow me to quote from the words of Mahmoud Darwish, the great Palestinian poet: “Identity is our legacy not our inheritance, our invention and not our memory.” The poet sees what the academician overlooks. We say a lot of things for all sorts of reasons and in the study of religion we often do this to establish our own authority. In classical Orientalism, this authority came from learning languages, reading texts, and making sense of peoples halfway around the world. In our critique and dismantling of Orientalism, however, authority needed to be constructed and established in other ways. The default position of authority now seems to be in the identity – and thus the perceived authenticity – of the individual or group in question.

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Mid-East by North-West: Locating Islamic Studies in Religious Studies

Oliver Scharbrodt

1 Introduction¹

The title of this contribution, “Mid-East by North-West,” is inspired by Alfred Hitchcock’s 1959 spy thriller *North by Northwest*, starring Cary Grant. In the film, an ordinary man is mistaken for someone else and pursued across the United States by agents of a clandestine organization trying to prevent him from thwarting their plan to smuggle out a microfilm containing government secrets. A summary of the film on Wikipedia (n.d.) notes that, “despite its popular appeal, the film is considered to be a masterpiece for its themes of deception, mistaken identity, and moral relativism in the Cold War era.” This quote also provides the subtext for this chapter, which explores deception, mistaken identities, and relativism in the context of Religious Studies.

The title *North by North-West* is a bit of a mystery, but may refer to the compass direction, north-northwest, which is midway between north and northwest. It is perhaps inspired by a line from *Hamlet*: “I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw” (2.2.378–9). In this line, Hamlet tries to convince his friends Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that his moments of insanity are just pretensions hiding his actual sense of reality. Hamlet appears to be referring to an Elizabethan notion that melancholy grows worse when the wind comes from the north. His madness worsens when the wind is northerly, and the sky is cloudy. When the wind is southerly, the sky is clear, and so is his mind, allowing him to tell one thing from another (Gowland 2024).

By using this spatial trope, “Mid-East by North-West,” I intend to address the positionality and directionality of Islamic Studies in Western academia, specifically how Islamic Studies has positioned itself within academic institutions in Europe and North America. “North-West” refers to both the dual positionality

1 This chapter is partially based on my inaugural lecture as Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Chester, delivered on 19 January 2017, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8toHqjLwYo&list=PL39C7A34C01B44378&index=15> (accessed 22 January 2025).

of Islamic Studies within academic contexts of the Global North and the diversity of assumptions about what the academic study of Islam should entail at Western universities. “North” here designates the wealth and resources available to European and North American universities and the cultural and intellectual power that comes with them. “West” refers to the hegemony of certain intellectual vantage points from which religions in general, and Islam specifically, have been approached at European and North American universities. While European and North American traditions around Islamic Studies are diverse and contested, they are still part of a collective discursive and intellectual field that shares more than it separates, allowing for cross-Atlantic conversations among North American and European academics working in Islamic Studies (Stenberg and Wood 2022). Power relations are inherent in contested academic representations of Islam and constitutive of different modes of exclusion and inclusion. These modes pertain to the disciplinary boundaries delineating a field of study – in this case, Islamic Studies – and what constitutes a valid knowledge claim within this field and who can make such a claim.

2 Deception: “Tell Me Lies, Tell Me Sweet Little Lies”

Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017) addresses “disciplinary lying” in one of his articles (Smith 2019). He argues that university teaching about religion is often predicated on two great lies about knowledge, both of which hide the process of knowledge behind the veil of a finished, easily delivered product. One, teachers are often guilty of a little white lie that “consistently disguise[s], in our introductory courses, what is problematic about our work” (Smith 2019, 124). We simplify ideas to deliver them in the classroom – presenting knowledge as monolithic, rather than constructed by scholars over time. A grander lie that Smith names is the disciplinary lie that one can master a discipline without following a step-by-step process of unmasking and deconstructing assumptions about it. He calls this lie necessary but suggests that it is a symptom of the institutional structure of academia. For Smith, the academic enterprise as a whole is “an exaggeration in the direction of the truth” (2019, 129). We are particularly guilty of the little white lie when, in introductory courses, we present different religious traditions – for pedagogical reasons – as neat entities with clear, essential characteristics marking them as unique and distinct. We struggle to deliver a finished, easily delivered product while being conscious of the problematic and constructed demarcations between different religions. This is Islam. This is Christianity. This is Hinduism. This is Buddhism. Perhaps Smith’s description of this approach as a lie is an overstatement, “an exaggeration in

the direction of truth,” to use his own words. However, it raises legitimate questions about the representation, the discursive framing, and the image of a religion, especially when we talk about Islam.

With the spatial trope “Mid-East by North-West,” I intend to raise some queries about the position of Islamic Studies in Western academia. First, I would like to highlight the politically, economically, culturally, and intellectually hegemonic position of the (North-)West towards the Middle East – a sense of superiority that has marked the academic and intellectual engagement with the Middle East and Islam since the inception of Oriental Studies at European and North American universities. In this context, Edward Said’s (1935–2003) seminal critique of *Orientalism* (2019[1978]) comes to mind. At the same time, I want to point out the problematic equation of the Middle East with Islam. As Talal Asad has noted, the problem with Orientalist research and its repercussions in his own discipline, Anthropology, is that it considers Islam as being Middle Eastern and Christianity as European, ignoring the Middle Eastern origins of Christianity and the significant historical and contemporary presence of Christians, Jews, and many other religions in the region as well as the global presence of Islam, which is as much a European religion as Christianity and Judaism, historically and today (Asad 1986, 2–3). The establishment of area studies departments has further solidified this problematic and highly inadequate equation: Islam is done in Oriental or – in current nomenclature – Middle Eastern Studies Departments. This is certainly a disciplinary lie that has been justifiably critiqued and is gradually being undone. Yet, despite Said’s critique of Orientalism, we still treat the Middle East as exceptional, even in naming the region. We no longer talk about the Far East, but refer to East Asia, South Asia, or Central Asia, but the Middle East has remained the Middle East. The more accurate and neutral designation, West Asia, has gained little traction. Even more curiously, when we refer to the ancient pre-Islamic Middle East, we tend to talk about the Near East – as if we want to suggest that the ancient Near East, as the cradle of “Western civilization,” is nearer to Europe than the contemporary Islamic Middle East.

Said’s highly influential *Orientalism* has changed the assumptions of Islamic Studies as his uncovering of the disciplinary lies of Oriental, Middle Eastern, and Islamic Studies. For Said, Orientalism describes the attitude of Western academic scholars towards the Middle East, its peoples, societies, cultures, and religions, particularly Islam. It is a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between Orient and Occident. Orientalism engages in a discourse of otherness: the belief in the inherent difference of the Orient compared with the Occident. The Orient as the ideal-typical “Other.” All the values of Western civilization stand in complete contrast to the Orient:

the Orient is sensual, traditional, superstitious, capricious, and backward – the Occident is rational, modern, progressive, reliable, and moral. Said analyses the political, scholarly, economic and cultural attitudes of Anglo-American and French intellectuals toward “the Orient” and sees Orientalism as an intellectual tool of colonialism – structuring, defining, describing the Orient as a discourse to facilitate its subjugation: “Orientalism as discourse of domination, both a product of the European subjugation of the Middle East, and an instrument in this process” (Halliday 1993, 149). Given the political purposes which Oriental Studies served, its scholarship, for Said, produced distortions and inaccuracies about Islam and the Middle East as the Orient is essentialized and reduced to inherent characteristics in opposition to the West.

Said’s work had an enormous impact and has been critiqued and discussed since its publication. This is not the place to rehearse all the arguments. No doubt, his book has its weaknesses, acknowledged by Said himself. To return to Smith again, Said’s book is “an exaggeration” but “in the direction of truth.” I would like to point out two problematic conclusions often drawn by colleagues in Islamic Studies from Said’s work. There is the tendency to adopt a wholesale dismissal of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Orientalist scholarship as being tainted by its complicity in European colonialism. Not all scholarship produced in problematic political circumstances needs to be illegitimate. In addition, the major omission of Said’s work – pointed out by numerous critics – is his complete lack of engagement with German Orientalist scholarship in the 19th century. Perhaps this omission is not entirely accidental; his Orientalism–colonialism nexus works well in the context of Britain, France, and the US, but not so well with Germany, which pioneered Oriental Studies in the 19th century yet was not a major colonial power.

Colonialism was not that significant for the establishment of German Islamic Studies – the rise of Biblical criticism was much more crucial. Early scholars were theologians-turned-philologists who combined Old Testament studies with Hebrew and Arabic. While these scholars certainly exhibited a strong sense of cultural superiority, and had internalized, as Dietrich Jung suggests, “the colonial habitus of European intellectuals” (2011, 36), their research agendas were not primarily shaped by advancing German colonial interests in the Middle East. One good example of the actual foundations of German Oriental Studies is Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), without whom modern Islamic Studies as an academic discipline would not be what it is today. Goldziher’s work does not receive the attention it deserves nowadays. His Jewish background does not play an insignificant role here, given the pervasiveness of latent anti-Semitism and dismissive attitudes towards the founding figures of Orientalist scholarship. Nevertheless, he shaped the field like no other scholar.

Resonating with this chapter's trope of mistaken identities, various complex identity dynamics unfold in Goldziher's scholarship on Islam. Born into a Hungarian Jewish family, he was attracted to Reform Judaism, adopting a modern Protestant understanding of his own tradition and seeing religion primarily as a source of morality in private life. At the same time, rejecting Zionism, he was a Hungarian nationalist at a time when Hungary was still part of the Austrian Empire. While he rejected the ritualism and dogmatism of Christianity and Judaism, he saw Islam as a rational religion, embodying the unspoiled purity and authenticity of "true religion." For Goldziher, Islam was the perfect manifestation of Friedrich Schleiermacher's notion of a feeling of total dependence on an almighty God. Yet, like Judaism and Christianity, Islam, as a historical religion, had been distorted by dogmas and rituals and lost the original purity of its ethical message (Jung 2011, 170–182). Goldziher is an early Orientalist who does not fit the image of Said's archetypal Orientalist: the intellectual mastermind behind European colonialism. He occupied too many marginal in-between spaces: a Hungarian Jew who rejected assimilation but supported Hungarian nationalism, who, to his own regret, published in German rather than in Hungarian, and who – as a Jew – performed Muslim prayers while travelling through the Middle East (Kramer 1999). It is impossible to accuse him of complicity in European colonialism, though he was certainly not free of the intellectual "colonial habitus" and its associated sense of European cultural superiority. If we could make one reprimand against him, if he told one "sweet little lie," it is his projection of an idealized image of what religion should be onto an ahistorical Islam. His disdain for Islam as a historical tradition is not larger or smaller than the disdain he showed towards Judaism or Christianity.

In addition to Said's "exaggeration in the direction of truth" overlooking sympathetic and romanticized views of Islam, his work has also created another, more serious impasse in Islamic Studies: silence. Many colleagues in Islamic Studies have rightfully observed that the rejection of old Orientalist intellectual paradigms and the development of post-Orientalist approaches entail the danger of going to the other extreme: favouring sympathetic "insider" accounts. The diversification of Islamic Studies and the inclusion of "insider" voices are certainly needed and important steps. However, this should not happen at the expense of historical-critical research, in particular on the origins of Islam, by branding it as inherently Orientalist. Said concluded that, because of its political nature and complicity with colonialism, Orientalism has misrepresented the Middle East. He went even further, arguing that there cannot be an adequate representation of the Middle East. His conclusion, however, is rather dissatisfying. If there cannot be any representation of the Middle East, why

should we as academics in Islamic, Religious, or Middle Eastern Studies keep trying to do our job and represent it in academic discourse? There is a danger that the legitimate deconstruction of Orientalism leads to a deconstruction into silence.

I find contributions from the Anthropology of Islam particularly helpful in developing a theoretical framework for redefining the study of Islam and Muslims in a post-Orientalist context. The Anthropology of Islam examines the indigenization of Islam in various contexts, the dynamics between dominant and demotic traditions, and the coexistence of normative discourses and popular religious practices. Participant observation with a bottom-up approach, where the researcher temporarily joins a community, observes, and to some extent participates in its life and practices, is used to situate negotiations of Islamic identities in complex and contradictory real-life contexts. Such an anthropological bottom-up approach makes an important contribution towards overcoming the essentializing tendencies of Orientalist scholarship. Investigating real-life Islam or lived Islam in different social, regional, and cultural contexts certainly highlights the diversity of Islam and de-objectifies Muslims. Muslims are not blind followers of a strict, oppressive, and inflexible tradition but – like adherents to all religions – engage critically with it, negotiate its demands and teachings, and most importantly, are not simply Muslims but constitute “a complex empirical reality” (Jeldtoft 2009, 10). Muslims are always positioned in a complicated, contested, and relational nexus of various identity markers such as nationality, culture, language, class, gender, and others.

The anthropologist's eye for local variation, difference, and diversity is important to deconstruct essentialist images of Islam and Muslims and to avoid reifying the religion. As a consequence, some anthropologists of Islam, like el-Zein (1977), reject the existence of Islam as an empirical reality altogether and refer to plural different “islams” to account for the diversity and differences they have encountered in different societies, different social classes, diverse cultures, and so on. For these anthropologists, the idea of a normative Islamic tradition with certain essential features that span different cultures and societies, creating a sense of unity and showing certain continuities over time, is a construct that affirms essentialized notions of Islam. Throughout time and in different parts of the world, Muslims have created their own “islams.” However, for anthropologists like Dale F. Eickelman (1989), the assumed co-existence of different “islams” does not account for the competition and contestation around orthodoxy and normativity. The distinction between great and little traditions, between official Islam and popular Islam, is a useful starting point for delineating struggles between normative and

demotic discourses and practices in Islam, as Otterbeck (2021, 50) also points out. However, it remains too simplistic a binary, furthering an essentialization of Islam in different social contexts.

I find Talal Asad's understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition useful for overcoming the impasse resulting from the post-Orientalist deconstruction into silence. His 1986 white paper, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," is a good example of the time it can take for academic contributions to have an impact on the discipline. In a rejection of both essentialist and nominalist approaches to Islam, Asad defines Islam as a discursive tradition. Islam instructs followers to perform certain practices because they have a history. Islamic discourse refers to the past, when practices were instituted, and seeks to secure them for the future through their present links with other social institutions and relations. A practice is Islamic because it is justified by referring to the discursive tradition of Islam and its various sources of authority, like the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. In proper Foucauldian terms, Asad considers discourses of orthodoxy as a power relation: orthodoxy is defined and resisted in this power relation, and particular practices are justified by providing reasons and arguments with reference to an authoritative discursive tradition. Hence, the diversity of the Islamic tradition depends on the different contexts in which these discursive struggles over orthodoxy occur, while a sense of unity is created across these diverse discursive formations through references to the same sources of authority and the effort of discourses of orthodoxy to achieve coherence with the past (Asad 1986, 14–17).

Seán McLoughlin (2007) develops the implications of Asad's and Eickelman's contributions, with reference to Pierre Bourdieu. McLoughlin triangulates between social structures in which Muslims are embedded and their impact, the efficacy and authority of Islamic tradition and community, a sort of "Muslim habitus," and the demotic processes of individual Muslim religiosities. From this, he argues that conceptions of Islamic tradition are shaped by diverse social structures but are not entirely formed by them. Likewise, individual religiosities are not mirror images of authoritative Muslim discourses but rather relate to them in complex and dynamic ways.

Muslim engagement with their religion individually and collectively, across time and place, creates something that Otterbeck describes as "a discourse consisting of a multitude of power practices – enunciations in words, deeds, texts, symbols, even emotions – backing up or challenging what is taken to be Islam" (2021, 48). This process of enunciatory interventions is not arbitrary but imbued with power relations, defined by the material, political, social, cultural, or spiritual capital of Muslims participating in the discursive formation of Islam. For Asad, the unity of Islam as a discursive tradition lies in having

the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad as authoritative reference points. While this is certainly true, it implies a particular monolithic understanding of the ontological, epistemological, and authoritative status of these reference points. In reality, throughout Islamic intellectual history, these sources have been defined differently. Cosmological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of God and the act of divine self-disclosure define the understanding of the authoritative sources and approaches to interpreting them: Islamic philosophers uphold the primacy of reason and understand the act of divine self-disclosure as an intellectual process; for Sufis, divine revelation is constant and manifest in a cosmic spiritual experience of oneness with God, realized through the intermediary role of the Prophet Muhammad; for Islamic jurists, the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions are sources to deduce laws; for theologians, they are a repository to establish creedal propositions (Ahmad 2015, 347–356). To overcome the reification of Islam, it is insufficient to simply distinguish between normative Islam and lived Islam. We need to move beyond this dichotomy. The diversity and capaciousness of Islam are visible not only in the lived realities of Muslims and their demotic engagements with their traditions in various contexts, but also in the diverse and competing normativities of Islamic intellectual traditions with their different conceptualisations of God, revelation, the Qur'an, and the figure of the Prophet Muhammad (Bauer 2021).

3 Mistaken Identities: “Baby, It’s Cold Outside”

Orientalist scholarship, with its inherent sense of European cultural superiority, favors the intellectual vantage point of Western, non-Muslim outsider scholars as being better capable of understanding Islam and the Middle East than Muslim insiders themselves. This question of privileged intellectual vantage points takes us to one of the perennial problems in Religious Studies: the so-called insider/outsider problem (McCutcheon 1999; Knott 2010). Much has been written on this topic, which I view as one of the great disciplinary lies of Religious Studies, or as Jeppe Sinding Jensen (2011) calls it, a “pseudo-problem.” The insider/outsider debate may be helpful in introductory courses to create awareness among first-year students about the various ways one can study religions, but beyond that, I am unsure how useful this distinction is. The insider/outsider distinction did play an important role in the emancipation of Religious Studies from Theology and is often rehearsed by scholars from both disciplines to delineate disciplinary boundaries. The actual roots of the insider/outsider dichotomy lie in the modernist religious/secular binary.

Ninian Smart (1927–2001) calls for “methodological agnosticism,” the strategic suspension of truth claims and one’s own religious perspective when engaging in the academic study of religions (Smart 1981, 54–58). This call mirrors the secular paradigm of a religiously neutral public sphere: private reason can be diverse and religious, but public reason needs to conform to liberal and secular principles to create a shared discursive platform. Translated into a Religious Studies context: both teacher and student should leave their religious beliefs outside of the classroom.

The insider/outsider distinction is problematic not only because of its roots in a modernist, liberal, secular paradigm but also because it ultimately misses the point. Jensen and Knott have complicated the debate further by arguing that there is no complete insider and outsider in Religious Studies, only different degrees of being an insider and an outsider in relation to a particular religious tradition. This is another “an exaggeration in the direction of the truth.” For Aaron W. Hughes, “there really can be no ‘inside’ because we all are, whether we admit it or not or whether we like it or not, writing from outside” (2015, 6). We can only claim to be full insiders if we construct an essentialist and reified notion of a religion. In reality, religious traditions are not only diverse – there are Catholics, Protestants, Sunnis, Shiis, and so on – and nobody can be part of every variation. Our own position can never be totally inside a whole tradition. A 21st-century British-born Muslim is not an insider of 11th-century Andalusian Islam or even contemporary Islam in the Gulf or Central Asia. Thus, the insider/outsider problem does what post-Orientalist academic scholarship on religion should not do: it essentializes the academic researcher and the respective religious traditions they study.

The insider/outsider debate also overemphasizes the religiousness or non-religiousness of individual identities. In Religious Studies, we tend to take religion very seriously – probably too seriously. While other disciplines like History, Sociology, Anthropology, or Cultural Studies might touch upon religion, we put it at the center of our investigation. This is valid as an intellectual exercise, particularly because of secular prejudices still dominant in other disciplines, which tend to ignore the religious side of human identities and social structures. However, it becomes misleading when we intend to denote the intellectual vantage points that distinguish Religious Studies from more confessional approaches.

The assumption of the outsider’s religious neutrality is equally problematic. A secular outsider perspective is based on certain ideological parameters and, therefore, not ideologically neutral, as it allows and disallows the articulation of certain identity markers to create a religiously neutral secular academic space. Such an intellectual space, shaped by certain modes of inclusion and

exclusion, is filled with power relations. Jesper Petersen and Anders Ackfeldt (2023) convincingly illustrate how non-Muslims play an important role in the production of Islam, shaping the understanding and images of Islam in European and North American societies and often impacting how Muslims themselves understand their religion. However, both also suggest that their concept of “non-Muslim Islam introduces an ideal of value neutrality and a program of the de-politicization to the study of Islam” (Petersen and Ackfeldt 2023, 252) to champion and re-assert an etic perspective. Non-Muslim politicians, journalists, public intellectuals and debaters, courts, and institutions create and disseminate images of Islam, define it legally, or delineate it from other religions and worldviews ideologically and organisationally. Academic studies of Islam are, for Petersen and Ackfeldt, somehow different: they are “driven by curiosity” (2023, 253), do not engage in “ontological debates on Islam” (2023, 254), and therefore do not produce non-Muslim Islam. I would argue that non-Muslim academics working on Islam, even if they do not intend to make normative propositions about Islam, are equally involved in the production of non-Muslim Islam: “all academic conceptualizations of Islam are both etic and emic at the same time – they carry normative and performative nature in themselves” (Al-Daghistani 2024, 129). Knowledge claims made in academic studies of Islam, which do not aim to define Islam normatively, nevertheless do something to Islam through their performance within an academic institutional context and its power. Otterbeck alerts us to the need to consider the power relations in enunciations of what is Islam by Muslims (and non-Muslims). Why should we not consider the power relations in academic enunciations about what Islam is, as a historical phenomenon or social reality? Why should the (non-Muslim) academic researcher studying Islam be exempt from questions about “the importance of power, the cognitive power of naming, and the semiotic resources mobilised by enunciations”? (Otterbeck 2021, 47).

Another question related to this debate is the observation above, that the separation between insider and outsider reflects a modernist secular paradigm that distinguishes between the religious and the secular, between private and public reason, and relegates religion to the private sphere. The question is, however: is the secular, non-confessional preference for the outsider perspective in Religious Studies, the “bracketing” of one’s beliefs and the adoption of “methodological agnosticism,” a continuation of Eurocentric hegemonic discourses on Islam and other non-European religious traditions, another “Mid-East by North-West” from the privileged vantage point of Western secular liberalism? There is also the question of whether this separation of academic scholarship from identity politics, demanded quite vocally by contemporary scholars like

Hughes in the context of Islamic Studies, is also only a viable option for white or white-presenting, European, male academics, because their identity is normative, hegemonic, and constitutes normality. For female academics and academics from minoritized racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, this is not a viable or easily accessible option because they deviate from normative constructions of what an academic persona at a university is supposed to be due to their gender, religion, race, or ethnicity.

That it is impossible to separate academic scholarship from questions of identity and power relations is evident in the changing demographics in academia more generally and in Religious Studies and Islamic Studies more specifically. We see the increasingly important role that university-trained children or grandchildren of immigrants of a Muslim background play, whose very presence and contributions challenge hegemonic academic discourses. This new generation also includes female Muslim academics who challenge both Eurocentric representations of their own religious tradition, filled with Orientalist stereotypes on issues of inequality and patriarchy in their own traditions, and universalist and secularist tendencies in modern feminist assumptions about female emancipation and agency. The new demographic profile also includes converts to these religions and students from Muslim-majority countries who undertake postgraduate degrees at European and North American universities to advance their academic careers in their countries of origin. Some of these new scholars might keep their religious beliefs separate from their academic engagement with religions, concealing their religious background as part of their academic persona, playing with the ambiguities of their identities – all for various legitimate reasons: they might not be religious at all; they might think their religious beliefs is nobody else's business; they might want to be recognized solely for their academic achievements or to counter any suggestion that they teach Islam because they are followers of this religion; they might not want to be pigeonholed as a "Muslim academic" or might feel they have better chances to find a job if they keep their religious identity open or ambiguous. All these strategies to create an academic persona are, in my view, completely legitimate.

For some, however, the demand to separate their religious beliefs and backgrounds from their academic work is not possible. For someone who carries their religion in their name, who wears a hijab, a Sikh turban, a Jewish kippa, or a beard for apparently religious reasons – even if they wanted to leave their biographies and backgrounds outside of the classroom – they often cannot do it. Their students and peers often automatically project assumptions, presumptions, clichés, and stereotypes about the "Muslim woman" or the "Sikh man" onto them. They can change their names, shave their beards, or take off

their hijabs and create a tale of mistaken identities and deception, but they might not want to. Hence, this demand to separate one's religious biography from one's academic work is easier to fulfil for male European academics. As a secular cultural or vaguely Christian background is inscribed onto their bodies and normalized in Western academia, they can leave their religious identity outside of the classroom because they do not carry it with them all the time.

The rise of identity politics in North American academia, which Hughes has been critical of, deserves critique. The assumption that Muslim academics and researchers possess a privileged epistemological vantage point for studying Islam compared to non-Muslims upholds the emic–etic dichotomy and prioritizes the former over the latter in response to previously dominant secular paradigms and outsider perspectives in Islamic Studies. As demographic changes and post-Orientalist conceptualizations of Islamic Studies impact the field, there is a need to transcend emic–etic/insider–outsider binaries. A Muslim academic in Islamic Studies needs to be able to engage critically with their own tradition without being given a simplistic binary choice between theologizing Islam as part of its normative discursive construction or adopting “methodological agnosticism” to make valid academic interventions in Religious Studies (Al-Daghistani 2024). Equally, the critique of identity politics in North American academia and its foundation in the insider/outsider distinction should not preclude a critical engagement with epistemological privilege, which has been bestowed on white male academics at European and North American universities. A critique of such ethnic, racial, religious, and gender privilege, and the power relations connected to such identity markers, should seek to broaden participation in academic debates and does not need to entail embracing naïve identity politics, which privileges insider perspectives.

4 Conclusion: Relativism, Diversity, and Humility

What is needed to take Islamic Studies forward is a middle-ground between identity politics privileging Muslim insider academics and the elevation of an etic perspective as somehow “apolitical,” more scholarly, and neutral. While it is impossible to separate academic scholarship from power relations around identity and positionality, in a Religious Studies context, academic scholarship needs to move beyond identity politics to make serious academic interventions towards understanding religious traditions, their history, their roles in societies, as well as individual religiosities, and much more. Academic scholarship is often biographically motivated, but to be a relevant academic contribution to Religious Studies, this scholarship needs to move beyond autobiographical

self-reflection and personal phenomenology. For an academic project to be viable and meaningful, it needs to transcend the personal and biographical – despite their importance as motivating factors – and make a contribution to the field that is relevant to researchers regardless of their backgrounds and positionalities. Ensuring the viability and meaningfulness of an academic project also ought to include a recognition of the positionality of the researcher, of the institutional, cultural, and political power relations connected to one's academic position at a European or North American university, and of the relativity and provisionality of all knowledge claims. Such a move should instill a sense of humility and openness to diverse perspectives and approaches in Islamic Studies.

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Superdiversity: Reflections on a Concept Inspired by Otterbeckian Warnings

Garbi Schmidt

Some academic concepts gain popularity so overwhelmingly that they change the gaze of an entire field. One such concept is that of “superdiversity.” The concept was coined in an article by anthropologist Steven Vertovec in 2007 (2007). At the time of writing – and according to Google Scholar – the article has so far been cited no less than 9,600 times, and according to the journal on *Ethnic and Racial Studies* that published the article, it has been downloaded a staggering 65,567 times.¹

The immense popularity of the concept was underlined by the IMISCOE international conference, which took place in Warsaw in 2022. Jonas Otterbeck generously allowed me to stay in a room in his rented Airbnb apartment. Apart from our discussions about life, music, and beer, we also talked about the conference and what we learned from it. One aspect clearly annoyed Jonas a lot; the repeated use of the concept of superdiversity across the paper presentations. It was not so much that the concept was used repeatedly that caused Jonas’ frustration – it was more that people just used it without considering the concept’s implications and without much critical reflection. The concept was everywhere at the conference, but its contribution was frequently debatable. The concept was, most of all, an empty but powerful signifier. Jonas and I laughed a little over it all, and I do not think he was aware of what I took with me from that conversation. I continued to use the concept, but it was somewhat different and more cautious than before. Although I had used and critically reflected on the concept in some articles (e.g., Schmidt 2015), Jonas’ frustration inspired me to dig deeper and with more significant curiosity.

In this chapter, I attempt to accomplish three things. First, I describe the concept of superdiversity based on Steven Vertovec’s writings (2023). Second, I introduce what I see as two missing but needed ways to approach and work with the concept of superdiversity, both inspired by my work with migration to Denmark in the *longue durée* and thus integrating both historical and

1 As of 21 February, 2025.

ethnographic methods in my study. Finally, I offer a concrete example of how this work can be done.

1 The Concept of Superdiversity

In his article from 2007, Vertovec defined superdiversity as follows:

I wish, firstly, to underscore the fact that in addition to more people now migrating from more places, significant new conjunctions and interactions of variables have arisen through patterns of immigration [...] Secondly, then, the article serves as a call – or at least reminder – to social scientists and policy-makers to take more sufficient account of the conjunction of ethnicity with a range of other variables when considering the nature of various “communities”, their composition, trajectories, interactions and public service needs. (2007, 1025)

When Vertovec, in 2023, dedicated an entire book to a discussion of the concept and how it had been used in migration research over the last 16 years, he first stressed that superdiversity “is a concept coined to convey the multidimensional nature of diversification processes and how these condition social patterns and stratification” (Vertovec 2023, 2). Second, he underlined (quoting his 2007 article) that “super-diversity is not a theory. I regard theory as providing an account of how-things-work” (Vertovec 2023, 6). The superdiversity concept is thus, first and foremost, a descriptive concept that helps us understand the increasing complexity of our societies. One central variable in this complex is that of (im)migration. A superdiverse society or superdiverse social entities (e.g., cities) are – at least if we follow Vertovec’s continuing mentioning thereof – societies and social entities affected by migration.

While superdiversity depends on migration, it also depends on other variables, including country of origin, legal status, language, ethnicity, religion, locality, and material conditions, transnational ties and practices, and the responses of national and local authorities to diversity (Vertovec 2007). Unsurprisingly, this diversification of variables has also fostered what Vertovec himself has called a myriad of ways to describe the implications of superdiversity – and that for multiple purposes (2023, 50). It is, of course, valid to ask how the concept of superdiversity can be helpful when it may cover so many themes. Moreover, although being a matter of description, the portrayal of multidimensionality and intersectionality also includes (which Vertovec also recognizes) a focus on causalities (e.g., Vertovec 2023, 165). However, are these causalities always obvious? Does more migration, more religious diversity, and

a more intense transnationality and transnationalization (Fauser et al. 2013, 2) lead to more robust and eventually more diversified responses from legislators? In the following, I will briefly analyze two cases from Denmark, highlighting the difficulty of working with this type of assumed causality.

2 Histories of (Super)Diversity: Numbers

Why is it at all relevant to talk about superdiversity? An apparent reason must be that something in our societies has changed – discussing diversity is no longer enough. Two essential and confirming arguments for having to make this change are: 1) societies have become more complex because of immigration and globalization, and 2) National and international legislation, and the diversification and increasing complexity thereof, are evidence of the response to increasing superdiversity.

Without denying the existence of an ongoing diversification of diversity, I will maintain that details in asserting the development hereof are lacking. The concept of superdiversity builds on historical perspectives that are rarely acknowledged but where greater scrutiny is necessary. How can we say something is “super” if we know little about when societies were “only” diverse? This is also a question historians of migration raise (Morawska 2001, 177; Foner 2017, 50). I argue that research through the lens of superdiversity and the utilization of the concept requires far more serious engagement with historical data than is currently the case (Schmidt 2015; Schmidt 2026).

One place to start the evaluation could be a critical assessment of the move from diversity to superdiversity, is often, and obviously, statistics. However, working from this angle can be rather complicated – at least if you want to take a long leap back in time. Taking Denmark as a case, we might assume that the country in the 19th century (where the first statistical yearbooks describing the nation’s demography appeared) was religiously and ethnically homogeneous. Diversity was not even an issue. However, we face some difficulties if we want to bolster this assumption with statistical evidence. It is remarkable when the 1880 national census report states the following about difficulties in asserting the number of immigrants:

For Denmark proper, it must be assumed that in the decade between the two last censuses, almost 40000 more persons have emigrated than those who have simultaneously immigrated to the country. Whether the population size has had such a considerable decrease due to relocation is not possible to determine

based on the existing information about the matter. *About the size of immigration, absolutely nothing is known.* (Statistics Denmark 1883, III. My emphasis)

The reason state statisticians could state without hesitation that nothing was known about the size of immigration stemmed from several factors. To give a trustworthy estimate, the number of immigrants from different countries had to be known and recorded by these countries – and the immigrants should, of course, also be counted and registered when they arrived in Denmark. However, this type of coordination between European statistical offices or a mandate given to Danish authorities to count immigrants did not exist. When a new Foreigner Act was enacted in 1875, immigrants were expected to get a so-called *opholdsbog* (document verifying their right to stay and work in Denmark). However, not all immigrants got this document – just as their employers did not always register their foreign workers (although they were expected to). Moreover, when did an immigrant become an immigrant, after all? No international definitions of immigrants existed in the 19th century.

Besides the difficulty associated with counting came the intention of counting. National censuses and statistical yearbooks did not focus on everything, but on a selection of themes. It was not until the national census of 1850 that respondents in the census were asked about their birthplace. Ten years earlier, Danish statistical yearbooks began to include tables on the number of confessors to foreign religions (*Antallet af fremmede Religionsbekendere*). It is also in this table that we find the first quantitative evidence of a Muslim living in Denmark (Statistics Denmark, 1842, XV). However, the number of foreign believers was probably imprecise because it was not the respondents in the census who reported what religion they belonged to; instead, the different denominations reported the size of their flock to the authorities.

This is not to say that the statistical reports showed a lack of interest in diversity, broadly speaking. Statistics are a way to enhance the understanding of diversity. However, the types of diversity that historical Danish statistical reports showed interest in were different from those that are of interest today. Mental illness and different types of both mental and physical disabilities were themes often dealt with in older yearbooks. To give an example, in the 1880 census report, a table giving insights into what was called “abnormal individuals” (*abnorme Individer*) appeared – just after the tables including information about birthplace and foreign believers. Humans in this table were categorized as either “deaf,” “deaf and dumb,” “blind,” “idiots,” or “mentally ill” (see, e.g., Statistics Denmark, 1883, CVI–CXVI). Similarly, in the 1930 report, there was a focus on *Anstalter* (institutions), which included orphanages, correction

institutions, prisons, poorhouses, and *Abnorm- and Vanføreanstalter* (institutions for “abnormal” individuals and “cripples”) (Statistics Denmark 1935, 62–63). Today, such tables are absent in national statistical yearbooks – and the wording has radically changed. However, the example underlines how statistics measure what is considered important – and in both the case of immigrants and the mentally and physically disabled – what is considered abnormal and eventually an economic burden to the nation-state. As David I. Kertzer and Dominique Arel have noted, statistics is “the most visible, and arguably the most politically important, means by which states statistically depict collective identities” (Kertzer and Arel 2001, 3). I will add that statistics are also a means to place specific collectives outside the realm of the common and accepted. Critical reflections on both the production and politics of statistics, including when certain types of information are present, when it is not, and why, should also, I argue, serve as a backdrop for the study of superdiversity.

3 Histories of (Super)Diversity: Senses

Returning to Vertovec’s suggestion of using perspectives on superdiversity to pragmatically describe multidimensionality and intersectionality also *beyond* numbers, there is one angle in the research literature on this topic that is surprisingly absent: a focus on the senses. Superdiversity, on the one hand, is presented as a perspective that can include everything from very mundane interactions to state institutions and legislative measures – but how does superdiversity feel and sound? If superdiversity points to societal transformations, from diverse societies to superdiverse societies, the perspective must also include a focus on everyday interactions, frictions, noise, and the presence of human bodies and their absence. Suppose a focus on the superdiversity of today includes a call for scrutinizing configurations of the ordinary as something extraordinary (why otherwise move from “diversity” to “superdiversity”?). In that case, it must also (at least, that is my argument) include a comparison of the ordinary between then and now.

A source I have returned to several times after first encountering it during my work on Nørrebro’s migration history is a memoir written by the woman Hedvig Toft. Like many other pensioners, and due to the encouragement of the Copenhagen Municipality, she sent her childhood memories to the Municipality’s 3rd Office in 1969. Hedvig grew up in one of the many backhouses on Baggesensgade, a street that intersects with a street many visitors to Nørrebro know: The party street Blågårdsgade. Compared to Blågårdsgade, Baggesensgade today appears dull. Aside from a few trendy wine bars,

Baggesensgade is marked by numerous similar-looking red brick apartment buildings, all constructed in the 1980s when sections of Nørrebro were renovated. Hedvig's backhouse (number 21A) was one of the many old and run-down houses that disappeared during that period.

Despite its dullness, Baggesensgade today shows signs of, for example, religious and ethnic diversity, as was evident when I moved into one of the red brick apartment buildings for a couple of days in November 2024 to carry out fieldwork. Signs of diversity were evident when I opened the window to the backyard, where I heard voices of people speaking on the phone or to each other in Danish and Arabic. (Religious) diversity was visible when I passed by the mosque located at the corner of Blågårdsgade and Baggesensgade, and where men walked in and out of the entrance door, most often just before or after ritual prayers but also at other times throughout the day. The mosque (Masjid al-Nour) is located on the ground floor at what used to be Nørrebro's telephone exchange Nora, but the tall building is now an apartment building – besides hosting small offices and the mosque. Several Palestinian flags – but also a Ukrainian flag – hung from windows in the apartment buildings. However, the question of who had placed them there and whether they represented a sign of solidarity or referred to a left homeland remained unanswered. Baggesensgade was primarily a street where people lived, and a thoroughfare people used on their way to other parts of the area.

The situation appeared quite different in the 1920s when Hedvig Toft was a child. Hedvig wrote in her memoir that

the residents of the back house were a motley crew. There were Jews, Russians, Poles, Italians, and all sorts of Danes. It was a lively place with so many people gathered in a house with four floors and dormers. Four families, usually with many children, lived on each floor in two-room apartments [...]. The better-off people lived in the front house; we did not usually associate with them.

We experienced a lot at home in our backyard with all those people. In the living room lived a Jewish family of tailors who had bugs, which became a nuisance for Mother. After all, we lived just above them, on the 1st floor. I remember that 'the bugs had to be gassed.' Next to the tailor lived an elderly Russian couple. The wife always went on the loo wearing a fur coat [...]

Mrs. Larsen lived next door to us. During the day she worked at a shoe factory in Stengade, but in the evening she was a very nice lady with a big hat, white polar fox and very high-heeled shoes [...] We children thought she was a lovely lady. We got balloons from her because mother helped her when she had to fold clothes. One night, I woke up to a noise on the stairs. It was Mrs. Larsen who ran up and slammed the door, and a man was standing down in the yard shouting

that she was a stupid bitch. He wanted his 5 kroner back. I asked mother what that meant. After that, we did not get any more balloons; mother did not talk to her anymore [...]

My best friend lived next door to us. She was Jewish. I was so captivated when I came into their apartment, and they would have macaroni for dinner. The mother used the entire dining table to roll the dough and cut it into strips. I was allowed to eat with them when the food was ready. When my family had roast pork for dinner, she was allowed to eat with us [...]

On the second floor lived an Italian family with nine children who slept all over the apartment, the little ones in dresser drawers. The father was a terrazzo worker who came home on time every evening, but financially, it must have been somewhat challenging. He was a good Catholic who went to church every Sunday in his Sunday clothes, which were then sent to the pawn shop on Monday and brought home again on Saturday. (Toft 1969)

Hedvig's description of the backhouse gives the impression of a house with many – and also very different – inhabitants. Importantly, Hedvig's description is confirmed when one studies the preserved and completed questionnaires from the period's national censuses, naturalization files, and other types of registration documents that exist on the inhabitants in Baggesensgade 21A. Here, it is actually easier to work with diversity in the past, as there are no available statistics on street level from the late 1900s and 2000s. In 2013, when I ordered and received statistical data about Baggesensgade and five other streets in the area from 1980 to 2010, a requirement was that the streets were anonymized, i.e., given numbers. The requirement did not help in my concurrent study of Baggesensgade either. What available and publicly accessible statistics (in this case, generated from Municipality of Copenhagen n.d.) from 2024 tell us is that the total population of Nørrebro in that year was 79,079 people. Among them, 7,417 residents (9.3%) held Western citizenship other than Danish, while 8,741 (11%) held non-Western citizenship.

But even if the percentage of immigrant minorities and their children is undoubtedly higher today than in the 1920, and although there are undoubtedly more diverse groups of immigrants and children of immigrants living in the street, the melody of Baggesensgade has changed from being played by a large symphony orchestra, including the playing of multiple instruments, harmonies, and disharmonies, to almost becoming a whisper. Since this book is in honor of Jonas, who, besides being a virtuous academic, is also a virtuous musician, I think the allegory is both valid and extends our understanding of what diversity and even superdiversity is. Diversity and superdiversity are sensuous, and they produce sounds, emotions, smells, tastes, movements, and colors. To people who live in diverse or superdiverse settings, this throwntogetherness

(Massey 2005) of their everyday life matters. It is not a matter of statistics. Hedvig was generous in describing how the diversity of Baggesensgade 21A was experienced. Her memoir offered examples of friendship (including cooking and eating together) alongside friction and feelings of repulsion (pests crawling from one apartment to another, a woman wearing a fur coat to the loo). Notably, her description omitted references to municipal or political intervention in the apartment building or the street. This absence does not imply that a policing of diversity did not occur; instead, it happened through an interesting use of refraining from interaction and using silence as a disciplining tool and a means of marking difference. Residents in the front house did not talk with those in the back house – and vice versa. Moreover, when Hedvig's mother discovered that lovely Ms. Larsen was a prostitute, all interaction ceased. Hedvig's mother stopped speaking to Ms. Larsen.

4 Histories of (Super)Diversity: Ignoring

As described, handling and living with diversity is an everyday experience. If – as I argue – diversity and superdiversity are also sensual experiences, we must also investigate how superdiversity feels, smells, and sounds. Further, we must investigate when diversity is ignored and ask ourselves why that may be the case. In the examples offered in Hedvig's memoir, ignoring can be a strategy for disciplining individuals and groups of perceived outsiders. Ignoring was an effect of categorization. However, four interviews I carried out in October and November 2024, all with men who had either lived in Baggesensgade in the 1940s–1970s as children or young adults, revealed other aspects of the implications of ignoring. Two of the respondents were brothers (which I did not know when I got in touch with them) who grew up in a two-and-a-half-room apartment inhabited by their parents and a total of eight children. The experiences from their childhood and their growing up in Baggesensgade that were most important to them were the alcoholism of their father, which had the consequence that both the children and their mother frequently fell subject to his violence. Further, both they and the last person that I interviewed about his childhood in Baggesensgade in the period talked about widespread alcoholism among (adult) inhabitants in the street, which meant that their children often had to take care of themselves. During the interview with the latter, I found it remarkable that after having asked the interviewee whether he remembered any sounds from his childhood in the street, he answered that he did not remember anything. He attributed this forgetting to his being so busy simply getting through (he used the word *overleve* to describe the situation – i.e., survive) that many other aspects of his life had little relevance.

Ignoring, forgetting, and silencing were and remain aspects of diversity, and eventually, superdiversity as well. One pertinent question in this regard is which diversities are seen, foregrounded, problematized, and celebrated – a question which this chapter's section on immigrant statistics also illustrated. States have the power to present specific diversities among their residents as important, and individuals have – and are sometimes denied – the right to frame their identity according to such categorical lines. Among my interviews in Baggesensgade, the topic of ethnic diversity came up quite remarkably often. The two brothers – with whom I conducted independent, individual interviews – first revealed several minutes into our conversation that their mother was an immigrant from Norway. This, despite my asking them early in the interview whether they had known any migrants living in Baggesensgade. Their mother and father had met when he worked in Norway, and among their neighbors and other people living on the street, she was known as “the Norwegian.” One of the brothers spoke a mix of Norwegian and Danish when he started school and therefore had to take extra lessons to improve his Danish skills.

Of course, there could be different reasons why the respondents did not describe themselves as the children of an immigrant. Norway is one of Denmark's neighboring countries; linguistically, they are not significantly different. During their childhood, the mother had only visited her country of birth once, “when the old one [i.e., the father] permitted her to,” as one of the brothers told me. However, the mother's being called “the Norwegian” by other residents of Baggesensgade underlined that she was understood as diverging from the norm. This particular handling of the impact of migration – and thus of diversity – on one's family could be a consequence of different motives and lack of such: Forgetting, denial, not being perceived as necessary for the narrative, not worth telling as an aspect of one's life history, embarrassing, traumatic. In other words, (perceived) diversity does not only result from sober observation and evaluation. Diversity is also a result of affect, emotion, and power. Had the brother's mother come from Lebanon, had she been a Muslim and had worn a headscarf, would they have presented themselves differently? If immigrant identities are also about stigmatization, this stigmatization is more manageable to escape for some people than others.

5 Conclusion: Why We Should Treat the Concept of Superdiversity Carefully

The concept of superdiversity has come to stay, and I have not written this small chapter to call for it to be abandoned. Instead, and based on my

conversations with Jonas in Warsaw – and with other colleagues – we need to engage critically with the concept to a greater extent than what happens today. Claiming that something is superdiverse implies that this something has changed – a change that should be described in detail. Using the concept of superdiversity necessitates both a sensitivity to historical and concurrent data. Further, as I also hope to have illustrated in this chapter, a critical engagement with the concept of superdiversity may tease out a whole bundle of questions worth scrutinizing. For one, if historical statistics and statistical categorization of immigrants are lacking, what are the implications thereof for claiming the existence of superdiversity today? Second, if we add a sensitivity to senses and affects to our study of superdiversity, and do so from a then-to-now perspective, what would the result be? Could Baggesensgade then be considered more or less diverse in the past than today? I am still working on the answer.

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Islamophobia Reconsidered? Developments in Swedish Political Discourse Concerning Islamophobia

Johan Cato

1 Introduction¹

Non-Muslims venturing to interpret Islam might claim to know more about Islam than Muslims, whom they consider to lie about, or live in denial or ignorance of, the actual meaning of Islam. This particular agenda is so strong and well-represented in the media that when Muslims find the opportunity to express themselves in public they have to take the enunciations of non-Muslims about Islam in to account to come across as authentic and believable, or even graspable. (Otterbeck 2021, 52)

In many ways, the quote above from Jonas Otterbeck offers a glimpse of what this chapter is about, namely, how non-Muslims produce, define, and interpret Islam. This is something I already broached in my doctoral dissertation and tried to analyze by looking at material produced by Swedish politicians and state authorities. At that time (2012), I stated that: “The premise for studying non-Muslim perceptions of Islam and Muslims is based on the assumption that this too has significance for how Islam is created and interpreted”² (Cato 2012, 3). This remains a valid point, and interest in analyzing what has been defined as non-Muslim Islam has since garnered more attention among other researchers (Ackfeldt and Petersen 2023).

With this in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze how the political discourse³ in Sweden concerning the issue of Islamophobia

1 Parts of this article were previously published in Swedish in a special issue about Islamophobia in *Religion & livsfrågor* (2024).

2 Author's translation from Swedish.

3 “Political discourse” is, of course, a broad concept that can include several different arenas. In this text, I focus on material that is included in what is known as the domain of public policy and includes publications that are the result of the work of the Parliament, the Government, various authorities and municipalities.

has shifted since 2010.⁴ Reports have repeatedly shown that most Swedes are in favor of diversity. However, the same surveys also show that there are wide variations in attitudes towards different religions. While most people surveyed expressed a favorable view of Christianity, almost half of those surveyed have a negative view of Islam (Weibull 2019; cf. Hvitfelt 1991). Sweden, like many other European societies, has been characterized by heated debates about Islam, Muslims, and integration. Much of the debate has centered on how Islam can be reconciled with so-called European values, how social cohesion can be enabled, and how various forms of discrimination that exist can be countered. One of these forms of discrimination is Islamophobia, which can be defined as an ideology that perpetuates and spreads negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims and creates a mindset of Islam and Muslims as the Other (Allen 2010, 194).

In my earlier research, which analyzed representations of Islam and Muslims in Swedish public policy between 1975 and 2010, I was able to show how the debate about Islamophobia in the early 2000s was characterized by an almost unequivocal agreement that people with a Muslim background were discriminated against and that this was a serious problem that needed attention (Cato 2012, 241). There is therefore value in analyzing in more detail the developments that have occurred in recent years in relation to the debate on Islamophobia in Swedish politics.

2 Islamophobia in the Political Landscape of Europe

If we lift our gaze and shift our focus for a moment to the political landscape of Europe, we can see that there has been a shift in the political discourse regarding Islam. The boundaries of what is possible to say about Islam and Muslims have expanded significantly. Talk about Islam and Muslims in derogatory terms in the political arena is no longer uncommon. Statements about Islam and Muslims that would be considered unacceptable in relation to other minorities and religious groups are more or less openly made in European politics, including in Sweden. It is worth noting that this shift was already recognized in 2010 by Chris Allen, one of the leading contemporary researchers on Islamophobia (Allen 2010, 114–115). The change has also meant that Islam and

4 The start of the survey coincides with the last year covered and analyzed in my doctoral dissertation, where the issue of Islamophobia was touched upon but to a lesser extent. My PhD supervisor was Professor Jonas Otterbeck.

Muslims are no longer seen as neutral concepts and must therefore be defined according to other criteria, such as “moderate,” “extreme,” “good,” or “evil,” to further qualify them as acceptable categories in society (Bonney 2003, 22). Part of this is the association of Islam and Muslims with national agendas focused on issues of national security and counter-terrorism measures, including various forms of surveillance and prevention of radicalization (Kahn and Mythen 2019, 314).

One aspect of this development that has been emphasized in previous scholarship is that the rise of the radical right, through its continuous scapegoating of Islam and Muslims, has led to an increase in Islamophobia, which in turn has led to this becoming an accepted form of racism in many European countries (Kallis 2019, 368). A further part of this development is that the boundaries have shifted. In some cases, the radical right’s descriptions of Islam and Muslims have not only been noted by the political mainstream but also embraced in different policies concerning Muslim immigration. While developments in the political landscape associate stereotypes of Islam and Muslims with various right-wing political parties and social movements, it is not uncommon for parties across the political spectrum to express concerns about immigration from Muslim-majority countries and fears about incompatible cultural values and practices (Hogan and Haltinner 2015).

Several reports have described an increase in hate crimes against Muslims in Europe, and that they tend to increase in connection with various terrorist acts (Mondon & Winter 2019; Travis 2017; Mark 2015). If we consider Sweden in particular, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) has reported a doubling of reported hate crimes with Islamophobic elements from around 200 in 2009 to 560 in 2019 (Brå 2021, 12).⁵

3 Some Notes on the Concept of Islamophobia

Since the term “Islamophobia” was popularized in 1997 with the publication *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* by the British think tank The Runnymede Trust, the benefits and disadvantages of different definitions have been discussed in a variety of forums, not least in a long-standing academic debate on the merits and drawbacks of the definition. The Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia as “an unfounded hostility towards Islam and therefore fear or

5 It is worth noting that it is difficult to measure Islamophobic hate crimes over longer periods of time as there have been no continuous studies conducted in Sweden.

dislike of all or most Muslims" (CBMI 1997, 4). Views on how to understand Islamophobia can be broadly divided into at least three categories: those who embrace the concept, those who pragmatically criticize the concept, and those who dismiss it completely (Otterbeck and Bevelander 2006, 30–32). Those who adopt the concept do so on the basis that it describes a form of discrimination that exists and thus needs to be analyzed and countered. Those who are skeptical of "Islamophobia" argue that the concept is likely to be misleading. Hostility towards Islam as a religion is something that few people embrace, and this is a thing of the past. Instead, it is about discrimination against Muslims as individuals (cf. Halliday 2002). The third category that dismisses Islamophobia as a useful definition emphasizes that this is a concept used by Muslim apologists to systematically dismiss any form of criticism directed towards Islam (cf. Meer & Modood 2019).

An interesting development in trying to further define Islamophobia as a concept is to divide it into two orientations: illiberal and liberal Islamophobia, as it is defined by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter. Illiberal Islamophobia is characterized by an essentialization in which Islam is described as a monolithic whole with little or no room to consider the differences that exist between specific theological beliefs, ideological orientations, backgrounds, or the actions of individuals or groups (Mondon and Winter 2019, 62). This form of Islamophobia is related to various forms of racially motivated hatred associated with extreme right-wing movements, but not least is it associated with what has come to be called 'new racism', which highlights a change, where the previous emphasis on biological differences and hierarchies between races has been replaced by an emphasis on differences between cultures and particularly the incompatibility between cultures.

On the other hand, liberal Islamophobia distances itself from overt and unspoken forms of racism and hatred in favor of emphasizing issues related to religion, culture, and, especially, values of tolerance and democratic rights understood and defined as inherently Western. Examples of such values highlighted here are free speech, women's rights, and LGBT rights (Mondon and Winter 2019, 63). Central to liberal Islamophobia is a conscious effort to demonstrate differences from both illiberal Islamophobia and other more extreme forms of racism. This is achieved primarily by emphasizing the importance of a liberal approach to equality, freedom, and rights, with a focus on freedom of expression, gender equality, and sexual equality. At the same time, it is important to remember that the two different definitions of Islamophobia are interdependent and are united by the fact that they share the same goal, even if the descriptions may differ (Mondon and Winter 2017, 2171).

4 Debates about Islamophobia in Swedish Political Discourse

The issue of Islamophobia and illegal or morally problematic discrimination directed specifically against Muslims has become a matter of contention and debate in Swedish politics, with different interpretations and starting points.

Looking at the political discourse in Sweden, concerns about an increased spread of Islamophobia and antisemitism were raised already in the early 2000s by the Swedish Government and described as a serious issue that must be prioritized in the work of Swedish authorities (Departementsserien 2002:26).⁶ In the parliamentary debate, representatives of various political parties emphasized that both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia were forms of discrimination that were increasing at an alarming rate in Swedish society. One of the solutions highlighted to counter increasing discrimination against Muslims in the form of Islamophobia was the need for increased and coordinated information campaigns aimed at society in general, but also specifically schools. One of the MPs described the root of Islamophobia and its solution in the following way:

It is an inability to see the individual behind the preconceived notion of his or her culture or religion. The only way to address this is through information, dialogue, and knowledge. The worst thing we can do is to remain silent. The problem will not go away just because we do not talk about it. The government should take initiatives to combat Islamophobia, particularly in Swedish schools. (Astudillo, Motion 2007/08:A 273)⁷

There was a broad political consensus that discrimination against Muslims was not a new phenomenon, but that it had previously been met with silence. However, there was no consensus on what the causes of discrimination were or what kinds of measures were necessary to bring about fundamental change. The causes of increased Islamophobia were said to rest in a general lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslims, but the political debate also expressed views that pointed to the rise of Islamophobia as a consequence of deviant,

6 However, it is interesting to note that a national action plan aimed at countering issues of racism, xenophobia, homophobia and discrimination made by the then Social Democratic Government in 2000, did not address or touch upon the issue of Islamophobia. See Regeringens skrivelse 2000/01:59:6. En nationell handlingsplan mot rasism, främlingsfientlighet, homofobi och diskriminering. For a similar description of the UK, see Allen 2019.

7 Author's translation from Swedish.

undemocratic, and violent actions advocated by Muslim states, organizations, and terrorists.⁸ In the words of one of the MPs:

Groups like al-Qaeda and Hezbollah are today at the forefront of a global ideology with totalitarian aspirations. Terror is the method and tool of these groups. In the work to counter Islamophobia, it is necessary to fight the global terrorism that today uses a misinterpretation of Islam as an argument for violence and terror – otherwise all Muslims will be lumped together to an even greater extent than is already the case today. Swedish society must support the majority of Muslims who are fighting against terror and fundamentalism, and be vigilant if groups that align themselves with terrorist networks try to establish themselves in Sweden. (Ullenhag, Motion 2005/06:Kr25)⁹

Chris Allen has noted, in relation to the political debate on Islamophobia in the UK, that instead of addressing the issue of Islamophobia and discrimination based on religion, the debate has tended to focus on issues relating to terrorism. Hence, when the issue of Islamophobia has come onto the political agenda, it has done so within a discourse that is largely concerned with increased security, protection against terrorism, and the need to defend society against Islamic extremism (Allen 2019, 400).

Looking at the evolution of the political debate on Islamophobia after 2010, there is continuity. The importance of countering the rise of Islamophobia continues to be emphasized as an important part of creating integration and a society free from various forms of discrimination.¹⁰

One change in the debate is a clearer questioning of the term Islamophobia itself and its use to describe discrimination against Muslims. One line of argument intended to disqualify the use of Islamophobia as a description of discrimination towards Muslim individuals questions the use since the term is deemed to be something used by Islamist-influenced groups and individuals to stop and dismiss all forms of criticism of Islam and Muslims. The fact that

8 See, for instance, Motion 2002/03: Kr201. Kampanj mot islamofobi av Luciano Astudillo (S); Motion 2004/05:K460. Åtgärder mot islamofobi av Yvonne Ruwaida & Gustav Fridolin (Mp); Motion 2005/06:Kr25. Kamp mot antisemitism och islamofobi av Erik Ullenhag (Fp).

9 Author's translation from Swedish.

10 See, for instance, Motion 2019/20:1219. Uppmärksamma islamofobi med en dag av Magnus Manhammar (S); Motion 2020/21:3234 Liberal integrationspolitik av Johan Pehrson m.fl. (L); Motion 2016/17:1987; Att förebygga och motverka våldsbejakande extremism av Jonas Sjöstedt m.fl. (V).

Muslim organizations and individuals use the term Islamophobia to describe perceived discrimination is, according to this line of argument, rather proof that they oppose integration into Swedish society and are driven by a desire to create parallel social structures:

There are organizations that use Islamophobia and racism as effective tools to smear opponents and to discourage counterterrorism. As soon as you raise an issue and criticize the phenomenon, such as the oppression of women or the fact that imams in mosques propagate holy war and send young men to fight on the side of ISIS, you are labelled an Islamophobe. (Riksdagens protokoll 2021/22:129. Speech by Boriana Åberg (M))¹¹

A second form of argument designed to disqualify the use of Islamophobia focuses on the linguistic inaccuracy and misleading connotations of the term, through the use of 'phobia', the lexical meaning of which is a form of strong irrational fear or terror. In this way of arguing for the rejection of the concept, the emphasis tends to be on the fact that it is perfectly rational and legitimate to have a fear of Islam and Muslims or to question Islamic dogma.¹² Also, in this form of argumentation, which aims to reject Islamophobia as a legitimate term to describe discrimination against Muslims, the term is criticized for being an Islamist invention intended to disqualify criticism of Islam, and it is argued that the use of the term to describe hatred of Muslims tends to confuse stigmatization of believers with criticism of Islam.¹³

The attempts to undermine the meaning and use of Islamophobia on the grounds that it is an Islamist invention, and that to use the term is to follow in the footsteps of these interests in order to effectively stop any criticism of Islam and Muslims, have also been noted elsewhere in analyses of the political debate in Europe concerning the use and viability of the term (Allen 2019, 402).¹⁴

11 Author's translation from Swedish.

12 For a more elaborate discussion about this and the shortcomings of the discussion about the word itself, see Lean 2019.

13 See, for instance, Interpellation 2020/21:629. Kritiken mot islamofobi som begrepp av Tobias Andersson (SD).

14 It is interesting to note that criticism of the use of the term Islamophobia and the undermining of its legitimacy is often associated with the political right. Looking at the political debate in France, Timothy Peace shows how this is also prominent on the political left, with similar arguments that this is an invention of Islamists and by extension an attack on the French notion of *laïcité*. For more on this, see Peace 2019.

A third form of criticism focuses on the use of Islamophobia to de-legitimize criticism of undemocratic and discriminatory Islamic practices against Muslim women, which is described as a stark contrast to previous national achievements in the work of promoting gender equality. This is also described as a betrayal of Muslim women who have come to Sweden to live in a more equal and democratic society:

In the face of this worrying development, the previously active left-wing movements are silent. Hardly a word is said about the degrading fact that women are not considered worthy of entering the same door as men. Instead, any criticism of these undemocratic practices is met with Islamophobia. But what would leftists and feminists think if Swedish churches introduced separate entrances for men and women? If Swedish libraries forced women to stay in a back room so as not to disturb the men? If Swedish schools let boys sit in the front row while all girls were forced to sit at the back, behind a curtain? It is easy to imagine that there would be an outcry, but in the face of Muslim practices, the left is silent and timid and has forgotten its former ideals. This is a mockery not only of the gender equality work it has done successfully in the past, but also of the many Muslim women who have come to our country to live in a more equal and democratic society. Women with immigrant backgrounds are denied the equality we take for granted for Swedish women.¹⁵ (Motion 2012/13:K380 av Josef Fransson m.fl. (SD))

The criticism levelled in the quote above with reference to the supposedly glaring failures of the political left in relation to gender equality and Islam has its equivalent in the infected French debate on *Islamogauchistes* (Islam-leftists). In the French debate, this has become part of the political discourse and is used to criticize the cluelessness of the political left and denounce and attack its proponents, especially their inability to recognize the devastating consequences of Islamism for society (Peace 2019, 115). The political left's cluelessness is, in this critique, understood as a misinterpreted defense of values that should be considered sacrosanct in themselves: freedom of religion, tolerance, and respect for minorities (cf. Ekman 2015). The criticism also relates to illiberal Islamophobia in the sense that the description emphasizes certain ideals as indigenous and progressive as opposed to ideals and values attributed to Islam and therefore inherently problematic (Mondon and Winter 2019, 64).

¹⁵ Author's translation from Swedish.

5 Concluding Remarks

Although the present study is limited in scope, several points are worth considering because they show both continuity and change in the political discourse on Islamophobia. Let us first turn to continuity. In the first half of the twenty-first century, there were signs of a more apparent consensus and acceptance in Swedish political discourse that Islamophobia is a serious problem that must be addressed to create change and promote an open, democratic society. One way to combat increasing Islamophobia, which has been emphasized in the past and continues to be highlighted, is through raising awareness and providing education on these issues.

As far as criticism of the term is concerned, it is not in itself new. Such criticisms have been levelled since the term became more widely recognized and visible, with the publication of the report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. Since then, there have been several competing definitions of Islamophobia within the academic community, and the concept is also part of a broader discussion about discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities. In 2006, Jonas Otterbeck and migration researcher Pieter Bievelander, in a major study on Islamophobia in Sweden focusing on the concept, youth attitudes, and the vulnerability of young Muslims, noted that even then, there were those who dismissed the legitimacy of the concept.

A change in the political discourse on Islamophobia is a clearer questioning of the term and its legitimacy. The change bears some features of what was previously labelled as illiberal Islamophobia, where Islam and Muslims are described as a single monolithic entity with no internal differences concerning practices and views. Also prominent here is the emphasis on culture and the incompatibility of different cultures, which was highlighted in the political discourse.

Instead, the above-cited examples of negative attitudes towards Islamophobia as a legitimate way of describing discrimination against Muslims are more similar to what I have described as liberal Islamophobia above. Characteristic of this variant is the creation of a single Muslim culture that is ascribed specific values that stand in stark contrast to the enlightened West, which is often concretized by reference to issues of democracy, gender equality, and sexual rights, as we also saw in the examples presented. Specifically emphasizing women's rights in order to attack Islam and Muslims is something that has been highlighted in previous research focusing on France and the UK. In a broader perspective, criticism and stigmatization of Islam with reference to gender rights can be understood through the lens of femonationalism as described by Sara R. Farris (2012, 187). By this term, Farris means an effort by European

right-wing parties and others to criticize immigration and Islam with reference to gender equality and thus co-opt feminist ideals.

A further change in the political discourse on Islamophobia that is worth noting is the idea that this is merely an Islamist fabrication designed to disavow criticism of Islam. In the early examples of the study, there is no indication that Islamophobia was perceived in the political discourses as an Islamist fabrication to counter criticism of Islam. One possible explanation for this change is that a general questioning of Islamophobia, previously associated with right-wing conservative political views, has moved to become part of the mainstream of political discourse.

Based on the examples in the present study, there is reason, as Ekman stipulates, to describe the relationship between Islamophobia and different political discourses such as: "Thus, Islamophobia is framed in relation to various national and transnational political actors and processes, and depending on the topic, events or circumstances, it intersects with various political rationales and processes" (Ekman 2015, 1998).

Criticism of Islamophobia and the attempts to de-legitimize it altogether often overshoots the mark, and the fact that discrimination against Muslims is a real phenomenon that affects individuals in their daily lives risks being overlooked. However, this does not take away a critical discussion concerning Islamophobia, its different definitions, and its practical implications in political or everyday life, as well as in scholarship. The attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the term Islamophobia and its use can potentially be seen in the light of a growing consensus at a societal level about the phenomenon it describes.

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On Authentication and Taking Islamophobia “Seriously”

Martin Lund

[The Swedish comic strip] *Rocky* uses Islamophobic expressions but does not necessarily send an Islamophobic message to the reader. (Otterbeck 2016, 53)

The moment we, as scholars of religion, say what gets to count as an authentically Islamic act, practice, or belief, all those who do not ascribe to them cease to be objects of study. In so doing, we actually end up depriving Muslim actors, whether existing synchronically or diachronically, of their agency. (Hughes 2016, xv)

The first epigraph comes from Jonas Otterbeck’s article (2016) about *Rocky*, a comic strip primarily published in a large-circulation Swedish daily from 1998 to 2018. In the article, Otterbeck highlights how the strip’s recurrent Islamophobic “expressions” or “conceptions” generally went unnoticed, while one specific installment was swiftly pulled and criticized for referencing anti-semitic tropes. He argues that this difference in response (or lack thereof) was due to a general understanding in Sweden that antisemitism is vulgar and offensive, whereas there was less awareness and concern about Islamophobia at the time. But Otterbeck also emphasizes the importance of genre, particularly *Rocky*’s “rough” humor, reading practices, and “taste communities” in the reception of something like a comic strip. What might be dismissed as “simply” Islamophobic by some can be seen by others as part of a more complex signifying process. Acknowledging the latter type of reading enables a more critically informed perspective that allows for the analytical separation of explicitly racist ideologies from structurally racist discourses. Put differently, Otterbeck advocates for a contextually sensitive and historicizing study of racist discourses and racial formation that goes beyond surface impressions.

The second epigraph is from Aaron Hughes’ critique of “Islamic religious studies,” a form of scholarship that imagines an egalitarian, progressive, pluralistic, and democratic Islam “and then maintain[s] that it is the real or authentic version” (2016, xv–xvi). This approach marks anything that doesn’t

conform to this authenticated image as inauthentic or illegitimate, which, as the quote highlights, amounts to depriving people who identify as Muslims in the “wrong” way of their agency. Conversely, Hughes argues that scholars should not adjudicate between “authentic” and “inauthentic” conceptions of Islam. Instead, we should treat any self-definition as Muslim as a socially and historically situated act of identification subject to redescription and analysis: “it is our job to discuss the rhetoric of authenticity, not what or whose Islam is more authentic” (xv). This, I will argue, includes those rhetorics of authenticity commonly labeled “Islamophobic.”

Otterbeck and Hughes advocate for contextually sensitive, historicizing, and critical scholarship that views categories like “Muslims” and “Islam,” as well as concepts like “Islamophobia” or “Islamophobic expressions,” not as pre-social and ahistorical entities, but as situated, contested, and contestable terms. These terms can be used and understood differently by different actors in different contexts (cf. McCutcheon 2005, 38). Understood thusly, these categories and concepts are both products and producers of socially formative discourse and rhetoric, and as such require theorization and redescription for deeper explanation and understanding. This perspective suggests that what some of us call Islam is a complex discourse composed of various power practices – enunciated through words, actions, texts, symbols, and affective practices – that either support or challenge prevailing conceptions and norms. These practices create multiple images of Islam, which can be studied as distinct yet interconnected discourses with their own internal logics, or as part of a broader discursive tradition that encompass all interpretations, whether they coexist, compete, or remain unaware of each other (Otterbeck 2021, 48).

With the above in mind, and by drawing Otterbeck and Hughes’ perspectives closer together, I devote the first part of this chapter to arguing in favor of taking Islamophobia seriously, to borrow a phrase with a long history in religious studies. By “taking seriously,” I don’t have the phrase’s usual sense in mind: “To take seriously seems to presume agreement, affirmation, or at least the preemption of conflict” (Pritchard 2010, 1089). Nor do I advocate for subjects “setting the ground rules for how their claims, behaviors, or organizations ought to be studied by scholars” (McCutcheon 2024, xxvii). I’m certainly not suggesting that, in the case of Islamophobia – or in any other case –, “taking seriously” our subjects necessitates holding off on theorizing or redescription (cf. McCutcheon 2006; Pritchard 2010, 1095). After all, the benefit of being “taken seriously” in the above sense tends to be afforded only to what Russell T. McCutcheon calls “the no cost other” – “those whose toleration requires little or no investment on our [scholars’] part” – and generally serves to manage

difference and domesticate dissent, while giving the scholar monopoly over the “means of representation” (McCutcheon 2006, 730–34, 744; Pritchard 2010).

Rather, following Elizabeth Pritchard, I want to explore the “possibility of a ‘taking seriously’ that does not manage or preempt difference and conflict but risks and even invites them” (2010, 1104). Taking Islamophobia “seriously” in this sense requires acknowledging the power and agency of Islamophobic enunciations, speech acts, and affective practices (cf. Otterbeck 2021, 50); resisting the common tendency to assume that the scholar is the only active agent in an encounter (cf. Pritchard 2010, 1102; McCutcheon 2006, 734); and examining not just *what* those acts and practices say, but *how* they are constructed and how they might function. Taking Islamophobia seriously, then, means taking a critically and contextually sensitive approach to discourses some of us label Islamophobic. This entails regarding Islamophobia and Islamophobic rhetoric as having historical, material, and bodily (pre)conditions and consequences, and considering *which Other* we are “taking seriously.” To that end, I devote the second part of the chapter to a discussion of Howard Chaykin’s comic book series, *The Divided States of Hysteria* (Chaykin 2018), as a case study in “taking Islamophobia seriously.”¹

1 Taking Islamophobia Seriously – a Discursive Approach

To take what some of us call Islamophobia seriously, we must take the term “Islamophobia” seriously. “Islamophobia” is a complex and contested concept, used both in first-order political discourse and as an analytical second-order term. Initially used by Muslim-identifying individuals to describe the prejudice, discrimination, and violence they faced, it gained wider recognition after the race equity think-tank Runnymede Trust’s 1997 report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*. This report helped popularize the term in public and then academic discourse, where it has become widely used but remains fluid and imprecise.² Although the approach is becoming increasingly challenged, not least by the recent emergence of a Critical Islamophobia Studies subfield, a version of the Runnymede perspective remains prominent in academia: Islamophobia is commonly conceived as a fear of Islam and/or Muslims, and

1 By “comic book,” I here, somewhat simplistically, mean a serialized sequential verbal-visual narrative. Cf. Lund 2025.

2 See Bleich 2011, 1582–85; Kathawalla et al. 2024 for discussions of the history, contestability, and imprecision of the term and its uses; cf. Hafez 2018.

prejudicial or negative attitudes and actions against Islam, Muslims, or those perceived to be Islamic or Muslim (e.g., Bleich 2011; Kathawalla et al. 2024; Klug 2012; cf. Hafez 2018).

While I don't want to suggest that previous research has not taken Islamophobia seriously, three counterproductive assumptions often accompany the above approach: it tends to reify "Islamophobia," takes certain contested positions for granted *a priori*, and focuses on affect and attitude. These assumptions risk dehistoricizing and depoliticizing discourses scholars might label Islamophobic by obscuring the preconditions and situatedness of all discourse about Islam and Muslims. I address these risks in turn below, and in doing so propose and argue for an alternative, discursive framing and a working definition of Islamophobia as *the discursive fabrication of an essentialized and hierarchically subordinated non-Muslim Islam to serve socially formative interests or to authenticate and authorize certain social formations over and against Muslim-coded ones*.

This definition positions Islamophobia in the orbit of racial formation. Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as "*the process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed*" (2015, 109; emphasis in original). Key to this theory is racialization, the process through which bodies are encoded with racial meaning, and racial projects, which link racialized structures and signification: "*A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines*" (125). Islamophobic enunciations in the above understanding discursively produce Islam and Muslims as essentialized, and often racialized, categories through Islamophobic projects that, if successful, have socially formative – and social, cultural, and economic – effects.

Conceived thusly, what some of us call Islamophobia can be understood to inspire, authorize, or justify physical and social actions while acknowledging the processual formation and social construction of discourses some of us call Islamophobic. This definition aims to isolate and classify specific ways of speaking within the broader field of contested Muslim and non-Muslim discourses about Islam, and their socially and racially formative effects. It emphasizes that "Islamophobia" should not be understood as naming a pre-existing affect or attitude, but rather as a social fact, and shifts the focus from Islamophobia as a reified thing, and from assumed intents, attitudes, and affects, toward observable discursive constructions and their effects. Consequently, scholars can conceive "Islamophobia" as a flow of enunciations (cf. Otterbeck 2021), enabling the study of acts and utterances related to Islamophobic discourses without decontextualizing them or making normative judgments about their authenticity.

1.1 Islamophobia as Essence

Reading research overviews and terminological discussions about “Islamophobia,” it’s easy to perceive a tendency towards reification. Erik Bleich, for instance, highlights that the term is contested and defined in various ways, but also writes about “Islamophobia itself” and its “expressions,” claiming that “we often have to infer the presence of Islamophobia from its effects” (2011, 1585, 1589, 1591). Similarly, Brian Klug rejects the idea of a single definition of Islamophobia but still discusses “the different *forms* Islamophobia can take” and its “specific *manifestations*” (2012, 668, 670, 672). Amd Ummul-Kiram Kathawalla and colleagues (2024) emphasize the lack of definitional consensus but use their own definition to discuss others’ proposed ways to measure Islamophobia (even when defined differently) and thus position it as a way to measure Islamophobia “as such.”

In these instances, “Islamophobia” (perhaps unintentionally) becomes a tangible *thing*. Instead, the debate generally centers on how to define and measure Islamophobia; that “it” pre-exists its naming is taken for granted. This overlooks the role scholars play in framing and constructing “Islamophobia” as something measurable to begin with. It’s crucial to remember that scholarly terms are constructs, not purely descriptive ways to capture the essence of whatever we’re discussing. *We* constitute our subjects as objects of discourse and our research material as data when *we* define, theorize, and direct our gaze (cf. Touna 2019; J.Z. Smith 1982, xi; Hughes 2016, 19). Consequently, we can only measure what *we* have named and thus constituted as Islamophobia.

The second-order term “Islamophobia” is an abstraction and generalization and should be treated as such. The variety of definitions and ways of measuring what some of us call Islamophobia cannot possibly account for its “manifestations” or “presence,” but are different ways to bracket certain ways of speaking about Islam and Muslims within the larger, messy, and contradictory field of such discourses. But it’s *our* gaze that does this bracketing; the world doesn’t come neatly pre-sorted into properly Islamic and Islamophobic discourses. Without this consideration, it’s easy to approach the study of Islamophobia mechanistically, presenting its measurement as simple calculus. Bleich, for example, argues that

a one-off negative opinion about Islam or Muslims constitutes low-level Islamophobia. At the other extreme, expressions of unshaking hostility are high-level examples of Islamophobia, especially if that opinion can be altered based on new information. The more consistently an individual expresses a greater number of such intensely held biases, the more Islamophobic he or she is. (2011, 1587)

Such a cumulative approach easily becomes an invitation to accept the tempting but deceptive simplicity of erecting a stark border between “Islamophobes” and “non-Islamophobes,” similar to what Robin DiAngelo critiques as an overly simplistic “good/bad binary” in discourse about racism (2018, 71–73). When racism, or Islamophobia, is reduced to opinion, affect, and prejudice, only those who say or do racist or Islamophobic things with malice aforethought can be considered racist or Islamophobic (and thus bad), while anyone who doesn’t hold explicitly or ideologically racist convictions becomes nonracist (and thus good) by default. This leaves little room for considering the context of speech acts and other actions, or structural, institutional, or cultural factors that can be understood as Islamophobic.

1.2 Islamophobia, *a priori*

Discussions about the term “Islamophobia” also often rest on implicit assumptions about Islamic authenticity, separating ostensibly erroneous conceptions of Islam from supposedly correct ones. This reified Islam is juxtaposed with reified Islamophobia, presuming *a priori* that certain conceptions are simply wrong or based on generalizations from extreme “perversions” of Islam by “inauthentic” Muslims who have “misunderstood” Islam. For example, Klug claims that in Islamophobic discourse, “The figure of the Muslim is essentially a figment or fiction: *any resemblance to real Muslims, living or dead, is purely incidental*” (2012, 678; emphasis added). But accepting his premise that “Islamophobia turns Muslims into ‘Muslims’” implies that scholars have the tools and the right to judge the authenticity of Muslim self-identifications, deciding where the domain of “real” Muslims ends, when we enter the realm of “Muslims,” and when scare quotes are needed. Bleich’s above-cited suggestion that new information can alter Islamophobic sentiments further bolsters the conceptualization of Islamophobia as a misunderstanding of “real” Islam.

Imposing what I’ll call a “right/wrong” binary on the study of Islamophobia not only repeats what Hughes critiques in the epigraph, ostensibly to help (the right kind of) Muslims, but also precludes Islamophobes’ self-reports and justifications, reducing their study to distinguishing between those who think the “right” things and those who don’t. (This is a far-reaching exercise of discursive power that, since it necessarily also defines “real” Muslims, controls who may identify as Muslim and how.) This approach risks missing valuable insights by assuming our data is irrational (rather than based on a *contestable assessment* of events), hateful (rather than *framed* as an expression of concern), or offensive (rather than *understood* as a form of defense), and so on. Such

pre-sorting mechanisms reveal authorized ways of speaking about Islam but tell us little about why some people accept Islamophobic claims and stereotypes or what’s at stake in their dissemination. As such, it can dehistoricize and depoliticize Islamophobia. A discursive approach allows scholars to analyze Islamophobic enunciations with the same tools used for any other discourse, like Bruce Lincoln’s “destabilizing and irreverent questions”: Who is speaking, to what audience, and in what context? Through what system of mediations and with what interests? What are they trying to convince their audience of, and what do they stand to gain (and who loses) if successful (Lincoln 1996; cf. Otterbeck 2021, 50)?

I read Hughes as arguing that “Islam” is continuously constructed by social actors who group together certain social formations, discourses, and practices and try to authenticate their particular grouping. Otterbeck notes that Muslims aren’t the only people making enunciations that produce Islam (2021, 51). If “Islam” doesn’t name some static monolith but rather is a contested identifier, it’s analytically counterproductive to claim that Islamophobic enunciations “get Islam wrong.” Non-pluralistic, undemocratic, and oppositional actors, both Muslim-identifying and non-Muslim-identifying, presumably take their stances seriously. Scholars should do the same, regardless of our own convictions (cf. McCutcheon 2005, 64; Hughes 2016, xi–xiii). What matters academically is how authenticating rhetoric convinces others, directs action, and affects social formation.

Jesper Petersen and Anders Ackfeldt call for studying what they label non-Muslim Islams, or conceptions of Islam by social actors for purposes other than belief in or worship of Allah. They argue that anyone can produce Islam, and researchers should investigate these productions, regardless of their producers’ self-identification (2022, 3). Ignoring these perspectives risks obscuring the range of extant discourses about Islam and dismissing Islamophobic or anti-Islamic discourses as unworthy of study (cf. Otterbeck 2021, 51–54). From this view, Barack Obama’s liberal articulation of a “true” Islam “compliant with US foreign policy interests” and Geert Wilders’ image of Islam as a “nihilist, anti-Semitic, violent religious ideology” akin to National Socialism (Damhuis 2019) are equally “authentic” – they are simply “perceived as authentic by different groups of people” (Petersen and Ackfeldt 2022, 4, 12). In short, any publicly articulated conception of Islam should be “taken seriously and investigated as an Islam, authentic to its audience.”

I view this perspective as crucial for studying those non-Muslim Islam-oriented enunciations that scholars might label Islamophobic. Analysis should not focus on judging the validity of positions but focus on how historically

contingent social formations use competing discourses to authorize their socio-political interests. Assuming that only Muslim-identifying actors can produce Islam allows scholars to dismiss contesting understandings as unrelated to Muslim constructions of Islam. By taking Islamophobic rhetoric seriously and describing it as closely as possible to the terms of its enunciation, scholars can better understand and navigate social contestation over the meaning and place of what some of us call Islam.

1.3 Affect and Historicization

Conversely, the common framing of Islamophobia as fear, prejudice, and hatred seems to rest on an assumption that people's self-reports correspond to some internal and personal, but externally knowable and measurable, emotional or attitudinal state – that is, that scholars can *know* what interlocutors *truly* feel and believe – and the assumption that action in the world is a manifestation or expression of prior personal attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Both of these assumptions have been challenged: critical, historicizing scholars have argued that affects and beliefs are contingent, socially constructed, and socialized, and, as such, serve as preconditions for people to identify, speak, and act in certain ways in the first place.³

Thus, to avoid suggesting that the affective practices and enunciations some of us label Islamophobic are pre-social, pre-linguistic, and pre-ideological, we ought to regard them as produced by discourse and social settings as much they produce them; and to avoid giving the impression that we possess mind-reading abilities, we ought to restrict ourselves to speaking about people's self-reported affects and affective practices as grounded in social, political, historical, and other preconditions, rather than speaking as if we have unmediated access to their internal feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. We can do little with Islamophobia if it's conceived as something people carry within them. We can do much by trying to understand how and why they speak and do Islamophobia – by shifting the focus from affect to effect, so to speak – since it is conflict, contestation, and political action that can have the most far-reaching impact.

3 Hughes and McCutcheon 2022, 11–17, 26–31, offers a succinct critique of “affect” and “beliefs” as internal states that are only secondarily expressed. See also Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018.

2 Taking Islamophobia Seriously

Comics and cartooning have a long history of racial formation and racist signification, both generally and concerning Islam and Muslims specifically (e.g., Baldanzi and Rashid 2020). Much of this scholarship adopts pluralistic, liberal, and democratic perspectives. For example, Aaron Ricker notes that many essays in *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation* (Lewis and Lund 2017) take “liberal ideas of good versus bad religion” as the foundation for liberalizing and democratizing arguments (Sacred & Sequential 2017, 50:15–50:40, 53:15ff). Similarly, Sophie Rose Arjana’s *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture* focuses on what she describes – without reflecting on the value-ascription entailed in such labeling – as “positive characters – Muslim women who are independent, exercise power, and fight against injustice” (Arjana 2017, xix). Muslim-coded characters that don’t advance the type of Islamic feminism Arjana celebrates are set aside, as are “negative” Muslim-coded characters, whose characterization is reduced to erroneous representation that, at most, needs a corrective. There’s little room in such approaches to discuss something like Howard Chaykin’s *Divided States of Hysteria*. Its images of Muslims and Islam were neither produced by a Muslim-identifying comics creator nor do they offer images of Islam that fit with conceptions of “good religion” or “good Islam.”

Ackfeldt and Petersen might be going too far when they characterize the labeling of certain non-Muslim Islam-producers as “bigots, Islamophobes, or racists” as “rather unscholarly and uninteresting” (13). To my mind, the issue isn’t whether to use such classifications, but *how* to use them. “Racism,” “bigotry,” and “Islamophobia” can be generative analytical terms, if they are used as such, rather than for their normative political weight. This isn’t to claim some objective, apolitical status for scholarship; scholarship is always situated and political, and scholars must therefore be self-reflexive at all turns (cf. Hughes 2016, 39).

If scholars use terms like racism or Islamophobia primarily as first-order political concepts, we risk conforming to Richard Dyer’s caricatured portrait of “images of” scholarship. This approach, driven by understandable anger, despair, or contempt at the “endless parade of insults” that many perceive in the representation of minoritized groups, can impede deeper analysis and largely serves “to demonstrate that everything is the same and it’s all awful” (Dyer 1993, 1). For Dyer, there’s something “deadly about such reductive work: it tells one little and thus does rather little politically.” It must be tempered by critical, analytical considerations. Wendy Brown has similarly noted that while critical theorizing concerned with politics ought to help orient people in relation to

their time, it “cannot let itself be bound by political exigency; indeed, it has something of an obligation to refuse such exigency” (Brown 2005, 15).

Otherwise, scholars risk drawing conclusions that, while sympathetic in the moment, are unscholarly and analytically uninteresting in the long term. They might dehistoricize and depoliticize Islamophobia, depriving Islamophobes of political agency to naturalize manifestly contested positions.⁴ *Divided States* serves as a useful example to work through these considerations because, while easily dismissed as Islamophobic, homophobic, transphobic, and more, it engages with these rhetorics not simply from essentializing hatred or fear of Muslims or other minoritized groups, but as examples in a larger argument about what Chaykin views as wrong with the USA.

2.1 Divided States of Hysteria: Identity Politics as Dystopian Threat

Chaykin's *Divided States*, published by Image Comics from June to November 2017, is set after an attempted coup that killed the President.⁵ The first issue constructs a world of conflict and mistrust, climaxing with a group of Muslim-coded women in New York City (“let’s go do God’s will ... and show Jew York City that *Allah* means business”), exploding nuclear and biological weapons hidden in their wombs and killing millions. This scene inarguably reflects Islamophobic “conceptions,” as commonly understood. By portraying Muslim women’s reproductive organs as weapons of mass destruction, Chaykin dramatizes an age-old fear that “the enemy’s women” threaten “Our” survival (however “Us” may be conceived). This portrayal is difficult to divorce from “white genocide” or “great replacement” conspiracy theories. But, where Theodore Roosevelt spoke of “race suicide” in the early 1900s, Chaykin updates this fear for a post-9/11 context by positioning Muslim women as “race suicide bombers.” Thus, it’s understandable if the series is read as Islamophobic: it certainly offers a negative appraisal of some Muslims.

It’s easy, then, to characterize the comic as part of the “endless parade” of Islamophobic insults and be done with it, but that’s a partial and reductive reading. While some Muslim-coded characters are positioned as terrorists, others are sympathetically rendered as victims of parochial violence. Indeed, labeling the comic’s portrayal of Muslims as an expression of “fear” or “hatred” obscures how strategic Chaykin’s use of disparaging images of Muslims and other minoritized groups is. And it potentially obscures the misogyny and

4 If antiracist positions weren’t contested and contestable, no matter how obvious they might be for some of us, there wouldn’t be racist positions to oppose.

5 The volume is unpaginated.

xenophobia or racism encoded in talk about the dangers posed by “other people’s women.” The series’ main cast includes a disgraced CIA agent who fails to stop the New York attack, a Black man who targeted white people in a killing spree, a Jewish man who stole from and killed the idle rich, a gay serial killer, and a trans woman – all introduced with a heavy dose of ironizing over identity politics. They are enlisted by a corporation to dismantle an international conspiracy of Black nationalists, white supremacists, Islamic terrorists, and a Russian leader aiming to destroy the USA.

Chaykin depicts the USA as a powder keg, a politically polarized nation in sociocultural freefall largely due to its shift toward identity politics. The conspiracy acts as a match that lights the fuse. This viewpoint is encapsulated in issue #2, where a narrative monologue – paired with visuals of racial, ethnic, and religious violence – informs readers that the Civil War never truly ended, “it just took a time-out”: it is intertwined with US American history through Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, *de facto* segregation, and Nixon’s Southern strategy. These events splintered the USA into various cultural, ethnic, social, and religious tribes, each defining its rights based on “what they felt like at any given moment.”⁶ Issue #3 adds that the “Second Civil War” is “about race, ethnicity, economic position, political divisiveness, social status, and religious differences ... about tribes ... about the Balkanizing of what was once a superficially unified national mass into a splintered sprawl of multicultural separation.” It’s about “entitlement,” and it’s weakening the US, making it vulnerable to outside foes who might incite the nation to self-destruction unless the protagonists can set their strongly expressed, identity-based differences aside.

That is the core of Chaykin’s perspective. *Divided States* was produced as a warning about international and domestic “terrorism” and a statement against identity politics. As he wrote in mid-2017:

So instead of “Trigger warnings,” “Cultural appropriation,” “Safe spaces,” and “Social Justice Warriors,” maybe *we on the left* should have put aside all this balkanizing nonsense and been fucking Americans for fuck’s sake, instead of allowing this nihilistic shithead [Trump] to mainstream and legitimize the racist, sexist, bigoted and flat-out moronic sensibilities that have always been here, but were held in check by a common understanding that one doesn’t get away with that shit in the United States of America. (Chaykin 2017; emphasis added)

Chaykin’s position here seems beholden to the common liberal assumption that “there can be a public space in which there is no exclusion, where there is

6 A variation of this phrasing also appears in #6.

no force" (Pritchard 2010, 1099). Thus, he asserts a strict political divide, imagines an equilibrium that could check excesses on "both sides," and speaks of simply "being fucking American." Nothing that upsets the *status quo* is acceptable; it's either "balkanizing nonsense" or "moronic." Chaykin's historiography plays an important role here: he acknowledges that racism, sexism, and bigotry predate identity politics but claims that they were checked by a supposedly "common understanding" of their wrongness. That is, he minimizes their role in the past and present.

It's therefore important to note that Chaykin elides the long Civil Rights struggle and the ethnic reverie that enabled white ethnic identification, including among Jewish Americans like Chaykin, who has self-described as "the Jew from the Future" (Fingerroth 2007, 131–33; cf. Frye Jacobson 2008). This is likely no accident, since their inclusion would complicate the idea that there *could* be any remotely "common understanding" that Chaykin's "moronic sensibilities" are unacceptable, if there hadn't been struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other marginalizing discourses and structures; struggles that remain contested and far from universally supported.⁷ It would also make it harder to deny the often-recognized reality that some people's Americanness is less secure than others'. Even Nathan Glazer, a long-time opponent of multiculturalism, eventually conceded that this differentiation must be acknowledged to address racialized inequities (Glazer 1997).

Chaykin's position can thus also be described as "colorblind," in its denial of the ongoing salience of racial formation. This might explain his lumping together, for example, of white supremacists and Black Lives Matter as if there's nothing that separates them ideologically, politically, historically, or, most importantly, structurally:

The perception by a majority of whites that we are now colourblind is why the Black Lives Matter movement was so jarring for some whites; in a colourblind America 'all lives' should matter and to privilege black lives over others is, from a colorblind perspective a form of racism. (Gallagher and Winddance Twine 2017, 1602)

But by rejecting *all* claims of strong collective identification as claims to "entitlements," and as equally harmful to social stability, Chaykin's comic and essay articulate what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls colorblind racism: he naturalizes social inequities and presents them as cultural and individual deficiencies,

⁷ This chapter was written before the second Trump presidency gave ample evidence of this.

with reference to an abstract liberal framing, all to minimize the effects of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018, chap. 3).

Divided States should be read with this liberal colorblindness in mind. And it should be read with an acknowledgment that Chaykin makes a (mostly implicit) distinction between “regular” Muslims and “extremists,” decries what some of us call Islamophobia, and shows Muslims as victims. His aim, it seems, is not to denigrate an essentialized “Muslimness,” but to mark any kind of strong identification or particularism as beyond the political pale. In this regard, Chaykin’s *Divided States* is neither more nor less Islamophobic than most “introduction to world religions” textbooks; it has nothing against Muslims *as* Muslims, or anyone else for that matter, as long as they don’t make waves. That is, while it begins with what is commonly understood as an Islamophobic “expression,” more likely, he saw it as a critique of people who “use Islam” for political ends.

3 Concluding Remarks

The “message” of *Divided States* is contested: it’s been read as both hateful, partly for its portrayal of Muslims, and as an excellent portrayal of the Trump-era *zeitgeist*. Chaykin likely knew that he was playing into anti-Islamic discourses when he plotted his New York attack. However, it seems clear that he wasn’t attacking an essentialized, undifferentiated Muslim monolith; more likely, he saw it as a critique of people who “use Islam” for political ends. This is a common perspective, and except for his use of slurs and other confrontational language, the comic is fairly conventional; colorblindness remains the hegemonic racial formation in the USA.

It might thus be helpful to return to Otterbeck here:

Those who consciously adhere to racist ideologies can, of course, unproblematically be labeled racist even if they do not classify themselves as such. But those who through speech acts connect with racist discourses can do so for several reasons, sometimes with racist motivations, but also through linguistic ineptitude, repetition of habituated and unreflected clichés, irony, or even in anti-racist artistry. (Otterbeck 2016, 47)

Judging by both *Divided States* and Chaykin’s claims about it, the latter set of possibilities seem most plausible. Chaykin seems to position his comic as an authentically colorblind, antiracist, and anti-“reverse racist” project. The trope of Muslims breeding white people into extinction, as essentialistically

employed in contemporary conspiracy theories, can be understood as ideologically Islamophobic in the above definition. Chaykin's use of the trope instead reads as structurally Islamophobic; the outcome is racist, but the motivation is not. Chaykin's structural Islamophobia is strategic, employed to support a colorblind liberal rhetoric that erects hard boundaries for acceptable claims to social space. This rhetoric marks *some* conceptions of Islam as undesirable, but not uniquely so.

But, like all discourses some of us call Islamophobic, the comic is more than its constructions of Islam and Muslims. It also fabricates racial, gendered, classed, and sexual significations that are used to argue for what is, at its most basic level of enunciation, a white, male, and liberal identity politics.⁸ Analyzing texts or discourses in terms of a single set of power relations – a focus that is always our choice as scholars, rather than a framing inherent in our data – can obscure the intersectional dynamics of the types of economies of signification that mark discursive coding in texts like comic books, as well as the economies of financial, social, cultural, psychological, and other forms of capital that permeate all social discourse. I have used Chaykin as a test case to argue that treating what some of us call Islamophobia as fear or hatred risks obscuring the larger context, aim, and function of such discourses. Focusing solely on what Islamophobic enunciations “get wrong” dismisses the images they create. Dismissing it *a priori* depoliticizes what is often deeply political. In either case, we close our ears to the people speaking, which, to my understanding, isn't particularly “serious” and tells us little about the ongoing construction and contestation of Muslims and Islam, which is never only about Muslims or Islam.

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8 Since the comic ends with a CIS-male- and a trans-female coded character initiating a romantic relationship, it is less unselfconsciously hetero-patriarchal.

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PART 2

Islamic Studies and Beyond



The Cult of Sanctity of Ibn Hanbal

Susanne Olsson

This chapter examines the development of Hanbali Sunni Islam as a distinct tradition through an analysis of Ibn al-Jawzi's biography of Ibn Hanbal. It focuses on specific terminology and ascetic practices that differentiate early traditionalist Sunnism – emphasizing the emulation of the Prophet Muhammad – from later Sufism. The chapter argues that renunciant practices must be understood within their specific historical and theological contexts rather than as universal concepts applicable across religious traditions. As part of this analysis, I will explore how Ibn al-Jawzi seeks to construct a form of sanctity cult around Ibn Hanbal.

During the 10th century, several conflicts led to social upheaval and violent clashes in Baghdad, where prominent Hanbalis publicly condemned and accused those they considered wrongdoers. However, a more passive approach gradually became the dominant Hanbali strategy, supported by the pragmatic jurist Abu Bakr al-Khallal (d. 311/923), who is credited with standardizing the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. One explanation for this shift is the pragmatic realization that rioting was unsustainable; to ensure the survival of Hanbalism, it became necessary to adopt a more restrained strategy that would not provoke excessive concern from the caliph (Olsson 2018).

This chapter, however, focuses on a later perception and representation of Ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855), particularly as portrayed in the biography *Manāqib Abī ‘Abd Allāh Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Ḥanbal* by Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1201), which has been made available in an annotated English translation by Michael Cooperson (2013). Writing in ‘Abbasid Baghdad, Ibn al-Jawzi depicted Ibn Hanbal as a devout and ascetic figure who deliberately avoided contact with the caliph. In contrast, Ibn al-Jawzi himself was a jurist with multiple academic appointments and played a prominent role in Baghdad's intellectual and religious life. He served as a historian, Hanbali *qāḍī*, and preacher, receiving support from Caliph al-Mustadi‘ (r. 1171–1179), who favored Hanbalism. This patronage enabled Ibn al-Jawzi to address large audiences, champion Hanbalism, and engage in polemics against opposing views (Laoust 2012). The caliph even allocated him space in the palace mosque to counter Shiite influence in Baghdad. Ibn al-Jawzi authored more than 200 works and was responsible for overseeing five *madrasas* (Mallett n.d.).

Ibn al-Jawzi's outward-facing approach reflects the significant rise in Ibn Hanbal's popularity. His hagiographical biography of Ibn Hanbal can thus be understood as a strategic effort to position Hanbalism as a legal school on par with the other three Sunni schools of law. Ibn al-Jawzi's portrayal of Ibn Hanbal serves not only to construct an ideal model of Islamic piety but also to comment on proper Islamic behavior and the correct understanding of Islam. This representation can be interpreted as both an indirect and, at times, a direct critique of those he regarded as deviating from true Islamic practice. As such, the biographical text functions as a response to competing practices and beliefs of the time.

Ibn al-Jawzi himself appears to have been a highly conservative, if not staunch, Hanbalite with a pronounced aversion to Sufism. While he was critical of more extreme forms of mystical piety, Merlin Swartz argues that he maintained a more favorable view of disciplined Sufi practices. Swartz notes that Ibn al-Jawzi exhibited

a deep respect, even admiration, for Sufism in its more disciplined forms along with a distrust of mysticism in its more radical and popular forms. His criticism of its later, less controlled, expressions ought not be taken as a criticism of Sufism as such. (Swartz 2002, 15)

1 Appropriation of Popular Practices

This chapter will examine how Ibn al-Jawzi's biography of Ibn Hanbal engages with specific terminology and practices, even when they are not always explicitly articulated in the text. One key example is the term *walī* (friend of God), which appears in multiple contexts, most notably within Sufism. Parallels can also be drawn with Shiite concepts, particularly the belief that the Imams possessed hidden knowledge. From the outset, conflicts and competition between various interpretative traditions shaped the development of Islamic thought. Polemics and disputes between these groups played a crucial role in defining both individual positions and broader religious trends.

During the 'Abbasid Caliphate, legal schools, Sufism, and Shiism competed for influence, each offering distinct perspectives on theology, interpretative methods, and jurisprudence. Popular piety was subject to these competing discourses, which often sought to legitimize similar tendencies within their own frameworks through theological justifications aligned with their fundamental beliefs. In Ibn al-Jawzi's biography, Ibn Hanbal is depicted as a pious and ascetic *walī*, with miracles attributed to him. Although people sought him

out, he is still presented as an ordinary man – albeit one of exceptional piety. This chapter will explore how Ibn al-Jawzi portrays Ibn Hanbal in a manner akin to that of a Sufi *shaykh*, how he positions him within an established model of sainthood, and how he seeks to frame such narratives within a distinctly Hanbali perspective.

Similar strategies of incorporating popular religious practices within theological frameworks can be observed throughout Islamic history. For example, ‘*ulamā*’ and caliphs are reported to have possessed hairs from the Prophet Muhammad, which they carried for protection, used for healing, and were even buried with. Scholars such as Ibn Hanbal and the *ḥadīth* compiler Bukhari (d. 256/870) not only showed interest in narratives about prophetic relics but also owned and used them (Bursi 2024, 19). The graves of saints and their relics have often been believed to bestow *barakah* (blessing) or *shafā’ah* (intercession) upon those who visit or touch them (Strong 2005; McGregor 2020). However, the veneration of relics, particularly those associated with saints, has been a source of controversy, with ‘*ulamā*’ frequently condemning such practices as *shirk* (idolatry). This chapter will briefly consider how relics and saint veneration are addressed in Ibn al-Jawzi’s biography.

Scholars (see Cornell 2022) have closely associated Sufism with asceticism, which may explain why asceticism has often been primarily linked to “mystical” ideas and practices. Renunciation (*zuhd*) emerged early as a distinct form of piety, contributing to the development of a more defined mystical orientation known as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). However, I argue that this orientation differs from the unwavering ascetic piety practiced by some among *ahl al-ḥadīth*, such as Ibn Hanbal. Hanbali asceticism tended to lean “in the direction of morality rather than mysticism” (Melchert 2002, 429).

Ascetic piety has historically functioned as an instrument of Muslim self-formation, signaling membership within the broader Muslim community across various interpretative traditions. It also served as a marker of piety that conferred social prestige. Sizgorich (2009, 194) notes that “heightened proficiency in these [ascetic practices] functioned as marks of communal authority.” This emphasis on asceticism can be compared to the biographies of Muhammad (*sīrah*), which similarly highlight his renunciant lifestyle. Many ascetics were constructed in texts as ideals for normative behavior. Early biographies often focus not only on an individual’s scholarly achievements but also on their daily life, including clothing, home environment, furnishings, and dietary habits. Such details illustrate a broader moral code, offering insights into the ethical perceptions held by the ‘*ulamā*’ during the periods in which these texts were composed.

This chapter will examine Ibn Hanbal's renunciant (*zuhd*) practices more broadly, with one illustrative example being his dietary habits. It will also explore the resulting cult of sanctity that Ibn al-Jawzi seeks to establish in his biography.

2 Renunciation – *zuhd*

The biography presents Ibn Hanbal's birth date and genealogy in the first chapters. Born in 164/780 in Baghdad, he was raised by his mother after his father passed away during his childhood. The biography emphasizes Ibn Hanbal's pietistic persona from an early age. At a young age, he began his studies at the Qur'an school, and the biography notes that he was called upon to write letters for families. It also describes how he refused to look at women and rejected writing obscene words that were dictated to him (Ibn al-Jawzi 3.1–3; see also Salih ibn Hanbal's biography 1981, 25–27). Later in the biography, Ibn al-Jawzi states his belief that a person's character is evident in youth.

As you doubtless know, a person's character is manifest even in youth; the way a life begins gives a good idea of how it is likely to end. In Ahmad's [Ibn Hanbal] case, piety and love of learning were evident in him from the beginning. As a result, his teachers praised him and gave him precedence. (Ibn al-Jawzi 10.1)

One of Ibn Hanbal's teachers is reported to have said, "I never saw anyone more astute or more scrupulous [*awra'*] than Ahmad ibn Hanbal" (Ibn al-Jawzi 10.9). Ibn Hanbal is described as renouncing the world and embodying the quality of self-denial (*zuhd*) (Ibn al-Jawzi 13.54, 13.55). Ibn al-Jawzi presents him as a man full of devotion, who prayed every night and recited the Qur'an (Ibn al-Jawzi, chapter 58). After completing the recitation of the entire Qur'an, Ibn Hanbal did not seek to show off, instead doing so in secret (Ibn al-Jawzi 30.4). As such, he is portrayed as a marker of communal identity – a pious and ascetic renunciant. Ibn Hanbal's stubborn personality led him to refuse any form of luxury (Ibn al-Jawzi 73.44). One chapter is devoted to describing Ibn Hanbal's reaction to his sons and an uncle accepting stipends from the caliph (Ibn al-Jawzi, chapter 76). When they kept the money, he refused to speak to them or pray with them and blocked the door between his house and his son Salih's. Ibn Hanbal's persona is thus portrayed as that of an ascetic pietist who renounced the this-worldly.

To understand why Ibn Hanbal is portrayed as an ascetic renunciant, we must further explore the concept of *zuhd*. *Zuhd* can be defined as "the material and spiritual asceticism facilitating closer association with the divine"

(Gobillot 2012). However, *zuhd* is not a term used exclusively by or for mystics; rather, it is applied in a much broader context. Geneviève Gobillot states that:

The term embraces numerous nuances, divided between two principal meanings: on the one hand, “renunciation” in the sense of detachment, of indifference to things of this inferior world; on the other, “asceticism” in the sense of privation, mortification, tests imposed on the carnal soul (*nafs*). (Gobillot 2012)

Ascetics and Sufis are not necessarily the same. Michael Cooperson notes that “Unlike the ascetics, the Sufis taught contemplation and dissolution of the self in a loving God, and emphasized the ‘states’ and ‘stations’ through which the believer passes in his relationship with Him” (Cooperson 2004, 159). Thomas Sizgorich’s discussion on early Muslim asceticism stresses that it is troubling that so much scholarly attention has focused on Muslim mysticism and the advent of Sufi schools, while neglecting closer scrutiny of asceticism as part of a broader Muslim identity and self-fashioning. Sizgorich argues that the “role of ascetic praxis in the elaboration of a specifically Muslim ‘moral imagination’ was inextricably linked to the development of normative behavioral traits that inscribed individuals as members of the Muslim umma” (Sizgorich 2009, 171). While not all Muslims were ascetics, asceticism became an ideal model that emphasized certain virtues and a detached stance toward the this-worldly. It was a strategic and significant part of self-understanding, identity construction, and differentiation from “others” (Sizgorich 2009, 172). Simultaneously, the sources elaborate on asceticism in a manner that seems to regulate boundaries between Muslims and others, such as Christian ascetics. In the *hadīth*, Muhammad objected to some pious Muslims who stated that they would live like Christian monks, since behaviors like celibacy were not sanctioned in his *sunnah* (Sizgorich 2009, 178).¹

Mysticism emerged as a distinct form of Islam in the middle of the 9th century. While asceticism entails self-discipline and austerity, characteristics that may well also apply to the practice of mystics, the term “asceticism” is often set in contrast to mysticism. As Christopher Melchert notes, “elements of both asceticism and mysticism will be found in every religion and every individual’s

1 Several examples testify to this. See Sizgorich 2009, 178f. Also, Kafri-Livne (1996) discusses the influences of Christian monasticism on Muslims. For critical commentary on discussions of *zuhd*, see Salem 2016, 105–106. Alexander Knysh (2000) also addresses Christian influences, particularly through conversion and the presence of Christian monks. Knysh demonstrates that there were diverse styles of devotion, some of which were influenced by Christianity. For instance, some converts wore woolen clothing, which was viewed as an innovation since the Prophet is traditionally said to have worn cotton clothes. See also Salem 2016, 107–108.

worldview; however, note well, in different proportions that can be measured" (Melchert 2015a, 120). Islamic studies scholars typically translate *zuhd* into asceticism and *tasawwuf* into Sufism (Melchert 2015a, 120). Melchert observes that "classical Sufism crystallized in Baghdad in the last quarter of the ninth century CE," and by "classical Sufism," he refers to the quiet mysticism centered around al-Junayd (220–297/835–910) (Melchert 2015a, 139). Melchert's insightful study, *Before Sufism*, seeks to demonstrate how early renunciant piety, after the period of conquests during the 8th century, consisted of efforts to preserve the ethos of the conquest period. This preservation was complicated by the growing number of converts to Islam and the development of a professional military. Melchert takes a critical stance towards the often essentialized views of Sufism as the early form of renunciation. Classical Sufism, as it developed in Baghdad around the figure of al-Junayd, promoted renunciation for the few, fostering an inward mysticism and piety that would not be in apparent conflict with Hanbali thought (Melchert 2020b, 189). In this context, *taqwā* (fear of God) was replaced with a cultivation of mystical communion with the divine in this world – an approach quite different from Hanbali renunciation. Melchert emphasizes that "scholars must reject the view, however comfortable to believers, that Sufism is a superhistorical essence manifest in the Prophet's lifetime, manifest throughout the conquest period, manifest immediately after the conquest period" (Melchert 2020b, 1). He critiques, for example, the views of Atif Khalil (Melchert 2020b, 182–184). Melchert makes a clarifying distinction between "asceticism," which stresses obedience to a transcendent deity, and "mysticism," which emphasizes communion with an immanent deity (Melchert 2020b, 179).

Considering *zuhd*, it has implications for daily life, providing codes of conduct for the pious. Leah Kinberg offers a general definition of *zuhd*, which "calls for the renunciation of anything that is not God, alongside the demand to suppress all evil inclinations" (Kinberg 1985, 30). A more specific definition includes precise instructions on how to perform renunciation and suppress evil. Kinberg divides the specific definitions of *zuhd* into two groups: one focusing on the goal of *zuhd* and the other on the means to achieve it. The goal is often portrayed as contentment with God (*ridā*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), and a sense of hope for a short duration (*qisar al-ʿamal*), which entails thinking about death and the world to come, thus avoiding the accumulation of things for the future (Kinberg 1985, 31–36). Furthermore, *warāʿ* (scrupulosity) is closely connected to *zuhd*.

Generally speaking *warāʿ* means hesitation and caution in deciding or acting out of conscience. The primary issue with which *warāʿ* deals is the border between

ḥalāl (lawful, or permissible) and *ḥarām* (onlawful [sic], or prohibited), and the meaning of *shubḥah* (moral doubt). According to the words ascribed to Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, *zuhd* can be divided into three classes: *zuhd* of the common people (*ʿawāmm*), which is abandoning the *ḥarām*; *zuhd* of the religious elite (*khawāss*), which is abandoning the surplus of the *ḥalāl*, and *zuhd* of those who know God (*ʿarīfīn*), which is abandoning whatever detracts the believer from God. (Kinberg 1985, 41)

Kinberg stresses that the theoretical aspects of *zuhd* are *ridā*, *tawakkul*, and *qīṣar al-ʿamal*, while *warāʿ* is the way of life the *zāhid* should follow in order to reach the goal (Kinberg 1985, 43). She concludes her analysis of *zuhd* as follows:

Leading a scrupulous way of life promises the achievement of *zuhd*. Following a code of life based on *waraʿ* is considered the way to draw closer to the longed-for goal of complete trust in God (*tawakkul*), contentment (*riḍā*) and yearning for death to come (*qīṣar al-ʿamal*). Thus, keeping the principles of *waraʿ* leads to *zuhd*. Since *waraʿ* is a social concept, which contains instructions on how to act in various situations in day-to-day life, and – as was shown and stressed – leads to the fulfillment of *zuhd*, it becomes obvious why *zuhd*, in the pious Islamic milieu, should be understood as a general way of conduct, or simply as ethics. (Kinberg 1985, 43–44)

Several of these terms were also associated with more extreme forms of asceticism. *Qīṣar al-ʿamal* means practicing “shortness of hope,” sometimes resulting in more extreme austere ascetic behaviors, such as not eating or dressing poorly (see Melchert 2007). *Tawakkul* was sometimes practiced recklessly; some went on desert journeys without carrying food or water, trusting in divine provision (Melchert 2007; see also Reinert 1968 on *tawakkul* in classical Sufism). *Warāʿ* is an important aspect of *zuhd*. While the term (or its root) is not found in the Qurʾān, it was used early on and appears in titles of treatises, such as *Kitāb al-warāʿ*, attributed to Ibn Hanbal (see Pitschke 2010). The terms *zuhd*, *tawakkul*, and *warāʿ* have often been used interchangeably (Urvoy 2012). *Zuhd*, perhaps best translated as renunciation, can thus be described as a program of pious moral conduct, an ethical outlook, and a philosophy of life (Kinberg 1985).

One book attributed to Ibn Hanbal is *Kitāb al-zuhd* (Ibn Hanbal 1981a, 1981b; for a presentation of manuscripts, see Melchert 2011b). This book differs from earlier works on renunciation and is narrated in the first person, suggesting it was transmitted by Ibn Hanbal’s son, ʿAbd Allāh. The book is chronologically organized, likely modeled on existing works on *tabaqāt*. It is permeated

by narratives from Jewish and Christian sources, the so-called *isrāʿīliyyāt*, which sets it apart from *Kitāb al-zuhd* by Ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181/797), who seems to have avoided such sources. A reason for the differences between the two works likely lies in the presence of competing ideals concerning piety (see Salem 2016, 134–135).

3 Ibn Hanbal's Dietary Habits

Nimrod Hurvitz discusses Ibn Hanbal's dietary habits (Hurvitz 1997, 51–55), providing a window into his ascetic ethos and rejection of indulgent materialism. As a prominent figure in the tradition of mild asceticism, his approach to food reflected broader ethical commitments and a desire to distance himself from luxurious lifestyles. Ibn Hanbal's diet was simple and unadorned, consisting primarily of bread, vinegar, and inexpensive fruits such as dates and watermelons. He avoided costly or refined foods associated with elite tastes, such as white bread or quince, which were favored by the social and cultural aristocracy of his time. Instead, he consumed coarse or stale bread, often softened with vinegar or salt – ingredients commonly used by the poor. These dietary choices were not dictated by necessity alone but also served as a deliberate expression of his worldview. He was acutely aware of the socio-cultural meanings attached to food and sought to align his eating habits with an ideal of self-restraint.

An anecdote about his hesitance to eat *falūdhaj*, a sweet dish made from flour, honey, and sometimes nuts – associated with the wealthy – underscores his concern with the moral and social implications of consumption. While sweets were enjoyed across all classes, Ibn Hanbal differentiated between those accessible to the poor, such as dates, and those reserved for the affluent. His decision to taste *falūdhaj* only after being urged signals his discomfort with indulgence and his commitment to temperance.

Beyond specific food choices, Ibn Hanbal's attitude towards eating embodied his broader ethical stance on material pleasures. While he did not entirely renounce nourishment or variety – occasionally consuming lentils and fat – he consistently avoided excess and self-indulgence. His approach stood in stark contrast to the refined elites who cultivated extravagant lifestyles and viewed culinary pleasure as a marker of sophistication. By rejecting their dietary preferences and maintaining a regimen that was both frugal and functional, Ibn Hanbal signaled his disapproval of material excess and his commitment to a life of discipline. His food consumption, therefore, functioned as a moral

statement, reinforcing his vision of an ascetic yet balanced existence, in which sustenance was a necessity rather than a source of pleasure.

Nimrod Hurvitz (1997, 51–55) demonstrates that the dietary habits of Ibn Hanbal, specifically his consumption of the same simple foods as the common masses (*al-‘āmmah*), serve as both a social and moral statement. In contrast, the wealthy spent considerable amounts on extravagant foods, with numerous recipes from that time still preserved. Traditionalist asceticism starkly contrasts with such behavior, portraying adherents as disciplined individuals who strictly regulate their needs. Hurvitz characterizes these examples as reflective of mild asceticism, emphasizing a moral rejection of worldly pleasures.

Distinguishing between mild and extreme asceticism is not always straightforward, but it is crucial for understanding the core principles of early forms of asceticism. While both mystically inclined and Hanbali-oriented ascetics share similarities, they differ significantly in various aspects. The primary distinction lies in conduct. For instance, mild ascetics controlled their appetites while eating daily, whereas extreme ascetics fasted for extended periods to suppress their desires. Another difference pertains to the objectives of ascetic practice. While renunciation is a form of asceticism, it does not necessarily entail striving for a higher “spiritual” state or seeking absorption in or participation with the divine.

Although renunciation is often associated with mysticism across various religious traditions, this chapter illustrates the importance of studying renunciant practice within its specific contextual framework, rather than employing it as a universal concept. It is essential to investigate the motivations behind ascetic relic veneration practices and consider their impacts on social, political, and economic relationships (see Bazell 1998, 428). All renunciant practices must be understood in relation to their socio-political and historical context, recognizing that such practices can transform and influence both religious and political power and authority. The example of dietary habits is just one instance that demonstrates how Ibn al-Jawzi seeks to establish Ibn Hanbal as a pious and ascetic role model to be emulated.

4 A Cult of Sanctity

I argue that one of Ibn al-Jawzi’s aims was to create a sanctity cult surrounding Ibn Hanbal. This idea is informed by Michael Cooperson’s research, which presents “the cult of sanctity” in the early biographies of Ibn Hanbal, and concludes that most of the information is found in Ibn al-Jawzi’s account

(Cooperson 2004, 139). If we examine the biography, we can note that chapter 61 in Ibn al-Jawzi is entitled “His Manifestations of Grace and the Effectiveness of His Prayers.” One example is how Ibn Hanbal threatened some ants, asking them to leave his house, which they did, never to return (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.1). He also prayed for his grandson, whose nosebleed had not stopped, and whose death was imminent, and the bleeding ceased (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.2). In another account, one of Ibn Hanbal’s pens was used to fertilize a palm tree (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.3). Through his prayer, he cured a woman who could not walk, and she exclaimed, “God cured me!” (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.4). One report describes how objects connected to Ibn Hanbal, such as his robe and writings, did not burn up in various fires (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.6–7; see also Ibn al-Jawzi 65.10). Miraculous events are frequently attributed to Ibn Hanbal. For example, one man prayed to God to light his way to visit Ibn Hanbal at night, stating, “For thirty years, everything I’ve asked for in his name has been granted,” and indeed, God illuminated the sky (Ibn al-Jawzi 61.8). During his flogging, Ibn Hanbal prayed to God not to expose his nakedness when his trousers slipped down to his groin, and they stopped slipping (Ibn al-Jawzi 69.33–34). One report even claims that two hands appeared from under him and pulled his trousers back (Ibn al-Jawzi 69.35), while another states that they reknotted themselves, though people were too preoccupied to notice (Ibn al-Jawzi 69.36).

In a chapter entitled “His Seekings of Blessings [*tabarruk*] and Cures [*istishfā*] Using the Qur’an and Water from the Well of Zamzam, as Well as Some Hair and a Bowl that Belonged to the Prophet,” Ibn Hanbal’s son Salih reported that Ibn Hanbal recited over a cup of water for him to drink while he was ill (Ibn al-Jawzi 24.1). His son ‘Abd Allah also mentioned that he saw his father place one of the Prophet’s hairs over his eyes as a cure (Ibn al-Jawzi 24.2). Thus, Ibn Hanbal believed that relics had power (see Melchert 2001, 355, who notes “mystical elements” in Ibn Hanbal’s piety). Intercession by the Prophet is also mentioned (Ibn al-Jawzi 11.15).

Miraculous stories are connected to Ibn Hanbal’s experiences during the *mihnah*. Ibn Hanbal reportedly had some of the Prophet’s hair knotted in the sleeve of his shirt while being stripped for whipping during the *mihnah* (Ibn al-Jawzi 69.21). Another report states that he received three hairs of the Prophet while in jail during the inquisition. “As he lay dying, Ahmad asked that one hair be placed over each of his eyes and the third on his tongue. This we did for him when he died” (Ibn al-Jawzi 79.10). A dream is also reported in which a man kissed Ibn Hanbal’s grave shaft and asked, “Why is yours the only grave that one can kiss?” Ibn Hanbal replied, “It’s not out of respect for me, but for the Emissary of God. I have some of his hairs with me” (Ibn al-Jawzi 92.43).

These narratives emphasize that the veneration was not directed at Ibn Hanbal himself.

One report recounts how a man once laid his hand on Ibn Hanbal and ran it over his body in the hope of receiving a blessing. Ibn Hanbal grew furious and disapproved, asking who had taught the man such behavior (Ibn al-Jawzi 52.11). People were evidently awestruck by Ibn Hanbal's asceticism and hoped for his intercession, as the biographies explicitly suggest. However, when the *hadith*-scholar Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani (d. 430/1038) labeled Ibn Hanbal a Sufi, Ibn al-Jawzi protested (Cooperson 2004, 141, 146–147). Ibn al-Jawzi criticized this, stating that “the notion that every conspicuously pious Muslim is a Sufi is a gratuitous misrepresentation” (Cooperson 2004, 147). Such comments indicate tension between different ascetic groups and a need to distinguish between them. Ibn al-Jawzi also remarked that “a jurist with few followers is much better than a thousand men of the sort the commoners rub their hands upon for a blessing, and to whose funerals countless numbers flock” (Cooperson 2004, 147).

Reports also tell of hundreds of thousands attending Ibn Hanbal's funeral (Ibn al-Jawzi, chapter 83). One report describes a man who took a week to reach the grave, explaining that this was the time it took to navigate through the crowds (Ibn al-Jawzi 85.1). It is not only Muslims who are reported to have mourned his death, but also Jews, Christians, and Magians, several of whom converted to Islam (Ibn al-Jawzi 87.1). Ibn al-Jawzi even states that the jinn prayed for him (Ibn al-Jawzi, chapter 88). In several accounts of funerals for important figures, mentions of visitors from other religious traditions are included to emphasize the significance of the deceased, highlighting their religious authority (Sizgorich 2006, 204–205; Zaman 2001).

Ibn Hanbal was perceived as extraordinarily close to God, akin to a *walī*. Cooperson argues that this perception allowed biographers to “come to terms” with the rival factions of the Sufis and the Shafi'is (Cooperson 2004, 141). Ibn Hanbal earned a reputation for being knowledgeable about and living in accordance with *hadith* even before the *mihnah*. As such, he became a role model for others to emulate (Cooperson 2004, 141). This is evident in Ibn al-Jawzi's accounts, where he not only reports the opinions of Ibn Hanbal but also describes his attire and conduct in everyday life (Cooperson 2004, 142). The fact that Ibn Hanbal himself seemed to oppose such veneration follows the dynamic of *wilāya* (sainthood). He insisted that he was not worthy of such reverence, and this was taken as proof of his high spiritual standing (Cooperson 2004, 142). As Cooperson notes, “Ibn Hanbal's poverty served as the external sign of spiritual authority” (2004, 142–143). He also suggests that

“renunciation (*zuhd*) [...] could come about as a consequence of scrupulosity (*waraʿ*) as well as the imitation of the Prophet” (Cooperson 2004, 143).

The poverty of Ibn Hanbal is also reflected in another aspect: his shagginess. Cooperson notes that shagginess “was associated with membership in a secret fraternity of holy men” (Cooperson 2004, 143). In Baghdad, certain men with such appearances were believed to belong to the *abdāl*, a small group of men with special intercessory powers, and Ibn Hanbal was likely seen as one of them by many (Cooperson 2004, 143; Melchert 2001, 256). Cooperson suggests that Hanbalis were aware of the development of Sufism and the fact that some ascetics did not follow the Sunnah. By including these narratives, they sought to reclaim the concept of *abdāl* from Sufism. Ibn al-Jawzi also attributes to Ibn Hanbal the power to have his prayers answered (*istijābat al-daʿwah*), a quality that Sufis associated with *wilāya* (sainthood), and which, according to ʿAlī al-Rida (148–202/765–818), the Shiʿite imam, was a defining characteristic of the Shiʿite imamate (Cooperson 2004, 143). Another aspect of sanctity is found in Ibn al-Jawzi’s writings, such as the story of a man whose tongue swelled after criticizing Ibn Hanbal, and dreams in which Ibn Hanbal appears at Heaven’s gate (Cooperson 2004, 145).

5 Final Comments

This chapter has examined the development of Hanbali Sunni Islam, with a particular focus on the biographical and hagiographical portrayal of Ibn Hanbal by Ibn al-Jawzi. I have aimed to illustrate how Ibn al-Jawzi strategically used Ibn Hanbal’s asceticism to position Hanbalism as a respected and distinct legal school, drawing a contrast with both Sufism and Shiism. As a prominent jurist in ʿAbbasid Baghdad, Ibn al-Jawzi portrayed Ibn Hanbal as a paragon of piety, embodying renunciation (*zuhd*) as both a moral code and a defining marker of communal identity.

This chapter also distinguishes early Sunni asceticism from Sufism, emphasizing its role in shaping Islamic ethical behavior and identity. While Sufism was often associated with mystical practices and esoteric spirituality, early Sunni asceticism, as reflected in the works of Ibn al-Jawzi, was grounded in a practical, outward expression of virtue and adherence to the Sunnah. By focusing on Ibn Hanbal’s asceticism and moral simplicity, Ibn al-Jawzi sought to solidify Hanbalism’s standing in contrast to other religious factions, presenting Ibn Hanbal as a figure of exceptional moral authority.

In particular, the chapter explores how Ibn al-Jawzi constructed a “sanctity cult” around Ibn Hanbal, elevating his asceticism, piety, and perceived

closeness to God, thereby associating him with the status of a *walī*. Despite Ibn Hanbal's apparent reluctance to be venerated, these narratives not only enhanced his authority but also served as a counter-narrative to rival religious groups. His poverty and simplicity, rather than being seen as marks of insignificance, were instead framed as outward signs of spiritual greatness, reinforcing his role as an ideal model of piety for the broader Muslim community.

Finally, I have argued that it is crucial to avoid generalizing concepts such as asceticism and to consider them within their specific socio-political and historical contexts. Ascetic practices must be analyzed in relation to the broader religious and political landscapes in which they emerge. By examining the distinct nature of ascetic practices across different Islamic traditions, we can better understand their varied roles in shaping religious identities, ethical behavior, and theological discourse, rather than arriving at uncritical, universal conclusions.

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Non-Islamic Sufism? On Islam and Non-Islam in the Rites and Writings of Inayat Khan

Simon Sorgenfrei

In the 1910s, the Indian musician and Chishtiyya missionary, Inayat Khan (1882–1927), founded The Sufi Movement International during travels in Europe and North America. Khan's Sufi movement has often been seen as the beginning of a Western form of Sufism, characterised as a sort of Universalist spirituality rather than by Islamic traditions. Precisely how the Sufism taught by Khan and practiced within the Sufi Movement is to be characterized has been a matter of discussion. Some scholars have chosen to label it "Universal Sufism" (Sedgwick, 2017; Genn 2007, 260–62), while others have called the teachings of Khan non-Islamic, as an expression of Sufism characterized by a separation from Islam (Rawlinson 1993; Godlas 1997–2008).

By analyzing some of the central rites and prayers of the Sufi Movement, this chapter aims to highlight scholarly difficulties in drawing distinctions between Islam and universalism, or Islamic and non-Islamic Sufism.

1 Inayat Khan: a Short Biography

Inayat Khan came from a distinguished Indian family, which appears to have been sympathetic to the British colonial power, as well as to Islamic modernists such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), Ameer Ali (1849–1928), and Chiragh Ali (1844–1895) (Inayat-Khan 2006, 45–49). Khan's grandfather, Sangitratna Mawlabakhsh (1833–1896), was an influential musician who sought to reform and revitalise Indian music in a similar way to Ahmad Khan's reform of Islam. After studying European music theory, Mawlabakhsh developed a system of notation for Indian classical music and, in 1886, founded the Gayan Shala, a music academy that became prominent in western India (Inayat-Khan 2006, 49–56).

Mawlabakhsh was of great importance to Inayat Khan. After his grandfather's death in 1896, Khan worked for a time as a teacher and professor at the Gayan Shala, also taking over his grandfather's ambition to develop a "universal system of music" with both Indian and European elements (Inayat-Khan

2006, 57). Khan was also a spiritual seeker, and in 1903, during an extended stay in Hyderabad, he was initiated into the Chishtiyya-Nizamiyya *tariqa* by Sayyid Abu Hashim Madani (d. 1907).¹ Throughout history, the *tariqa* has shown inclusivist tendencies, welcoming Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs into its practices and teachings (De Tassy 1995; Genn, 2007; Ernst & Lawrence, 2002). Maybe as an expression of such an inclusivist spirit, Khan was urged, according to various biographical notes, by Madani shortly before the latter's death, to travel to the West to unite East and West through his music – or through his Sufism. The details vary.²

In 1910, however, Inayat Khan travelled to New York, where he came into contact with the exotic dancer Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968), and Khan and his musicians toured with her under the name The Royal Musicians of Hindustan in 1911–1912 (Sedgwick 2017, 158). The company also performed for a time with the legendary dancer and spy for the Germans in the First World War, Margaretha Geertruida Zelle (1876–1917), better known as Mata Hari (Inayat-Khan 2006, 81). In San Francisco in 1911, Khan performed at the Landmark Hindu Temple, which was part of the Vedanta Society founded by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) seventeen years earlier (Sedgwick 2017, 159). In the audience was theosophist Ada Martin (1871–1947), who under the name Rabia would become Khan's first murid (disciple) (Inayat-Khan 2006, 74).

Khan left the United States for Europe in 1912, but he maintained contact with Rabia Martin through an intense correspondence that provides insight into his thoughts and teachings during the years he founded the Sufi Movement. It was also in contact with Martin that Khan first expressed the idea of founding a “Sufic Order in America” (Inayat-Khan 2006, 74). The impulse from Vivekananda's mission in the United States, as well as Martin's Theosophical take on religion and spirituality, both seem to have been important to Inayat Khan in founding the Sufi Movement International.

In these early letters, Khan appears very much as a Muslim sheikh. He urges Martin to study the poets Rumi (1207–1273), Sadi (1210–1292), and Hafiz (1325–1390), as well as the Indian reformists Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Ameer Ali (Inayat-Khan 2006, 73–79, 101–109; Sedgwick 2017, 159–16).

In New York, Khan also became acquainted with the Danish-American theosophist Carl Henrik Bjerregaard (1845–1922), who helped him borrow European and American studies of Sufism from the New York Public Library, where Bjerregaard worked. Among the books he read there were Bjerregaard's

1 He is also said to have had initiation in suhrawardiyya, qadiriyya and naqshbandiyya (for Khan's various lineages, see Inayat-Khan 2006, 346–350).

2 For a discussion of the different narratives see Inayat-Khan 2006, 64–67.

own theosophically coloured articles and books on Sufism, James Graham's (d. 1843) *Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism* (1819), Edward Henry Palmer's (1840–1882) *Oriental Mysticism* (1867) as well as Reynold A. Nicholson's (1868–1945) article "The Origin and Development of Sufism" (1906). Both Graham and Palmer, and to some extent Bjerregaard, presented Sufism as an expression of an oriental, esoteric universalism in a way that fit well with the fervour for undogmatic mysticism of the time.³

In 1914, Khan published his first book in English, *A Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty*, by the Theosophical Publishing House. In an analysis of the book, Mark Sedgwick argues that Khan is still close to the Sufism he may have been taught in India, but that the text also shows influences from Bjerregaard, Graham, and Palmer in that a universalistic trait becomes prominent. Sufism is presented as "the pure essence of all religions and philosophies" (Sedgwick 2017, 162–163). We can thus note how Western reception of Sufism – and the vocabulary used in English-language books on Sufism – influenced how Khan himself would come to express himself in English.

In his mission, Khan benefited from his established contacts with theosophical networks, as several of the early members were theosophists, and also had an influence on how Khan's Sufism came to be communicated (Sedgwick 2017, 162–164; Inayat-Khan 2006, 84–86, 110–111, 145–146). At the same time, Khan repeatedly expresses a critical attitude towards Theosophy. As it seems, a certain tension was to develop between Khan's ideas concerning the Sufi Movement and those coming from some of his murids who had a background in Theosophy (Khan 1979, 224).

After the war, Khan moved with his family to France, and during a trip to Geneva in 1920, the movement's headquarters were established there. His message harmonized with, and perhaps adapted to, utopian hopes and liberal values of the inter-war period, and more and more people seemed interested in his lectures. He repeatedly emphasised the fact that the Sufi movement and the League of Nations were both headquartered in Geneva, and how both wanted to work for peace and the equal value of all people regardless of gender, race, or religion.

In Geneva, Khan also managed to attract a large group of aristocrats who assisted him and the movement financially, including by buying the family properties in Suresnes outside Paris, which would be Khan's base for the rest

3 Bjerregaard wrote a series of articles on Sufism in the theosophical journal *the Path* as early as 1886, and then the book *Sufi Interpretations of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam* and Fitzgerald in 1902. Sedgwick 2017, 160–61.

of his life (Inayat-Khan 2006, 119–125). Inayat Khan died unexpectedly during a visit to India in 1927 (Inayat-Khan 2006, 147).

2 The Universal Worship

As discussed in the previous section, Khan had a background in both Islamic reformism and an inclusivist, ecumenical expression of Chishtiyya Sufism. In his efforts to communicate his teachings to a Western, non-Muslim audience, he drew linguistic and conceptual inspiration from Theosophical writings as well as from academic scholarship on Sufism, often presenting it as an expression of Oriental Mysticism. Additionally, his ideas were influenced by the political and ethical ideals of peace, harmony, and cross-cultural understanding that were prominent in post-war U.S. and European societies, particularly as embodied in the League of Nations. Over time, these universalist and inclusivist tendencies became more pronounced in his own teachings, gradually overshadowing distinctly Islamic elements.

Early in his career in the United States and Europe, Inayat Khan taught his murids the traditional Islamic *Salat* prayer (without requiring them to convert to Islam). However, over time, he developed his own prayer rites.⁴ Probably the best known of the Sufi Movement's ritual activities is the so-called Universal Worship. This was created as a collaboration between Inayat Khan and his *murshida* (teacher), Sophia Saintsbury-Green (1876–1939). Green had previously worked closely with Theosophical Society leader (from 1907) Annie Besant (1847–1933), and the main features of the Universal Worship appear to have been inspired by Sunday services developed within the Order of the Star of the East, which was founded in 1911 and later became the Liberal Catholic Church.⁵ Khan himself writes of this “Universal Worship,” which he also calls “the Church of All,” that the rite is so called because it contains within itself all the various forms of worship and all the churches (Khan 1979, chap. VI).

The first Universal Worship was conducted by Inayat Khan himself, in London on May 7, 1921, and an account of this occasion was recorded by one

4 Prayers and Instructions, Inner School, Original Prayers, Doos 137, Inv.nr. 208, Jamiat III '24–'27. Original Prayers + mov. (SMIH).

5 Inayat-Khan 2006, 130–131, 114. See also Saintsbury-Green, 2014. Mark Sedgwick has also pointed out similarities between Khan's universal services and the Protestant mass, as well as with the rites of the Vedanta Society (which Khan visited in 1911), Sedgwick 2017, 166.

of the murids present.⁶ Detailed accounts of how the service is conducted can also be found in Karin Jironet's studies (e.g., 2002).

At the center of the service is an altar on which six candles are burning and copies of holy books of various religions are displayed along with writings by Inayat Khan. During the service, there are readings from the various texts on a theme – for example, “love” or “trust” – which conclude with readings on the same theme from Khan's writings. Four prayers are also read, which are all quoted in full below. These are the prayer *Toward the One*, which is central to the Sufi Movement; a prayer called *Saum*; the prayer *Salat*; and finally, *Khatum*.

Saum and *Salat* are two Arabic words that commonly refer to the fasting of Ramadan (Ar. *Sawm*) and daily prayers in Islam (Ar. *Salat*), but which Khan uses here to refer to two other prayer rites. *Khatum* (Ar. *khatam*) means “seal” and can be used as an epithet for Muhammad or the Qur'an as the last prophet or the last revelation, respectively. Khan uses it here as a name for the prayer that concludes the service. The three prayers read as follows:

Toward the One

Toward the One
the perfection of love, harmony and beauty,
the only being, united with all the illuminated souls
who form the embodiment of the Master
the Spirit of Guidance. (Jironet, 2002, 65)

Saum

Praise be to Thee most supreme God
Omnipotent, omnipresent, all-pervading
The only Being
Take us in Thy parental arms
Raise us from the denseness of the Earth
Thy beauty do we worship
And to Thee do we give willing surrender.
Most merciful and compassionate God
The idealized Lord of the whole humanity
Thee only do we worship and towards Thee alone do we aspire
Open our hearts towards Thy beauty
Illuminate our souls with Divine light
O Thou, the perfection of love, harmony and beauty

6 E.A. (Shabaz) Mitchell's account is quoted at length in 'The First Universal Worship Service', Siraj Sharif Munawwir (Donald Avery Graham), Suresnes, 18 August 2006, (NFA).

All-powerful Creator, Sustainer, Judge
 and forgiver of our shortcomings
 Lord God of the East and West, of the worlds above and below
 And of the seen and unseen beings.
 Pour upon us Thy love and Thy light
 Give Sustenance to our bodies, hearts and souls
 Use us for the purpose that Thy wisdom chooseth
 And guide us on the path of Thine own goodness
 Draw us closer to Thee every moment of our life
 Until in us be reflected Thy Grace, Thy Glory
 Thy Wisdom, Thy Joy, and Thy Peace
 Amen⁷

Salat

Most gracious Lord, Master, Messiah, and Savior of humanity, We greet Thee
 with all humility.
 Thou art the First Cause and the Last Effect, the Divine Light and the Spirit of
 Guidance, Alpha and Omega.
 Thy Light is in all forms, Thy Love in all beings: in a loving mother, in a kind
 father, in an innocent child, in a helpful friend, in an inspiring teacher. Allow
 us to recognize Thee in all Thy holy names and forms; as Rama, as Krishna, as
 Shiva, as Buddha.
 Let us know Thee as Abraham, as Solomon, as Zarathushtra, as Moses, as Jesus,
 as Mohammed, and in many other names and forms, known and unknown
 to the world.
 We adore Thy past; Thy presence deeply enlightens our being, and we look for
 Thy blessing in the future.
 O Messenger, Christ, Nabi, the Rasul of God! Thou Whose heart constantly
 reacheth upward, Thou comest on earth with a message, as a dove from above
 when Dharma decays, and speakest the Word that is put into Thy mouth, as
 the light filleth the crescent moon.
 Let the star of the Divine Light shining in Thy heart be reflected in the hearts of
 Thy devotees.
 May the Message of God reach far and wide, illuminating and making the whole
 humanity as one single Family in the Parenthood of God.⁸

7 Saum, Inner School, Original Prayers, Doos 137, Inv.nr. 208, Jamiat III '24-'27. Original Prayers + mov. (SMIH).

8 Salat, Inner School, Original Prayers, Doos 137, Inv.nr. 208, Jamiat III '24-'27. Original Prayers + mov. (SMIH).

Khatum

O Thou, Who art the Perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty, The Lord of heaven and earth,

Open our hearts, that we may hear Thy Voice, which constantly cometh from within.

Disclose to us Thy Divine Light which is hidden in our souls,

That we may know and understand life better.

Most Merciful and Compassionate God, Give us Thy great Goodness;

Teach us Thy loving Forgiveness;

Raise us above the distinctions and differences which divide mankind:

Send us the Peace of Thy divine Spirit, And unite us all in Thy Perfect Being.

Amen⁹

Although *Toward the One* is the most central prayer of the Sufi Movement, Inayat Khan is said to have believed that *Saum* and *Salat* were the two most fundamental practices that all initiates were expected to perform every day. *Saum*, he said, was the prayer that invoked God, while *Salat* invoked *Rasul*, the Messenger. Neither prayer was to be done alone, which he believed could be dangerous, but *Saum* and *Salat* were always to be done together.¹⁰

In a way, the two prayers can be seen as a ritual manifestation of the Muslim creed (*Shahada*), which first expresses testimony about the one God, and secondly that Muhammad is God's messenger (*Rasul Allah*). In an analysis of the prayer *Saum*, Mark Sedgwick (see below) has also shown how it can be seen as an allusion to the first sura of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha*.

Just as *Toward the One*, also the *Saum* prayer can, I argue, be read as a manifestation of *tawhid*, the belief in one God and the unity of God that is central to Islam. The prayer repeats several times that God is the only one, and furthermore, the epithets attributed to God in *Saum* overlap with the so-called most beautiful names (*al-asma al-husna*) attributed to God in Islamic tradition. Finally, the concept of 'willing surrender' is closely related to a modernist interpretation of the verbal noun Islam as a voluntary submission to God (Troll 1978, 297). Further examples could be given on how this (and the other prayers) *could* be interpreted as alluding to central Islamic dogma.

9 Khatum, Inner School, Original Prayers, Doos 137, Inv.nr. 208, Jamiat III '24-'27. Original Prayers + mov. (SMIH).

10 <http://www.towardtheone.com/PrayerMovementsSaumAndSalat.pdf>. (besökt 2017-08-09).

TABLE 8.1 Comparison of Saum and Al-Fatiha texts (Source: Sedgwick 2017, 167)

Saum	Al-Fatiha
	1. ...
1. Praise be to Thee, Most Supreme God,	2. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds,
2–5.	—
6. Most Merciful and Compassionate God,	3. The Compassionate, the Merciful,
7. The Idealized Lord of the whole humanity,	4. Ruler of the Day of Reckoning,
8. Thee only do we worship, And towards Thee alone do we aspire.	5. Thee (alone) we worship, Thee (alone) we ask for help.
9–16.	—
17. And guide us on the path of Thine own goodness.	6. Guide us on the straight path,
18–19.	7.
20. Amin	Amin

Although the prayers were generally read, and are still read, in stillness and silence by the congregation, Khan also attached a ritual movement scheme to them that was voluntary to perform. During the first service in 1921, Khan recited the prayers along with these movements.¹¹ An analysis of these ritual teachings connects Inayat Khan even more strongly to the Islamic tradition in which he was schooled. The movements for the *Saum* prayer for example show great similarities to the *raka* to be performed during the *Salat* prayer that Muslims are expected to perform five times a day, while the movements associated with Khan's *Salat* prayer have similarities to the movement patterns for both the Protestant prayer with clasped hands, and for the *dua* (i.e. individual prayer practiced by many Muslims). Khan's instructions for these prayers are as follows:

11 "The First Universal Worship Service," Siraj Sharif Munawwir (Donald Avery Graham), Suresnes, 18 August 2006. (NFA).

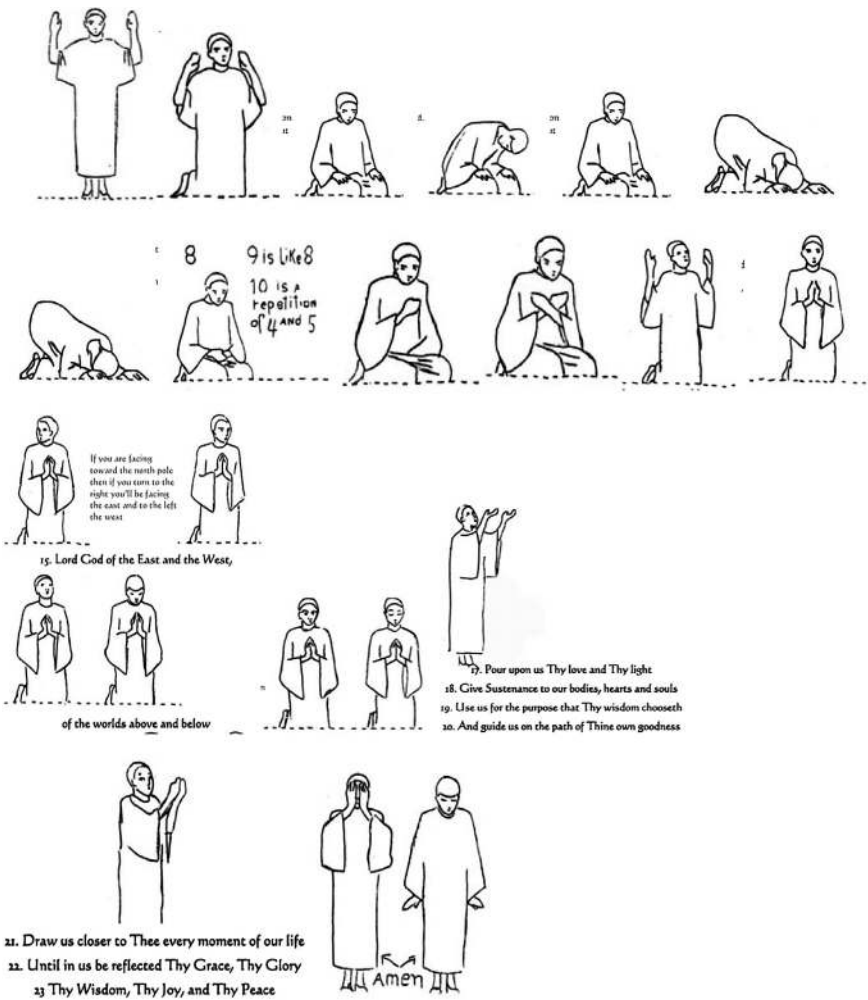


FIGURE 8.1 Saum, movements (Source: Sufi Movement Headquarters Archives)

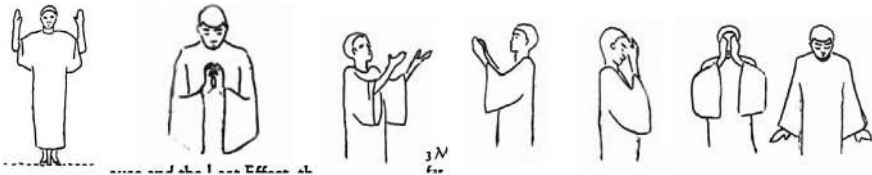


FIGURE 8.2 Salat, movements (Source: Sufi Movement Headquarters Archives)

3 Islamic or Non-Islamic Sufism?

Throughout his years in Europe and the United States, Inayat Khan collaborated closely with Theosophists, and the Sufism he introduced within the framework of the Sufi Movement International incorporated both ritual elements and terminology borrowed from Theosophy. However, as the above accounts also illustrate, there are discernible continuities between Khan's teachings and the Sufism he himself was taught and practiced in India.¹² As previously noted, his grandfather was a reformist who sought to revitalize Indian classical music by integrating European musicology and pedagogical methods. These ambitions also aligned with broader reformist currents in India at the time, particularly those associated with, for example, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Chiragh Ali, and Ameer Ali, all of whom also influenced Inayat Khan (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming). Within these reformist currents, inclusivist interpretations of Islam were promoted. By emphasizing *tawhid*, the doctrine of the unity of God, as central to Islam, for example, Sayyid Ahmad Khan fostered what seems to be a quite open understanding of who could be defined as a Muslim:

Islam is [basically] the profession of the tawhid (unity) of God. By the firm belief in that unity, a person can be called a Muslim [...] The person who in truth acknowledges God and firmly believes in his unity is a Muslim. (Troll 1978, 297)

As we could see both in the prayers quoted above and in the liturgical readings connected to the Universal Worship, the belief in the One and Absolute God was a focal point, and all scriptures read during the worship were understood to express the same universal and divine truth. Inayat Khan seems to have followed in the footsteps of Indian reformists and Chishtiyya sheikhs, both as a musician and as a teacher. The Sufism he developed was profoundly influenced by inclusive and ecumenical attitudes evident in Chishti traditions, reformist Islam, and Theosophical thought.

Just as Khan sought to accomplish his grandfather's ambition of creating a "universal system of music," his Sufism can be understood as an effort to establish a "universal system of religion," a concept that also aligned with the aspirations of Theosophists and other contemporary perennialist movements

¹² There are many possible ways to understand Khan's development in Europe. One obvious explanation, of course, is that he adapted his message to a Western audience to achieve greater success and thus higher incomes. These changes, as well as the development of a more formal organisation, take place during a period in Khan's life when he and his growing family are living in difficult economic circumstances. See Inayat-Khan 2006, 92–95.

(Sedgwick 2004; Wasserstrom 1999). One could also argue that such a universal attitude does not necessarily mean a break with, but could also be understood to relate to, views of Islam as the pristine religion brought to mankind by God. Islam is commonly understood to be “the natural religion” (*din al-fitra*) which every living being is born into, and therefore the core common in all divine revelations as communicated by prophets such as Abraham, Jesus, or Mohammad (Hoover, 2016).

This brings us back to the question of whether Khan abandoned Islam and developed a form of Sufism detached from Islamic traditions. Providing a definitive answer to it remains challenging if we are to avoid normative understandings of what constitutes Islam.

A useful parallel can be drawn from the early Christian church, where the faith was initially shaped by Jewish thought and terminology, as all of Jesus’ disciples were Jews. However, as Christianity expanded into regions such as Greece and Rome, the need to communicate with non-Jews led to the incorporation of Greek philosophical concepts and terminology. Further westward expansion necessitated the expression of Christianity in Latin, often rendering its message more legalistic. In non-Western contexts, such as India, China, and Japan, the Western Christian framework appeared less relevant, prompting Catholic missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries to adapt the Christian message to these cultural settings. This resulted in diverse representations of Jesus, such as a guru, a sort of Buddhist sage, or even a female Korean shaman. However, in Japan, when the country closed its borders and banned foreign influences in the 17th century, Christianity was suppressed, leaving hidden Christian communities that survived underground for over two centuries. When missionaries returned in the mid-19th century, they encountered these secret Christians, whose beliefs, terminology, and rituals had been further shaped by local Japanese religions. This led to significant theological inquiries: Were these practitioners truly Christians? Were they still practicing Christianity, or did they require re-evangelization (Fornberg 2013)?

A similar reflection might be applied to Inayat Khan and his Western murids: Was he truly a Muslim? Were they practicing Islam?

As noted at the outset of this chapter, some scholars have answered “no” to both questions. However, the answer is not necessarily that straightforward. Rather than engaging in the broader debate concerning whether, when, and where different expressions of Sufism should be considered authentically Islamic (e.g., Sorgenfrei 2018), this analysis aims to highlight some difficulties we, as scholars of religion, risk encountering when drawing such clear lines.

One, maybe obvious, way of discussing such matters further in through applying Talal Asad’s concept of Islam as a “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986).

Asad argues that Islam is shaped and defined through ongoing discussions, debates, and intellectual processes over time – a discourse centered around core elements such as sacred texts (the Qur'an), divinities (Allah), figures (Muhammad), doctrines (*tawhid*), and ritual practices (*salat*). Like other religious traditions, Islam is continuously interpreted, reinterpreted, and negotiated within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. This perspective underscores that Islam is not static, but is instead a product of diverse and evolving interpretations shaped by power dynamics, institutions, and socio-political contexts.

This fluidity is also evident in linguistic adaptation. The Arabic word "Allah," for example, often becomes "Khoda" in Persian, and "Gud" in Swedish. That entails that *Khoda* or *Gud* can denote *Allah*, as mentioned in the Qur'an, but also a variety of other deities, also called *Khoda* or *Gud* in Persian and Swedish, respectively. In a similar way, other Islamic terms and concepts – such as *salat/prayer*, *dua/prayer*, and *Din/Religion* – have also been translated into various national languages (DeJong 2015).

As we have seen, Khan was not the first to develop an English terminology to present teachings in the U.S. and Europe. But when he did so, he was clearly influenced by the audience he addressed, in a manner reminiscent of the Catholic missionaries in 17th-century Japan. In his case, both Theosophical and academic literature on Sufism – particularly literature that framed Sufism as a universalist tradition more than a current within Islam – shaped his approach. By studying Khan's text, it is obvious that his terminology and teachings evolved over time (Sedgwick, 2017). In his early years in Europe and the United States, he appeared more aligned with the reformist Islamic currents of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ameer Ali, and Chiragh Ali than in later years, when Theosophical influences became more pronounced in his teachings and vocabulary (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming). For example, from 1915 onward, *God* increasingly replaced *Allah*, and explicit Arabic-Islamic references became less frequent in the movement's publications.

Usually, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this has been understood as Khan separating Islam from Sufism. It is not clear whether or not Khan was trying to translate, in a way, what he understood to be Islamic teachings and practices into other cultural systems, or if he understood his teachings to be something that broke away from the Islam he himself had been thought and had practiced before leaving India – that is, if he really wanted to present a "non-Islamic Sufism."

Applying Asad's concept of a discursive tradition, one could argue that Khan's adaptations distanced his teachings – such as the prayer in focus here – from the discursive tradition of Islam by omitting references to Muhammad or

the Qur'an, and by substituting *Allah* with *God*. But it could also be understood as an attempt to translate the Islam that Inayat Khan was raised within, into a language more agreeable to the audience he was talking to. In a 1920 letter to his early Murid Rabia Martin, he wrote:

No doubt I have been by experience more adaptable and I can work with Western people much better than I did before. I have studied their psychology and I know what they like and what they do not like and how to approach them on these subjects and therefore I have been lately successful too. (Quoted from Inayat-Khan, 2006, 104)

It is also obvious from the prayers quoted above that he did not totally break with the discursive tradition of Islam, as the names of the prayers – *salat*, *sawm*, and *khatam* – are recognizable from Islamic tradition, even if their use differs from conventional denotations. Furthermore, the ritual movements developed to accompany the prayers strongly resemble or allude to those associated with the Islamic rites of *salat* and *dua*. Hence, Khan did keep to certain, some would say central, Islamic dogma and rites in developing the teachings of the Sufi Movement International.

Just as we cannot know precisely how Khan considered his teachings, it is difficult to say whether Khan's Murids were aware of how his teachings could be understood to tie into Islam as a discursive tradition or not. It varied from individual to individual. One way of approaching this is through social semiotics. In an article titled "Finding the Object of Study: Islamic Studies in Practice," Islamic studies professor Jonas Otterbeck engages with Talal Asad's concept of discursive tradition in relation to the question of what constitutes Islam and how to define who is a Muslim (Otterbeck 2021). To operationalize the study of a discursive tradition, Otterbeck argues that scholars must pay attention to how actors engage with and contribute to this tradition by mobilizing semiotic resources – words, rites, or symbols – associated with what is generally understood as Islam (2021, 55). These semiotic resources do not possess inherent meaning; they are not Islamic *sui generis*, but acquire their significance contextually through repeated use and the process of "anchorage." This process involves connecting these resources to other signs already imbued with strong Islamic connotations (Otterbeck 2021, 52).

Following Otterbeck, religious studies scholars Anders Ackfeldt (2025) and Douglas Mattsson (2025) have further developed the field of social semiotics to analyze what they term "Islamic semiotic resources" (ISR). Semiotic resources, such as a prayer rite, can carry different meanings depending on their historical use and the knowledge and associations of practitioners or observers. The

way we understand and use a semiotic resource is influenced by “semiotic regimes” – social rules and expectations that govern their use in specific situations (Mattsson, 2025). The act of kneeling, for instance, may signify different things to a shoeshine and a monk, just as the term “prayer” may belong to a different religious semiotic regime for a Muslim than it does to a Daoist.

According to Ackfeldt and Mattsson, virtually any rite or expression can become an Islamic Semiotic Resource. Something can become considered Islamic when it is tied to the discursive tradition of Islam, either through references to the Qur’an, the Sunnah, or other Islamic sources (Ackfeldt 2025; Mattsson 2025). For example, the term “God” takes on different meanings when printed in a copy of the Bhagavad Gita versus the Qur’an. In the first case, through anchorage or through what Mattsson (2025, 109) calls a “transferability of affordance,” it becomes a Hindu Semiotic Resource, and in the second, an Islamic Semiotic Resource. As Mattsson summarizes:

I understand ISRs as semiotic resources (e.g., sounds, visual representations, text and words, gestures, or clothes) that have been granted an Islamic affordance through social processes of interaction. These, in turn, are historically and contextually situated. The main advantage of the social semiotic approach is the acknowledgment that ISRs are affected by social processes and must be studied contextually. (Mattsson 2025, 44)

Similarly, Otterbeck emphasizes that “[m]eaning-making operates through systems of associations that are more or less shared by, and more or less comprehensible to, an in-group or an out-group” (Otterbeck 2021, 55).

Following Otterbeck, Ackfeldt, and Mattsson, one could argue that Khan, through his background and training, his ritual forms and chosen terminology – such as *salat*, *sawm*, or *khatam* – and an abundance of other semiotic resources with Islamic affordances, anchors his practices in an Islamic discursive tradition. Therefore, his teachings could be said to be afforded with Islamic meaning. But in changing “Allah” to “God,” as through avoiding or translating other terms with strong Islamic anchorage, Khan can also be understood to detach, to weigh anchor, from Islam as a discursive tradition and offer his followers to invest his teachings with other meanings, or even to anchor them in other religious semiotic regimes than that of Islam.

The murids of the Sufi Movement International at the time of its establishment did not necessarily share Khan’s historical and contextual understanding of the teachings he was presenting. They might not have been able to perceive them as invested with Islamic value. Khan might have translated “Allah” with “God,” but his readers and listeners did not think “Allah” when they heard him

talk about “God.”¹³ But for the sake of argument, let us assume that Inayat Khan intended to introduce what he considered to be Islamic practices to his Western murids. Does that make them Muslims?

The question of who is and who is not a Muslim remains widely debated, both within Islamic discursive traditions (e.g., Sunni-Shia, Salafi-Sufi, and mainstream Islam vs. Ahmadiyya) and in Islamic studies scholarship (Otterbeck 2021; Hughes, 2022). According to Otterbeck, a common approach in Islamic studies is to define Muslims as those who self-identify as such (Otterbeck 2021b, 52). If that is so, we are presented with multiple answers to the question. Some practitioners of Universal Worship could be considered Muslims engaging in Islamic practices – if they imbued the rituals and prayers with Islamic significance. Others, however, may have been Muslims performing rituals they did not themselves categorize as Islamic, while a third group consisted of non-Muslims practicing rituals they likewise did not interpret as Islamic. From this follows that you could be a Muslim, and consider yourself practicing Islam as a member of the Sufi Order International (as Khan and his brothers might have done), just as you could consider yourself not a Muslim and practicing some sort of universalist, spiritual tradition as a member.

4 Conclusion?

So where does this leave us? While some scholars have interpreted Inayat Khan’s movement as an attempt to establish a universal Sufism detached from Islam (Rawlinson 1993; Genn 2007, 260–62), others have suggested that he may have envisioned his teachings as ultimately leading his murids into the Islamic fold (Hermansen 1998, 158–59). So what to make of all this?

It is certainly true that Khan developed a form of universal Sufism, steering away from terms defined as Islamic to more open concepts and inviting everyone, regardless of religious belonging, to be a member of the movement. But does that mean that the Sufism of his movement should be defined as non-Islamic? Following a narrow and normative approach, we could easily argue for such a labeling. Most scholars in the study of religions or Islamic studies, however, would be uncomfortable with such an approach. On the opposite side, we find Otterbeck and his proteges. According to their approach, everything can be afforded with Islamic meaning. Following their social semiotic approach, rather than trying to state whether the Sufism within the Sufi

13 For a developed discussion of such translation issues, see von Stosch (2015).

Movement International is to be labelled as Islamic or non-Islamic, it leaves us with the answer that it can be both Islamic and non-Islamic at the same time.

Or, to quote the Swedish romantic writer Jonas Love Almqvist (1839, 58), “Alas, and yet – why is the kind evil? Why is the wise cruel? Why is everything in ruins?”

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Unpublished Material

Sufi Movement International Headquarters (SMIH)
 Original prayer prescriptions
Nekbakht Foundation Archives (NFA)
 Universal Worship description

“It Does Not Feel ... Authentic”: Synthetic Muslim Young Adults in Malmö and Copenhagen on Islamic Pop Music

Jonas Svensson

In *Samtidsislam* (2010), Jonas Otterbeck interviews nine young Muslims in Copenhagen and Malmö, exploring everyday Islam. He focuses on young adults for whom religion is not necessarily central to their daily life. The book serves as an important testament to the diversity of beliefs and practices. *Samtidsislam* touches upon many issues, but not extensively on what is one of Otterbeck's prime research areas: Islam and popular culture in general, and Islamic pop music in particular. In *Samtidsislam*, there are only a few references to music, and Otterbeck notes that none of his interlocutors appear to have a “religiously niched consumption” of popular culture (Otterbeck and Hallin 2010, 173–174). Its absence is perhaps not surprising. As Otterbeck points out in his *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* (2021), the genre did not take off until the early 2000s, and data for *Samtidsislam* was collected between 2003 and 2004. In one of the concluding remarks of the latter book, Otterbeck writes:

There is also a need for specific studies of the ongoing cultural production – which will certainly only increase in the future – that has Islam as its resonance base. Novels, music, theater, film, poetry. (Otterbeck and Hallin 2010, 396)

In this chapter, as an homage to Otterbeck, I want to provide what could perhaps be a short appendix to *Samtidsislam*, addressing Islamic pop. In this, I immediately ran into a problem. I do not have the time, money, or stamina to do what Otterbeck did in the early 2000s: recruit young adults with a Muslim background in Malmö and Copenhagen; arrange meetings; conduct interviews; transcribe interviews, etc. Furthermore, additional constraints have been introduced since 2004. New legislation requires ethical approval by the Swedish national ethical agency before conducting interviews on sensitive topics such as religion. The process of obtaining such approval is both cumbersome and costly.

Given these constraints, I explore a methodologically innovative approach made possible through recent technological advancements in generative artificial intelligence (henceforth genAI). This investigation employs nine synthetic interlocutors – artificial personalities constructed to mirror the characteristics of Otterbeck’s nine original participants – as a means of extending qualitative inquiry into domains where traditional ethnographic methods face practical or ethical barriers. Rather than replacing conventional ethnographic approaches, this study represents a systematic exploration of how synthetic interview data might complement established qualitative methodologies in Islamic studies.

The suggestion that interviews with what I henceforth refer to as my “synthetic interlocutors” may contain useful data may seem preposterous, defeating some of the basic purposes of humanistic research investigating “expressions of the human mind” (Bod 2013). The synthetic participants are not humans. They do not have “minds” that can be probed. However, it may be argued that the way in which genAI, in the form of Large Language Models, works can at least form a basis for a discussion on the value of this form of qualitative “synthetic data” in the humanities and the social sciences (cf. Rossi et al. 2024).

This methodological exploration builds directly upon the ethnographic foundation Otterbeck established in *Samtidsislam*, extending rather than critiquing his approach. The goal is not to question the validity of traditional qualitative methods, but to investigate whether emerging technologies might offer supplementary avenues for understanding cultural phenomena, particularly in contexts where conventional fieldwork faces increasing practical, ethical, or financial constraints. By grounding the synthetic interlocutors in Otterbeck’s carefully documented participant profiles, this study maintains fidelity to established ethnographic standards while testing new methodological frontiers.

1 Large Language Models: Training and Inference

This is not the place to dwell in detail on how Large Language Models (henceforth LLMs) work. In fact, much is still unknown, and the technology is the object of exploratory academic research (Han et al. 2024). What is known, however, is the primary task that most of these models have: to predict the next most probable *token* – almost, but not quite, the equivalent of a word – given a preceding sequence of tokens (often referred to as “context”). To perform this task, the models have been trained on an enormous amount of data, often text data, iteratively attempting to predict every token that follows every

other token or token sequence in this data, adjusting calculations to, in the next round, better correspond with the actual token that followed. It has turned out that this training, repeated over and over again, using large amounts of compute power and enormous amounts of text data, results in a system that, when training is completed, and the system has been further trained to follow instructions, can display emergent capabilities to successfully mimic human activities such as text summarization, translation, engaging in conversations, display conceptual knowledge and perform creative tasks (Wei et al. 2022). While the goal – next-token prediction – is transparent enough, the complexity of the training process leaves opaque the question of *how* the system ends up delivering a particular output in response to a particular input. The internal workings of the systems are still very much a “black box” (Castelvecchi 2016).

Basically, the results the system produces are dependent on (but not always determined by, see below) the content of the training data. Patterns in that data are likely to be reproduced by the system in its output. The issue of *biases* in responses has, due to this fact, been the object of exploratory research (Fulgu and Capraro 2024; Peters 2022; Gallegos et al. 2023). These biases are usually construed as problematic. My suggestion in the following is that the patterns emerging in the models can also be considered a resource.

The most competent models available today are trained on *all* publicly available data on the Internet (and most probably a fair amount of proprietary data as well). This includes data relating to Islam, Islam and Music, Muslim youth (also in Scandinavia), and Islamic pop. It possibly covers homepages, discussion groups, blogs, YouTube videos, comments to YouTube videos, academic papers, and much more. Any user input (e.g., a question posed to ChatGPT) that creates a context relating to such areas will “steer” the system towards producing output that potentially reflects patterns in data relating to the relevant areas. In her book *The AI Mirror* (2024), philosopher Shannon Vallor uses the metaphor of current genAI as a “mirror” (Vallor 2024). They reflect us and our history, as recorded mainly in text. “Us,” however, is not a unified category. The images in the AI “mirror” can be much more specific, reflecting a particular subsection of humanity more than something generically human. In a sense, careful probing into a particular area can perhaps be seen as a form of less controlled, but comprehensive, Internet research, or explorative “netnography” (Bartl, Kannan, and Stockinger 2016), assessing the systems’ “knowledge” gained from processing large amounts of data, some of which may be naturalistic (for example, actual online discourse among Muslim youth concerning the phenomenon of Islamic pop).

This is why it may not be as preposterous as it first seems to suggest that interviews with synthetic interlocutors, carefully crafted on top of the most

capable LLMs, may provide useful data. The responses that the synthetic interlocutors give in the interviews are, of course, not authentic individual “expressions of the human mind.” However, they could, at least tentatively, be seen as *generalizations* of such expressions.

The issue of generalizability is epistemologically important for interviews as a method in qualitative humanistic research. In *Samtidsislam* Otterbeck writes, in a manner that is fairly commonplace for this type of study:

The young adults’ ideas, thoughts, and answers [as presented in the book] are not intended to be statistically representative, but I hope and believe that their voices will be perceived as credible and interesting. Thus, perhaps they can also say something general about other young adults in similar situations. To substantiate this, other studies are needed that can relate heuristically to what emerges in this study. (Otterbeck and Hallin 2010, 15)

Some implicit claims to generalizability lie in Otterbeck’s purposive sampling of interlocutors. They are not chosen at random. They are chosen because they are assumed to represent a group of Muslim youth that Otterbeck claims are rarely heard in public discourse; those for whom religion may be relevant, but not central, to their everyday lives (Otterbeck and Hallin 2010, 15–17).

Given the reasoning above, the responses I get from my synthetic interlocutors may be *more* useful for generalizations than those that I could have gathered from non-synthetic ones. They may say “something general,” by virtue of them *not* being, strictly speaking, expressions of any actual idiosyncratic “ideas” or “thoughts” in individual minds, but statistically based generalizations of such expressions. It should, however, be remembered that LLM-based synthetic interlocutors are not human beings, and hence they are not “credible” in Otterbeck’s sense. They do not have thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Hence, the common aspiration of “understanding” the individual interlocutors, as the goal of qualitative research, must be kept at bay.

2 Constructing the Synthetic Interlocutors

The interlocutors in *Samtidsislam* are pseudonymized, but Otterbeck provides quite extensive personal background information. Some of that information is presented in dedicated sections of the book, while other information is scattered throughout the text. My first task was then to compile this information for each of the interlocutors separately. I here used the tool NotebookLM, provided for free by Google. It utilizes Google’s LLM Gemini, most noted for

its ability to process large amounts of text (up to two million tokens, roughly equivalent to 1,5 million words). I prompted the model to:

1. Extract information for each of the young adults featured in Otterbeck's text.
2. Based on the text, describe the personality of each young adult.

The resulting description was then fed into OpenAI's LLM GPT4o, asking the system for an assessment of how each synthetic interlocutor would behave in an interview situation. Together with the text generated through steps 1 and 2, this assessment became part of the framework within which each of the synthetic interlocutors produced answers, i.e., part of the context for the next token prediction.

The nine interlocutors created, named using the same pseudonyms that Otterbeck used in *Samtidsislam*, were given the same basic instructions together with the text constructed in the previous steps:

Your name is [Name]. You are a young Muslim living in [Denmark/Sweden] and speak [Danish/Swedish]. You are participating in an interview conducted by a Swedish Islamic Studies scholar. You answer truthfully but take limited initiative in the conversation. You do not ask the interviewer any questions but only respond to his questions. You always answer in [Danish/Swedish]. Play your role well. Note pauses and bodily reactions.

Here is your background story. Take it into account when answering [biography, personality, and behavior in interview]

As the chat framework, I used SimTheory (simtheory.ai), a paid service that allows you to create a set of chat "agents" and converse with them using different LLMs. I experimented with the two most capable models available at the time of writing: GPT4o and Claude 3.5 Sonnet. After a few attempts, I decided that the latter provided the most realistic feel in terms of responding like an actual interlocutor or conversation partner in an interview situation. This is of course a highly personal judgement, but the "realistic feel" I experienced does correspond to what Anthropic, the company behind Claude, has explicitly aimed for with their so-called "character training" (Anthropic 2024).

Otterbeck conducted three lengthy interviews with each of his interlocutors, whereas I conducted only one with each, lasting around 30 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that I had certain themes that I wanted to address, but no set questions. The first two themes were used to check whether NotebookLM had succeeded in extracting relevant background information from *Samtidsislam* and whether Claude 3.5 used that information. I asked the synthetic interlocutor to tell me about him or herself, and his or her

personal faith. Cross-checking with the text in *Samtidsislam* showed that the synthetic interlocutors were able to follow the given instructions to a, for me, satisfactory degree.¹

Otterbeck interviewed five young women, Alina, Mona, Shazia, Venus, and Zara, and four young men: Ghulam, Ismail, Malik, and Sadiq. They all had a family background in either the Middle East (Arab countries or Iran) or Pakistan. As Otterbeck has described in *Samtidsislam*, the youth had quite different ways to relate to Islam as a religious tradition. All claimed to believe in God, and most subscribed to other “articles of faith” such as beliefs in the Prophets, paradise and hell, the books, angels, and jinn (see Otterbeck and Hallin 2010, 114–115). In *Samtidsislam* Alina, Shazia, Ghulam, and Malik protruded as the three most religiously engaged (in faith and practice), and Venus and Sadiq the least, and the pattern was also visible in the responses from the synthetic counterparts.

The rest of the interviews were devoted to music and Islamic pop, and it is to the results from that part of the interviews that I now turn. I choose to quote extensively. All quotations are originally in Swedish or Danish, and I have translated them into English.

3 Knowledge about, Consumption of, and Attitudes to Islamic Pop

All synthetic youth enjoy listening to music, but to different degrees and in different genres. The most enthusiastic music lover is synthetic Venus: “Oh, I love to dance and listen to music! It’s a huge part of my life. I often play music at full blast at home – both Persian pop and Danish music.” Synthetic Alina is the most hesitant, citing her mother, who is critical of any music using instruments other than the *duff* (drum), and stating that she personally “prefer[s] Quran recitation and *nasheed*, because I feel it brings me closer to Allah.” The synthetic interlocutors mention that they listen to Swedish pop artists such as Håkan Hellström and Veronica Maggio (synthetic Zara), hip-hop artists Yasin and Dree Low (synthetic Ismail and synthetic Malik), and the Danish post-punk band *The Minds of 99* (synthetic Sadiq). These preferences likely reflect patterns of popularity in the underlying training data, possibly also some gender-related ones. Several synthetic interlocutors also cite modern

¹ All interviews are available in raw format at https://github.com/jsnhum/synthetic_interviews/.

Arabic and Persian pop. Synthetic Ghulam, however, claims to mainly consume instrumental music, both classical and modern.

All synthetic interlocutors are aware of Islamic pop, and most spontaneously mention at least one of two artists: Sami Yusuf and Maher Zain. These are also the ones that Otterbeck cites most frequently in *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* (117 and 193 times, respectively). Hence, the fact that these two are mentioned is probably a result of a prominent position in Claude 3.5's training data. When asked, some, but not all, of the synthetic interlocutors could name a few other (male) artists as well, all mentioned in Otterbeck's book (the number of mentions in *Awakening* in parenthesis): Mesut Kurtis (61), Harris J (31), Zain Bhikha (71), *Native Deen* (5) and the Malaysian group *Raihan* (47), "the first Islamic boy band" (Otterbeck 2021, 67). Noteworthy, however, is that they do not necessarily mention the same artists, apart from Zain and Yusuf. It is also noteworthy that only synthetic Sadiq mentions Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) (53): "My mother actually has some old cassettes with Cat Stevens – or Yusuf Islam, as he is called now [...] But his new music isn't nearly as good as his old songs like *Father and Son*." That the synthetic interlocutors spontaneously, and when asked to exemplify more, mention *male* artists, reflects the training data, which in turn reflects an actual skewness in the genre. However, when specifically asked about female artists, one – synthetic Venus – could come up with a name: "Yes! [lights up] There's actually Yuna – she's from Malaysia. She's quite interesting because she kind of blends modern pop music with her Muslim identity." Otterbeck does not mention Yuna.

While the synthetic interlocutors then display an "awareness" of Islamic pop, consumption varies. One of those actually consuming it is synthetic Shazia:

[Maher Zain and Sami Yusuf] are interesting because they mix modern pop music with Islamic themes. This actually fits well with my own situation – you know – that of being modern and Danish, at the same time as being Muslim [...] Their music is good because it kind of builds a bridge between the modern world and Islam.

To her, Islamic pop, albeit inferior to traditional forms of devotional music, can "give me peace and make me feel closer to Allah," in a manner similar, but not equivalent to, prayer, expressing values that she can relate to. She has no reservations about the mixing of modern pop, or modern musical instruments, with such messages: "We live in 2024, don't we? You must keep up with the times." In addition, there is a pragmatic aspect of outreach: "If the music can make young Muslims think more about their faith and feel proud of it, then it's a good thing?"

Synthetic Shazia's consumption of Islamic pop also has a collective dimension; it is a "special, something I share with my family." She mentions that the whole family may listen to Islamic pop during Ramadan. This latter comment is interesting, since it resonates with something Otterbeck notes in relation to the record label *Awakening*, producing Islamic pop that could serve as a "soundtrack of Muslim lives," specifically targeted at being sold during the month of Ramadan (Otterbeck 2021, 94–95).

The pragmatic view of the role of Islamic pop in bringing youth closer to Islam that synthetic Shazia expresses is also found in other responses. Synthetic Ghulam – who claims to have done the necessary "research" – sees no problems with Islamic pop, which he sometimes enjoys listening to. He specifically mentions Maher Zain's songs *Insha Allah* and *For the Rest of My Life*, as having "good messages about faith, hope, and love of the family, and also good melodies." Like synthetic Shazia, he states that "if the music can help to bring the message of Islam to young people, in a positive manner, then it has to be good." Likewise, Synthetic Malik states that, "Well ... [begins cautiously] I think it can be a way to feel closer to your faith without it becoming too ... strict, if you understand what I mean? Like when we played football by the mosque – it was a way to get closer to Islam that felt natural." Synthetic Alina expresses that Islamic pop can "make young Muslims feel that their faith is part of modern life."

This attitude rhymes well with a general, overall assessment in a larger discourse that Otterbeck addresses. Music in general is a contentious issue in Islamic theological thought, particularly when it involves the use of stringed instruments. In paving the way for the religious acceptance of Islamic pop as a phenomenon, the concept of "purposeful art," *al-fann al-hadif*, has been important. Music, even with instruments, and in a "pop" form, can be accepted – and even promoted – if it's possible positive effects, such as bringing people to Islam or strengthening faith, are emphasized (Otterbeck 2021, 47–57).

Synthetic Malik and synthetic Alina, however, both voice some skepticism. Synthetic Alina listens to Islamic pop mainly in the company of her peers, who are, according to her, more "into it" than herself. She cannot fully share this enthusiasm:

Even though the message is good, it does sometimes feel more like entertainment, and too little ... true devotion, you know [...] I ... am holding back a bit [...] I can't stop thinking about whether it is correct. Sometimes when we get together, and put on that music, I feel misplaced. I don't want to be judgmental, because they are good Muslims [...] it's just hard to know, sometimes, where the boundary between the modern and the traditional ... between the permitted and

the forbidden, lies. My mother says that instruments are *haram*, except for *duff*, in certain contexts. And when I read about views among different scholars on the Internet, I also see that they have different views. Some say music is forbidden, others say that it depends on the content and the context [...] what troubles me most is perhaps that it sometimes feels like we are trying to make Islam more “cool” and entertaining. As if we do not trust that the traditional ways of devotion are enough.

Synthetic Malik expresses a similar reservation: “It feels like one is trying to do something that should be both *halal* and ... cool at the same time. Like if one does not really dare to choose.”

Synthetic Sadiq acknowledges as a fact that Islamic pop may appeal to young Muslims trying to find their place in contemporary global pop culture. In general, however, he is dismissive, citing Islamic pop to be just an artificial “halal version of pop music,” not fully committing to either religious or musical authenticity. The music is not as “honest in its expression,” like traditional religious (Sufi) music, or even secular music like indie rock. He here recalls experiences as a student at a Christian school: “we were to sing those modern Christian songs – and just never became truly ... authentic.” He says the genre tries to “please everyone but ends up pleasing no one.” His main critique, however, concerns the commercial aspect. Islamic pop is driven by market demand and a desire to sell a specific idea of being both religious and trendy. He cites several such “halal” versions of products in contemporary consumer culture, such as “Muslim fashion” and “halal makeup,” which, in his view, all boil down to money and marketing. He mentions his atheist father’s somewhat critical stance on “religious capitalism.” Synthetic Ismail is even more dismissive: “Religion is about faith and values, not about making money. That’s why I get so ... [pauses and searches for words] ... provoked by things like that. It’s like turning religion into a commodity you can sell.” He here likens Islamic pop to the French soda product “Muslim Up,” as an alternative to “Western” soft drinks. He claims such attempts as unnecessary, disrespectful and outright “annoying.” “When you are trying to package something as hip and modern ... it feels that something important is lost on the way [...] it does not feel ... authentic.”

Synthetic Venus, who expresses the most enthusiastic view on music in general, states that Islamic pop is “not her scene” and dismisses it. She calls for consistency in attitudes: if music is *haram*, then it is *haram* regardless of the content of the lyrics. Islamic pop is a form of religious self-deception and hypocrisy:

Perhaps it is all about the fact that some have a hard time accepting that they just like music. So, they find a middle way here, where they can say “but, it is

religious" [...] It is like ... [thinking a bit] ... Yes, it is like saying "I cannot eat such stuff, but if I put a vitamin pill into the chocolate, then it is ok!" [laughs]. That does not make sense, does it?

According to synthetic Mona, the adjective "Islamic" in relation to pop music is "unnecessary" and "forced":

My father usually says that the important thing is the content, and how it affects you. And I agree. If I listen to an ordinary song by Ed Sheeran that is about love in a nice way, or an Arabic pop song that has good values – why would that be less good than a song that is called "Islamic" just because it is made with that label?

Synthetic Zara also notes that other forms of music may achieve the same things as Islamic pop. She claims to consume "non-Islamic" pop with emotional depth and personal feel, citing the Swedish artists Håkan Hellström and Veronica Maggio. In comparison with these artists, Islamic pop can sometimes feel contrived and prescriptive, rather than expressive.

My aunt tried to make me listen to Islamic music when I was younger. She meant well, but ... it just didn't feel like my thing. It was as if the music had already decided what I should feel and think. I prefer to listen to music that lets me feel what I am actually feeling, if that makes sense?

It is somewhat ironic that the issue of authenticity is so prominent in the critical views of some *synthetic* interlocutors. Still, anyone who has studied contemporary intra-Muslim discourses on religion and modernity knows well that much of the internal debate concerns what beliefs and behaviors in the contemporary world should be seen as Islamically authentic. Different actors may invoke different sources for authenticity, including a general Islamic worldview, specific verses in the Qur'an, particular hadiths, the general character of the Prophet Muhammad, transmitted learning within specific traditions, or even personal revelation or inspiration. That the issue of authenticity should occur in the responses from the synthetic interlocutors hence comes as no surprise. As Otterbeck notes in *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music*, the issue of authenticity in relation to the Islamic heritage is also important in relation to Islamic pop. He relates internal criticism within Islamic pop circles on precisely this issue. The record company *Awakening* promotes its music as a counter movement to a dominant, sinful, and hedonistic global pop culture by stressing Islamic authenticity in "social engagement and ethics." It, however, also receives criticism "for being just a ruthless, commercial company that has lost track of Islam by not connecting actively to an Islamic heritage"

(Otterbeck 2021, 164). Could it perhaps be that the synthetic interlocutors, in their diversity of responses to Islamic pop, mirror some of this tension, in turn present in the Claude 3.5 training data?

4 Gender and Islamic Pop

In this chapter, given that this is a volume in honor of Jonas Otterbeck, I cannot ignore what he usually insists is a duty for every serious researcher in the humanities: to address the issue of gender. I have touched slightly on gender above, noting, for example, that almost all the Islamic pop artists are male. I asked the synthetic interlocutors why, and they cited traditional interpretations of Islam, as well as cultural norms and societal expectations. From the perspective of Islamic tradition, several cited the notion that a woman's voice raised in public is *ʿawra* (nakedness, or something that should be covered or hidden). Noteworthy in this context is that all synthetic interlocutors express clear personal ideals of gender equality and criticize the gender imbalance in Islamic pop. Even synthetic Alina, who otherwise appears to be the one interlocutor most leaning towards an acceptance of established tradition, provides a comment with an egalitarian twist. She states that her devout mother would object to women singing, even to other women, but at the same time reflects that:

I am personally uncertain whether it is permissible for women to perform with music according to Islam. Even if it is religious music. Perhaps that is why almost all artists are male. [pause] It sometimes makes me think, if perhaps the whole genre is ... problematic. Because if women may not participate in the same way as men, is that right?

That all interlocutors display ideals of gender egalitarianism may reflect the training data. However, other studies of bias in LLM have revealed that at least in the early models, there were clear examples of, if not misogynistic, then at least gender stereotypical output (Fulgu and Capraro 2024). This is well known to those who prepare LLMs for public use post-initial training. LLMs put to public use are usually subjected to a process of “alignment” (Gabriel 2020) through so-called Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback (RLHF) (Kaufmann et al. 2023). The fact that all the synthetic interlocutors, to different extents, emerge as champions of gender equality can possibly be attributed to this alignment process.

While, as noted above, most of the synthetic interlocutors do not present themselves as consumers of Islamic pop, they all refer to *others* in their surroundings who are. Alina mentions her Muslim female friends, particularly a friend called Sarah, who is very enthusiastic. Ghulam notes that girls at school talk about Maher Zain and other artists. Ismail observes a similar phenomenon at mosque. Sadiq mentions his cousin and her friends, who can spend hours listening to Islamic pop and sharing online videos. There appears to be a consensus that there is a gender bias in the consumption. Synthetic Alina claims that she does not know any male youngsters who listen to Islamic pop. Only synthetic Malik is reluctant to state this clearly: “I really don’t know if girls listen to it more. We hang out boys with boys and girls with girls, so I really have no idea what the girls are listening to. But it would not surprise me if more girls than boys listen to it.”

Enter the issue of attraction and eroticism in Islamic pop. This is apparently a sensitive topic in the larger discourse. The whole of chapter 6 in *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* is devoted to what Otterbeck terms “an ethical Islamic masculinity” nurtured in the genre. This masculinity is formed by Islamic teachings, cultural norms, and the demands of the contemporary music market. It involves characteristics such as mild-manneredness, politeness, honesty, cleanliness, seriousness in religious activity, family orientation (being a good son, husband, and father), and community-mindedness. Artists perform this masculinity in photo ops, on stage, in interviews, and through interactions on social media. It is present in lyrics, in movement in music videos and concerts, and in manners of dress, the latter being stylish, but never immodest. The artists are handsome and well-groomed, but never (overtly) seductive.

As Otterbeck notes, and witnesses during field work, there are instances when, especially the last item in the list above, does appear difficult to uphold, but perhaps through no fault of the artists themselves. He cites examples of problematic behavior among female fans. This includes instances of “inappropriate” comments on social media posts, and perhaps over-enthusiastic behavior of the female audience at concerts: dancing, screaming, mimicking fainting, etc. (Otterbeck 2021, 1–2, 123–124, 158–159).

Several synthetic interlocutors discuss the idea that the perceived gender difference in appreciation may stem from girls feeling attracted to the male artists. Both synthetic Alina and synthetic Zara acknowledge that some girls find Sami Yusuf “handsome.” Neither admits to sharing this view, and synthetic Zara says she prefers to “lust for” the Swedish artist Håkan Hellström, but also asks me, jokingly, not to tell her parents who already think she has become

“too Swedish” (perhaps reflecting a stereotypical image of a young Muslim girl in Sweden, present in the training data). Synthetic Alina acknowledges that some Muslim girls may find the artists attractive, but views this as a cause for concern. The focus on the artists’ appearance and style might overshadow the religious message. Synthetic Ghulam has also overheard how some of the girls in his class have talked about how handsome Maher Zain is, but at the same time, he is clear that it is too simplistic to say that the artist’s physical appearance is the only reason girls are attracted to Islamic pop. It is also the feelings and the message conveyed that are appealing.

Synthetic Shazia, the only one who claims to be a regular consumer of Islamic pop, blushes and laughs shyly when asked whether she finds Islamic pop artists good-looking. Then she explains:

But that’s not why I listen to their music! It would be completely wrong to say something like that. It’s their message and the music that’s important. It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to talk about how they look. You know, as a Muslim girl ... it’s not something I think about or talk about. Their voices are very beautiful, and the lyrics have real meaning. That’s what matters!

Synthetic Zara focuses on a combination of physical attraction and the appeal of the *content* of the music, in line with Otterbeck’s ethical Islamic masculinity: “I understand that artists who both look good *and* sing about faith and such can be appealing. Especially if you’re religious yourself. It becomes like a complete package – someone who is modern and attractive but also shares your own values.”

According to synthetic Ismail, the artists sing about love and other emotions in a way that may be appealing to girls, “but in a permissible way.” In a similar vein, synthetic Sadiq relates:

You should see my cousin and her friends when they watch Maher Zain videos ... [rolls eyes] They’re completely ... [searching for words] infatuated with him [leans forward and lowers voice slightly]. The funny thing is ... or maybe more ironic. These artists are supposed to be so ... [makes air quotes] “pure” and “Islamic,” but at the same time, they’re totally styled with perfect hair and fashionable clothes. It’s like ... it’s okay to have a little crush, as long as it’s on a “good Muslim man” [laughs]. My sister once teased my cousin, saying she could just marry Maher Zain, since he’s such a good Muslim ... [laughs] My cousin turned completely red! [becomes more thoughtful]. But I suppose it’s very natural. I mean, when you’re a teenager and ... [gestures] you’re not allowed to date or go

to parties like other Danish youth. So maybe these artists become a kind of ... [thinking] safe fantasy? Someone you're allowed to have a crush on?

What synthetic Zara and synthetic Sadiq here allude to may perhaps be termed a *halal*-infatuation. You feel attraction, but the attraction is legitimate because the *message* and the framing of the experience are religious.

5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter, to my knowledge, represents the first systematic attempt at employing synthetic qualitative interview data in Islamic studies research. While acknowledging its experimental character, this investigation demonstrates a methodological potential for expanding qualitative inquiry in the humanities. The approach should be understood as a contribution to ongoing discussions about methodological innovation in the study of religions, offering both practical solutions to contemporary research constraints and theoretical insights into the nature of cultural knowledge production in the age of genAI.

From the responses that the synthetic interlocutors give to my questions, *hypothetical* conclusions may be drawn. It has been shown above how some of the responses of the synthetic interlocutors appear to correspond well with certain general information given in *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music*. This involves the notion of the usefulness of Islamic pop in bringing young people to Islam, and in negotiating between loyalty to a religious identity and the wish to be part of a global pop culture. Some of their analysis of the gendered appeal of Islamic pop, and the connections to the “ethical Islamic masculinity,” may appear stereotypical, but also insightful.

It may be that the synthetic young adults constructed here are somewhat representative of a larger set of Muslim youth in Sweden (somewhat religiously affiliated but not that engaged). Their music consumption is in line with that of other, non-Muslim youths. Islamic pop is known, but not particularly consumed. It may very well be that if I had chosen to construct more “devoted” synthetic interlocutors instead, the results would have been different and more appreciative. It is interesting to note the prominence of the notion of “authenticity” in the synthetic young adult’s critical views on Islamic pop, and perhaps worth exploring further.

Let me be clear, I do not suggest that synthetic qualitative data like that generated for this chapter can replace “real” such data. However, I do believe it may have an important role to play in academic research.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, generating synthetic qualitative data is an important part of ongoing research on how LLMs work. Such research, in virtually all fields, including the study of religions, is important in the search for inherent biases and flaws in models. As mentioned above, we know how these LLMs are constructed, but we do not know how they work. Generating and analyzing a wide range of outputs, in as many domains as possible, searching for patterns, constitutes an important contribution to the goal of “explainable AI” (Rai 2020).

Secondly, given the fact that LLMs are trained, at least partly, on extensive naturalistic data, it is possible to use, for example, synthetic interlocutors to generate hypotheses before embarking upon observations of and interviews with non-synthetic counterparts (which are time-consuming and need careful planning). By manipulating different elements in the background information of synthetic interlocutors (such as gender, family background, social class, degree of religious engagement, etc) and observing possible changes in responses, it is possible to map a range of *possible* responses and factors that may influence them. One can try out different interview strategies and perhaps glean inspiration for new themes and questions from the replies, which may not have been anticipated using other forms of background material. As the LLMs become more and more capable at mimicking human behavior, they can become a useful part of the qualitative researcher’s toolbox.

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“Wanted to Meet a Good Halal Boy”: in Search of Love, Authenticity and “Islam” on Muslim Dating Platforms

Erica Li Lundqvist

Also, for the brothers signing up, HOW are you keeping to your religion while scrolling through pictures of scandalous girls?? Imam Al-Shafi’s memory, may Allah have mercy on him, was affected when he accidentally saw the ANKLE of a sister uncovered, where is your imaan now my brothers? This is an app designed to please Muslims who do not value staying away from fitnah, it is not halal just because it labels itself as is. We must stick to the real meaning of being Muslims and that is submission to Allah’s commandments.¹

Full of feminist profiles, really angry divorced feminist women.²

During my doctoral studies in Islamic studies, I frequently faced criticism from colleagues who argued that my research did not align with their perception of what constituted “Islamic studies.” A recurring question during seminars where I presented sections of my dissertation was, “Where is Islam in your study?” My research involved ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon, where I interviewed Muslim men to understand how they reconciled their often-conflicting identities – being both Muslim and homosexual (Lundqvist 2013). Despite what I believed to be a relevant inquiry, some critics remained unwilling to label it as “Islamic studies,” placing both me and my research at the center of the debate on how scholars in Islamic studies define the concept of “Islam” (see, for example, Asad 2009; Lukens-Bull 1999; Hughes 2016). Ahmad, in his book *What is Islam?* (2018), encapsulates this very dispute eloquently:

That this challenge has, unfortunately, not yet been met successfully – which is to say that the existing conceptualizations and uses of “Islam/Islamic” do not express a coherent object of meaning (or an object of coherent meaning) – is

1 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/66f7c1df3feaa7384a1c06e0> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

2 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/67464e89830cfb382444f8cd> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

readily reflected in the fact that analysts, be they historians, anthropologists, sociologists, or scholars of art or religion, are often frankly unsure of what they mean when they use the terms “Islam/Islamic” – or whether, indeed, they should use the terms at all. (9)

Fortunately, under the mentorship of my supervisor, Jonas Otterbeck, whose insightful and steadfast guidance was invaluable, I was able to navigate and define my place within the evolving field of Islamic studies. Fifteen years later, I find myself still engaged in this ongoing debate at the intersections between authenticity and identity, questioning how concepts like “Muslim,” “Islam,” and “Islamic studies” shape and are shaped by the lived experiences of individuals within (and outside) the broader framework of Islamic discourse (Lundqvist 2018; 2020; 2021). In this chapter, I seek to understand how the concept of “Islam” is negotiated and constructed in the corporate self-descriptions of dating platforms targeted at Muslim users and through user reviews of those same platforms. By conducting a netnographic analysis of user reviews from two prominent Muslim-oriented dating platforms – Muzz.com and Salams.app – this chapter endeavors to explore how self-identifying Muslims articulate their experiences within these digital spaces and how they construct (and deconstruct) their understandings of what ought and ought not to be considered as “Islamic.” Online matchmaking in general – and the review section in particular – presents an interesting canvas upon which people can articulate and express their identities and beliefs – and their dislikes for the framework itself. Notably, the widespread tendency of individuals to review and critique anonymously online presents an intriguing phenomenon that warrants further academic investigation.

The first Google search for “reviews on Muslim dating apps” led me directly to what became the title of this article – a review of the app Muzz. The review, in its entirety, reads:

Wanted to meet a good halal boy, but I couldn't change the gender! They only let me see girls! Very discriminatory against LGBT Muslims!! Do not recommend! (Dissatisfied lgbt m ... 3 years ago)³

3 This review is only to be found in the app version on apple.com and therefore the whole name of the reviewer and date of review is not available, but it can be tracked through this link: <https://apps.apple.com/se/app/muzz-muslim-dating-marriage/id969997496>. This is also one of the reasons I chose to collect my material via Trustpilot, which collects reviews from different online platforms, in this case from Muzz.com and Salams.app. Gathering data from platforms like TrustPilot might not seem groundbreaking, but these reviews are gold-mines of insights into the digital dating experience.

The disappointment is palpable as the user realizes that Muzz, a dating app designed for Muslims, does not support same-sex matchmaking. While specific reviews from queer individuals on Muslim dating apps are limited, both selected platforms in this study seem to approach critique with some degree of inclusiveness, which is seen not least in the response to the review above:

Although we appreciate that we are a Muslim-focused app, we do not discriminate based upon a person's religion, gender, age, disability, race, colour, or ethnic origin.⁴

In the modern, globalized, and digital age, where swipes and clicks have to some extent replaced chance encounters, handwritten love letters, and arranged marriages, online dating has emerged as both a double-edged sword and a rich subject of critique. For many, it provides a convenient and expansive platform to seek love and companionship; for others, it becomes a site to question authenticity claims and engage in the discourse of what ought and ought not to be considered as “Islam” (see, for example, Enstedt and Larsson 2013; Otterbeck 2021). Most Muslim dating sites are designed for users who prioritize “Islamic principles” (a term open to interpretation, as we shall see), often reflecting normative values related to courtship, such as monogamy, heterosexuality, modesty, family involvement, and traditional gender roles (Ali 2008). The generic response from Muzz, however, highlights a tension between adhering to traditional religious norms and adapting to the realities of contemporary dating dynamics. Notably, they never mention “sexuality” in their otherwise intersectional anti-discrimination approach.

1 Halal Dating

Previous research on the impact of Muslim dating apps on Muslim religious identity and partner selection explores the concept of “Halal dating” and its role within Islamic discursive traditions (Nisa 2021; Ali et al. 2019; Sugimoto et al. 2023; Hasan 2021). Similar research, on how Muslim dating and matrimony websites interact with religious and social customs regarding courting and marriage, discusses, for example, reasons for joining Muslim matchmaking websites, identity expression online, and the impact these new dating platforms have on the interpretation of traditional courtship norms (Tiller, 2018; Sotoudeh et al. 2017).

4 <https://apps.apple.com/se/app/muzz-muslim-dating-marriage/id969997496>.

In this study, I will analyze “Halal dating” as a theoretical construct, examining its relation to broader themes such as religious authority, authenticity, and the transformation of Islamic norms in digital spaces. This might highlight perceptions of legitimacy and how Muslim dating apps navigate competing interpretations of what constitutes “permissible” romantic interactions. On the other hand, viewing “Halal dating” as a first-order concept might help us understand how practicing Muslims themselves experience, define, and engage with this form of dating. It represents their lived experience and the religious, cultural, and ethical considerations that shape their approach to partner selection. As we shall see, some reviewers remain critical of the Halal branding, mainly because casual sex, hookups, and relationships that are not meant to lead to marriage are seen as un-Islamic – and thus not Halal (Naji Bajnaid et al. 2017). However, since the chosen platforms also cater to a more progressive Muslim demographic, aiming to facilitate diverse interactions in a modern digital context, including relationships not aimed to lead to marriage, these dating sites provide valuable insights into the intersection of technology, religion, and identity in the context of Muslim online dating and ways in which Muslim-specific platforms cater to religious and cultural needs.

Salams – launched in 2015 – is dedicated to “connecting progressive, smart, fun, and interesting Muslims with each other in the halal way,” highlighting the unique ways in which this Muslim-specific platform caters to religious and cultural needs:

Finding a spouse can be challenging for many young people, but Muslims have an additional faith obligation to stick to halal dating. This is a special kind of relationship that focuses primarily on finding someone who will be compatible with you for life. However, in the Islamic faith, there is a unique set of rules and customs that you must adhere to if you want to keep the relationship as pure as can be.⁵

Similar to *Salams*, *Muzz* – founded in 2014 – allows users to specify their level of Islamic practice, encouraging their members to maintain their “taqwa both on and off the app” while referring to a Qur’an verse that reads: “And most surely you conform yourself to sublime morality” (Qur’an 68:4).⁶

Platforms like *Salams* and *Muzz* describe themselves as facilitators of relationships grounded in Islamic principles such as *taqwa*,⁷ emphasizing

5 <https://www.salams.app/muslim-terms/halal-dating> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

6 <https://muzz.com/en-US/safety/behavior/> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

7 Taqwa can be described as “God-consciousness or God-fearing piety” (Esposito 2003, 314).

modesty, monogamy, and marriage. Yet these principles are anything but straightforward. What does it mean, for instance, to date in a “Halal” way when the very notion of “dating” carries connotations of casual relationships and Western norms? The developers of Muzz seem aware of this challenge, stating that:

While the concept of dating, as understood in Western culture, may not have a direct counterpart in Islamic teachings, halal dating in Islam is permissible as long as it's with the intention of marriage, and we know that because we've asked. There are guidelines and principles that govern relationships between men and women. Islam promotes modesty, piety, and the avoidance of any actions that may lead to immorality or sin.⁸

Scholars like Naji Bajnaid and colleagues (2017) have argued that these platforms represent an ideological shift, where traditional matchmaking practices are modernized to cater to a younger, more digitally connected generation. When it comes to courtship, marriage in Islamic cultures traditionally involves significant family and community members, with parents playing a crucial role in arranging matches. However, the advent of online dating has to some extent shifted this authoritative matchmaking role from offline actors to online platforms (see, for example, de Rooij 2020) as “online dating is a way to both adhere to and circumvent courtship norms” (Tiller 2018, 9). In gender segregated Muslim societies such as Saudi Arabia, direct offline interactions and the development of relationships with unrelated members of the opposite sex are strictly regulated. Advancements in online connectivity have introduced virtual platforms that provide innovative spaces for new kinds of social interactions that differ from traditional courtship practices for Muslims, even in non-Muslim majority countries (Naji Bajnaid et al. 2017; Daneshpour & Fathi, 2016), but have also created arenas for debate, creating new opportunities for different principles and norms to come into contact and create tension.

2 Authentication and Authority

In contemporary Islamic discourse, the concept of authenticity is both contested and multifaceted, especially within online platforms. Traditionally, religious authority has been exercised by established institutions, but as many scholars have noted (e.g., Hasan 2023), this authority has increasingly

⁸ <https://muzz.com/en-US/islamic-dating/> (accessed on March 10, 2025).

shifted to non-traditional figures. This transition further complicates authenticity claims, as new voices and interpretations challenge established norms. Reflecting on this phenomenon in the context of music in the new public sphere, Otterbeck (2008) observes that “this new public sphere challenges and renegotiates authority and creates a forum for a plurality of interpretations” (212). The tension between tradition and modernity parallels broader debates about authenticity within Islamic discourse, where, as Otterbeck suggests, “the struggle in the public sphere about the public sphere is ultimately a battle about cultural and religious authority and authenticity in a pluralist environment” (226). This is also prevalent in online dating discourses where users’ claims about authentic Islam clash with the corporate descriptions of what is deemed *halal*. Through the *halal* claim, the platforms are legitimized, purified, and deemed authentic by being linked to an established concept, such as *halal*, and a recognized discourse on what is perceived as right/wrong, permissible/forbidden, Islamic/un-Islamic, etc.

Additionally, Hughes (2016) argues that claims to authenticity often reveal more about the observers making such claims than about the individuals being observed. He asserts that “as scholars of religion, it is our job to discuss the rhetoric of authenticity, not what or whose Islam is more authentic” (xv). This perspective underscores the importance of analyzing the discourse surrounding authenticity rather than engaging in evaluations of religious legitimacy. Similarly, Bucholtz (2003) distinguishes between “authenticity” as a static identity marker and “authentication” as a dynamic, socially negotiated process.

Ellsworth and Alexander (2024) also point towards questioning the very premise of authenticity. They argue that “rather than view authenticity as pointing to something natural, we instead understand it to be a socially contested and constructed label that is used to manage and codify a variety of choices in relation to understandings of identity formation” (1). Moreover, they emphasize the authoritative dimension of authenticity claims, noting that such classifications are often embedded in contested discourses of power: “Thus, there is an authoritative nature to the classification of things or people as real or authentic, and claims of authenticity, much like authority, are often part of contested discourses steeped in power” (1).

In traditional Islamic discourse, religious authority was typically centralized in scholars and institutions. But as Otterbeck (2008) notes, the digital age has upended this hierarchy, creating a more pluralistic public sphere where authority is constantly negotiated. Dating platforms like *Muzz* and *Salams* embody this shift, as users, algorithms, and platform policies collectively shape the boundaries of what is considered “Islamic.” This shift of authority, while empowering for some, also creates friction. Dating platforms attempt to

maintain a broad appeal by promoting inclusivity while simultaneously catering to conservative users. This often leads to vague or contradictory policies, such as *Muzz*'s anti-discrimination stance that notably omits references to sexuality, as noted above.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that authenticity is less an objective or inherent quality and more a discursive tool shaped by social, cultural, and power dynamics. It is through this lens – of authentication as an ongoing, negotiated process – that this chapter will analyze the reviews under consideration and how the “halal” branding functions as a means of claiming authenticity as an authorizing mechanism.

3 The Reviews – “Looking for an Authentic Islamic Experience”

A common refrain in the reviews is the tension between inclusivity and tradition, as discussed previously. This tension is vividly illustrated through the various user reviews, each highlighting different aspects of discontent. Users frequently judge one another's profiles, accusing others of being “un-Islamic” for reasons ranging from visible makeup, feminism (!), to vague liberal tendencies.

“James Balo” criticizes *Muzz* for being “Tinder with an Islamic umbrella,” suggesting that the app's permissiveness undermines Islamic principles. He points out what he views as the contradiction in allowing certain, to him, un-Islamic practices while banning others:

This app is basically Tinder with an Islamic name. The owner is Ahmadi, which explains why many un-Islamic practices are allowed on the platform. However, if you mention privately to anyone that you are open to polygamy – a practice permissible in Islam – they will invade your privacy, read your messages, and ban you. It's misleading to present themselves as a Muslim-friendly platform while enforcing contradictory policies. I do not recommend this app to anyone looking for an authentic Islamic experience.⁹

The invocation of polygamy also highlights a broader issue of how inclusivity can sometimes clash with traditional values, leading to perceptions of hypocrisy. While polygamy is permissible within Islamic jurisprudence

⁹ <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/66f7c1df3feaa7384a1c06e0> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

(Chamie 1986), it is not widely practiced among Muslims living in Europe, for example. The mention of the owners’ Ahmadiyya background adds another layer of controversy and highlights an authenticity claim that is commonly used by Muslims when referring to claims of what is “real” Islam. This quite harsh authenticity rhetoric is also seen in “Abdul Baser Ahmed’s” review, displaying disappointment in the prevalence of liberal values, equating them with a betrayal of the app’s “Halal” branding:

Absolutely disgusting! 9/10 women profiles are divorcees. When you reject them they stalk and taunt you. App is made and operated by liberal Muslims. Anything and everything is allowed. Full of feminist profiles, really angry divorced feminist women. Blurred profiles are 100% of the time a disappointment. Thousands of incomplete profiles with professional photos, very likely fake profiles made by Muzz. Those who do have genuine profiles are extremely immature. Most people seem damaged? The whole community seems like an online version of a council estate full of single parents.¹⁰

Notably, most reviewers are men, although some women, such as “Faiza Iqbal,” also raise concerns about the male clientele:

Best functionality, but poor quality of members, most of men 35+ are divorcées, they are shaming over their age and telling lies about age, marriage status. Long list of visa seekers. Low level men who have never gain anything in their life, like drivers, kitchen chef ... Time wasters and sick men.¹¹

“Ryan” takes a similar stance, accusing Muzz of being a “shame of religion” and filled with fake profiles and inappropriate content. His review is also a denunciation of the app’s perceived failings and an example of how personal and vitriolic these critiques can become:

Good morning. Muzz and the whole team behind it are the shame of religion. And sold their souls to the devils. You don’t have children, are you a team surrounded by men and women? You sleep well? App, filled with fake profiles, divorced and frustrated women, whores, exposed breasts, navels, thongs, ... Feminicide to the core!! That’s not being a Muslim!! (...) I see that you respond,

10 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/67464e89830cfb382444f8cd> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

11 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/6772c2006360f10d9828806e> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

saying that we are trying to improve. ? Ah well, however, I have pointed out many times from the app, you have been deaf, blind ... but GOD sees everything! And as they say at home, What you do, they will do to you, the wheel turns! a team of liars, destroying the true principles and precepts of religion..are you living your life well? You weren't afraid that a misfortune would strike you down? Here is my response, and in the names of all the consumers you have manipulated! Because of your extremely serious weakness, women think badly of men and vice versa! HASBY ALLAH WA NI3MAL WAKIL! to you!! rest well now!

“Ryan” is questioning whether the app genuinely adheres to Islamic principles or merely adopts the halal branding for commercial appeal. Critiques like the above often focus on perceived breaches of modesty, with users expressing outrage over profile photos showing uncovered hair, exposed breasts, suggesting that this “un-Islamic” behavior is being normalized. The user “N Rahim” is convinced that Muzz is “Definitely NOT Suitable for Muslims!” as he makes a point about contemporary app policies.

This is an app which targets the Muslim population yet the staff does not understand the basic foundation our religion is based on and they gear to please unIslamic principles. This “Muslim app” runs on ads that include *tabarujat*, i.e. women who decide to go against the rulings Allah has placed for their modesty – those who are cursed by our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) – and conversations between the opposite genders concerning irrelevant topics, this is basically the step of dating. In Islam, when we want to talk to the opposite gender concerning marriage, our conversations should be about that! About things that we NEED to talk about, not to video chat about some cooking recipe, as shown in the pictures. Also, for the brothers signing up, HOW are you keeping to your religion while scrolling through pictures of scandalous girls?? Imam Al-Shafi's memory, may Allah have mercy on him, was affected when he accidentally saw the ANKLE of a sister uncovered, where is your imaan now my brothers? This is an app designed to please Muslims who do not value staying away from *fitnah*, it is not halal just because it labels itself as is. We must stick to the real meaning of being Muslims and that is submission to Allah's commandments.¹²

“N Rahim's” review challenges Muzz's claim to authenticity by arguing that its operational policies contradict fundamental Islamic values. He contends that the app promotes *tabaruj* (immodesty) and facilitates interactions that

¹² <https://justuseapp.com/en/app/969997496/muzmatch-arab-muslim-dating/reviews> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

resemble modern dating rather than a strictly marriage-focused process, thereby failing to align with what he perceives as an Islamic framework of modesty and gender interaction. His argument reflects a hard-line authentication discourse, where “true” Islamic legitimacy is measured by strict adherence to religious doctrines rather than self-labeling. The assertion that Muzz is “not halal just because it labels itself as is” exemplifies a broader skepticism toward surface-level authentication – suggesting that “true” Islamic legitimacy must be earned through practice, not branding.

“Adam” also criticizes Muzz through the lens of authenticity and authentication, questioning whether the app genuinely adheres to Islamic principles or merely adopts Islamic branding for commercial appeal:

Muzz markets itself as a halal platform for Muslims seeking marriage, but in reality, it is nothing more than a business that enforces double standards, ignores Islamic values, and discriminates against men. (...) Muzz claims to follow Islamic guidelines, yet its policies are inherently biased and contradict fundamental Islamic rulings: Women can sign up as “separated”, but men who select the same option get permanently banned. A single unverified complaint from a woman can get a man banned, but when men report misconduct, nothing happens. Islamically, a woman cannot seek marriage until her divorce is finalised, yet Muzz allows women to join while still married. Meanwhile, men get punished even if they are separated with the intention of divorce. This isn’t an Islamic platform – it’s a Western feminist-controlled dating app that uses Islam as a marketing gimmick while enforcing rules that favour women.¹³

The reviewer, moreover, highlights how Muzz enforces gender-biased policies that contradict Islamic legal principles, particularly regarding marital status and reporting mechanisms. This is aligned with the reviews by “James Balo” and “Abdul Baser Ahmed,” who frame *Muzz* as an inauthentic Islamic platform (i.e., Western feminist-controlled!), accusing it of selectively enforcing Islamic principles while allowing what they perceive as un-Islamic practices. The critiques above reflect the performative nature of authenticity claims, whereas, as Hughes (2016) points out, such judgments may reveal more about the claimants’ own religious and ideological positioning than about the platform itself.

Moving on to the app Salams, “Muhmmad Dawud” criticizes the platform for allowing profiles that do not adhere to Islamic dress codes and for lacking features that would ensure a more Islamic experience:

13 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/679c0f0a39fe2db3b2a166fi> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

admins on this app should fear Allah. And so should the sisters. The pictures there are horrible, the women wear clothing but its as if they don't because they follow the western culture on the outside. its as the prophet salallah says, there will be women in hellfire naked even though they are wearing clothing. Wear loose clothing and hijab to have any respect in an islamicly minded brother if that's what you are looking for. if not then we have no interest in you. Why are admins approving such profiles? for profits? gains from haram are killed as the prophet peace be upon him says in an authentic hadith about false oaths to sell good. Also Wali buying is wajib according to numerous authentic hadithes for marriage to be valid so why not have that feature available for Godfearing sisters? he can have access to all chats so its more clean and clear what is happening and if the match is good. wasalam Muhammad Dawud. previous app user for couple of weeks.¹⁴

Here we can see another way to challenge the halal branding by invoking theological discourse, arguing that the app facilitates immodest behavior and violates fundamental Islamic gender norms. Additionally, reviews from “Northern Light” and “Yunus” directly question whether these platforms have any legitimate connection to Islam at all, suggesting that they contradict divine commandments rather than aligning with religious values:

By the way, just to be clear, the application has nothing to do with Islam, in fact it is completely contrary to what Allah has definitely asked us to do. Tip: please stay away from this application, it is really not worth the effort.¹⁵

If you're looking for a righteous wife don't look in here is full of liberal no hijabi women who put dunya over deen. By the other reviews I see that sisters have the same problem with men in that app. May Allah swt bless us with a righteous spouse.¹⁶

“Northern Light’s” outright rejection of Salams’ authenticity – stating that the app has “nothing to do with Islam” – demonstrates yet another form of authentication discourse, in which digital matchmaking itself is framed as incompatible with religious teachings. “Yunus” echoes this concern, lamenting

14 <https://www.trustpilot.com/users/63bb90fca1ea7800128830c3> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

15 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/65cfan5321ab82afe5c34bf> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

16 <https://www.trustpilot.com/reviews/66589efc15b31b6d4c26312e> (accessed on January 8, 2025).

the perceived prioritization of worldly desires (*dunya*) over religious commitment (*deen*), reinforcing the notion that “true” Islamic platforms should strictly adhere to theological principles rather than cultural or commercial adaptations.

A discussion by Reddit user “*r/MuslimNikah*” introduces a reflexive dimension to this debate. Rather than simply condemning the platforms, the user engages in self-examination, questioning whether the problem lies with the platforms themselves or with the people using them:

I’m genuinely curious what the Islamic marriage apps are like for the men. Are the other girls serious and communicative? Or is it just as difficult for you guys too? For us girls, it’s absolutely abysmal. I feel like most of the men I talk to are deeply unserious. They’re just looking for something haram or to pass time, ig [I guess]. This guy I was talking to and I got on so well and he was telling me how insane it was for the guys too. He told me that most of the women were pretty dry or looking for something physical, and he was glad to have someone he could banter with.¹⁷

The comment by “*r/MuslimNikah*” – noting the unserious attitudes of both men and women – suggests that authentication is not merely a top-down process imposed by platforms but also negotiated among users themselves. Similarly, “*invbankingdouchebag’s*” critique of women’s lack of profile effort, coupled with his own concern about competing with “top guys,” reflects an awareness that authentication operates at multiple levels, including self-presentation and peer validation.

I recently joined two weeks ago. Tbh [to be honest] as a serious guy it seems that a lot of the women aren’t really putting in effort into their profiles. It’s hard to make a decision with only their pics and a lot of the bios and questions are empty. Muzz is honestly still a lot better than Salams because Salams is tabarruj central currently. A lot of women aren’t practicing clearly and are only culturally Muslim on there who want a similar culturally Muslim man who probably doesn’t actively practice. I wish we could see other men so I know who the top guys are and how I could improve my profile. Overall I would not recommend these apps over a matchmaking person who can actually help.¹⁸

17 https://www.reddit.com/r/MuslimNikah/comments/1bt8x29/the_other_side_of_salamsmuz/ (accessed on January 8, 2025).

18 https://www.reddit.com/r/MuslimNikah/comments/1bt8x29/the_other_side_of_salamsmuz/ (accessed on January 8, 2025).

Taken together, these empirical examples illustrate how claims to authenticity are not just reflections of religious beliefs, but also tools used to navigate, negotiate, and contest authority within the digital public sphere, as Otterbeck (2008) has previously noted. The *halal* branding of Muzz and Salams functions as corporate authentication strategies, but, as user reviews reveal, these claims are persistently challenged, reshaped, and resisted by the very communities these platforms seek to serve. As such, authentication emerges not as a singular or stable process but as a site of ongoing struggle – one where religious, cultural, and commercial interests intersect in complex and often contentious ways. The reviews also illustrate the ways in which users function as active agents in interpreting and contesting religious values, rather than being passive recipients of religious doctrines, as well as the contested negotiation of religious authority within the digital public sphere.

4 Some Concluding Thoughts

The user reviews of Islamic dating apps such as Muzz and Salams offer a compelling and often critical lens through which broader questions of authentication within Muslim communities can be explored. These dating platforms, which market themselves as “halal” alternatives to mainstream dating apps, occupy a unique and complex position as both facilitators of matchmaking and negotiators of religious authority. Yet, as the reviews reveal, the dating platforms’ role as arbiters of what is deemed “Islamic” is fraught with tensions and contradictions. Efforts to balance inclusivity and conservatism often fall short, as users frequently assert themselves as the true arbiters of what constitutes “Islamic” behavior.

Accusations of “un-Islamic” practices, debates over liberal versus conservative values, and instances of identity policing underline the diverse and fragmented ways users conceptualize “Islam.” This phenomenon challenges traditional hierarchies of religious authority. While this shift of authority – transferring the power to define authenticity from scholars and administrators to the broader user base – can be empowering for some, it also fosters fragmentation and conflict.

One example of this is how the reviews cultivate discussions about gender dynamics and modesty standards – discussions that are central to much discourse on Islamic authenticity. Critiques of women’s appearances – ranging from complaints about “exposed breasts” to “tight clothing” – reveal broader anxieties about the intersection of modernity, globalization, and traditional

gender norms. Women's bodies are often positioned as symbolic battlegrounds, where debates about Islamic values, modesty, and piety play out. This scrutiny disproportionately burdens women with the responsibility of upholding religious standards, something critics might use to reinforce the perception of Islam as inherently patriarchal or misogynistic. Such critiques reflect a broader cultural tension in which religious norms are both contested and reinterpreted in the context of contemporary challenges. Scholars of Islamic studies often frame these aspects – such as polygamy, homophobia, violence, and misogyny – as “misconceptions” or “misrepresentations” of Islam, or as controversial issues. However, as Hughes (2016) argues, the use of the term “misconceptions” risks veering into apologetics, as it presupposes a singular and authentic understanding of Islam. Instead, it is more productive to acknowledge the fractionalized and interpretive nature of Islamic identity. Drawing on Robert Wuthnow's (1986) concept of “patchwork religion,” we see that individuals selectively adopt and omit aspects of religious tradition to align with their personal values and lived realities. This dynamic is evident in the reviews, where users navigate competing interpretations of Islam to construct their own claims to authenticity.

Viewed through this lens, user reviews of Muzz and Salams become a rich source for examining how claims to authenticity are constructed, negotiated, and deployed. These reviews are not static declarations of religious truths but dynamic expressions of the ongoing human pursuit of knowledge and self-definition. They reveal the ways in which Muslims engage in a “classification struggle,” a tug-of-war over interpretive prerogative and ownership of what is considered “Islamic” (Lund and Lundqvist, forthcoming). For Islamic studies scholars, this discourse of “authenticity” offers an opportunity to destabilize rigid notions of what Islam and Islamic studies ought to be and instead theorize the ways in which authenticity is both claimed and contested. Rather than accepting statements like “this is not Islam” or “this is not Islamic studies” at face value, scholars can investigate the social, cultural, and political forces that shape such claims (cf. Otterbeck 2021).

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What Is Reasonable to Demand? Islam in Swedish Textbooks Twenty Years Later

Rickard Lagervall

In 2005, Jonas Otterbeck published the article “What is Reasonable to Demand? Islam in Swedish Textbooks,” a critical examination of how Islam and Muslims were represented in Swedish textbooks in religious education for upper secondary school. The books examined in his study were published between 1998 and 2002, except for one that was published already in 1994. His article thus served as a follow-up study to a 1993 dissertation by Kjell Härenstam, who had examined the representation of Islam in Swedish textbooks from the latter half of the twentieth century to the late 1980s. As Otterbeck noted, examinations of the representation of Islam in textbooks is a popular topic for university students’ theses, especially teacher students, and I always recommend both Härenstam’s dissertation and Otterbeck’s article as vital previous research. Furthermore, it is also often evident that the writers of textbooks have read both Otterbeck and Härenstam and taken their criticism into consideration. Another important consideration is that a new syllabus for upper secondary school was introduced in 2011, which has also affected textbooks since Otterbeck’s article. Therefore, as, at the time of writing, it has been twenty years since Otterbeck’s article was published, it is timely to ask: What has happened twenty years later?

1 Religious Education in Sweden

According to the national curriculum, education in Sweden shall be non-confessional. This also applies to religious education, which has been compulsory since 1996. This means that no particular worldview or religious tradition should be promoted so that pupils from various backgrounds can attend (Berglund 2010, 21). However, the national curriculum also makes clear that the school system shall promote what are called “the fundamental values of [Swedish] society,” namely, democracy, human rights, and gender equality. The school shall actively work against racism, sexism, and honor-based violence.

Among the core contents in religious education for upper secondary school are:

- Christianity, the other world religions, and different outlooks on life, their characteristics, and how they are expressed by individuals and groups in the present, in Sweden, and the world.
- Different views of human beings and God within and between religions.
- Religion in relation to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, and sexuality (Skolverket 2011).

The syllabus also explicitly states that education should prepare pupils to live in a society characterized by diversity and to respect different outlooks on life and life choices. Hence, religious education should both be neutral towards different religious traditions and promote certain values about, for example, gender equality, but also about the rights of sexual minorities.

Susanne Olsson therefore poses the question of whether, in the name of social cohesion, textbooks should promote “a ‘nice’ version of Others’ religions and cultures and claim that ‘bad’ versions are not the true versions” (Olsson 2010, 45). As Jonas Svensson notes, “non-confessional” can be interpreted in two ways: In a narrow sense that the school must not promote a specific religious community, and in a broader sense that teachers should also not take a stand on specific interpretations of a religious tradition, not even between misogynic and feminist interpretations (Svensson 2011, 100). The latter choice might be tempting, as in Flensner’s case study, where a teacher draws on Muslim feminist interpretations in order to convince Muslim girls that gender equality is not incompatible with their religion (Flensner 2020, 18f).

Härenstam (1993) demonstrated in his dissertation that textbooks prior to 1962, when the process of developing a non-confessional religious education began, portrayed Islam as the “Other” from a Christian perspective, employing value-laden expressions such as “fanatical,” “aggressive,” and “fatalistic” to describe the religion. This continued to a large extent during a new syllabus that was in force between 1962 and 1969, despite its demand for objectivity. The value-loaded expressions were replaced by an objective prose, but Islam was described as a religion belonging to the past without any important development through history, and Muslims tended to be treated as a collective. A new syllabus in 1969 emphasized the importance of gender equality, and hence, female oppression in Islam became a prominent topic in the textbooks, and this focus affected the descriptions of Islam specifically, in contrast to those of other religions.

In a later examination of textbooks published between 2003 and 2005 for the Swedish School Board, Härenstam finds a clear improvement in the

representation of Islam. Islam, as described in these textbooks, now appears more in line with central values such as democracy, human rights, and gender equality, values that, according to the syllabus, are to permeate school education. However, he calls for more of what he calls “antifundamentalist innovative thought” (Härenstam 2006, 46). This indicates that both Härenstam and the textbook authors interpreted the writing in the syllabus on society’s fundamental values as an instruction to privilege those interpretations of each religious tradition that are in line with those values.

Otterbeck is more critical in his examination of seven textbooks for upper secondary school, two of which are included in Härenstam’s report from 2006. He notes frequent omissions of whose interpretations are presented as Islamic, which masks the power relations. The presentations are often Sunni-centered and, worse, Islamist interpretations are often presented as normative. A tendentious choice of facts gives a prominent place to hudud, corporal punishments, in discussions on sharia and to female oppression in discussions about women and the family. A focus on what men do in Islamic rituals makes women invisible. There is also a tendency to generalize Muslims into what Otterbeck calls “theological robots” who fully apply all Islamic rules, such as praying five times a day. Furthermore, Islam is given agency with expressions such as “Islam means” or “Islam recommends.”

He notes that a growing portion of the pupils in Swedish classrooms have various sorts of Muslim backgrounds and various levels of religious engagement – or disengagement (see also Otterbeck 2010; 2011), and often do not recognize their religion in the textbooks. He therefore concludes: “The lived plurality of Islam *is* present in the classrooms of Malmö, but *not* in the textbooks. That problem has to be taken seriously” (Otterbeck 2005, 810).

Flensner has shown that religious education classrooms in Sweden are dominated by a secularistic discourse in which a non-religious, or even atheist, position is regarded as neutral. Religions in general are considered as something belonging to the past, something that others have, and are associated with oppression and ignorance (Flensner 2015, 107ff). Islam, specifically, is associated with submission and considered a lifestyle rather than simply a religion, and therefore incompatible with Western secular societies (Flensner 2015, 141, 223). Holmqvist Lidh comes to similar conclusions from her interviews with religiously active pupils of various religious traditions, in which she finds a discrepancy between what they experience as fundamental and meaningful in their respective religious traditions and what is taught (Holmqvist Lidh 2016, 204). They describe the religious education as something that alienates their respective traditions, with a superficial focus on facts, rules, and history rather than something that is lived and experienced in everyday life (Holmqvist

Lidh 2016, 84f), while her Muslim respondents find that Islam is associated with female oppression and rule-following (129).

Furthermore, textbook presentations of Islam tend to privilege a Sunni perspective, resulting in the impression that Sunni is the normal Islam and Shia is both a derivation and a deviation from it (Vestøl et al. 2014, 12). Due to the scarcity of contemporary sources for early Islamic history, it is actually less obvious that Shia traditions developed from an original Sunni tradition compared to the case of Protestant traditions, which have evident historical roots in Catholicism. It has therefore been suggested that Sunni and Shia gradually emerged as reactions to each other, rather than one originating from the other (Berkey 2003, 141ff).

Sunnis are, of course, the majority, estimated to be 85–90 percent of all Muslims globally. However, in Sweden, a third of the Muslim population is estimated to have a Shia background (Larsson and Thurfjell 2013, 25).

2 The Textbooks

For this study, I have selected seven religious education textbooks for upper secondary school, all of which were published after 2011, when a new syllabus took effect. All books are published by well-known publishing houses specializing in textbooks. One of the books, by Mattsson Flennergård and Eriksson (2014), was examined by both Otterbeck (2015) and Härenstam (2006), but I have used a later edition published under the new syllabus.

The following books were selected:

- Mattsson Flennergård, Malin, and Leif Eriksson. 2014. *Söka svar. Religionskunskap kurs 1 och 2*. Liber. Fourth edition.
 - Franck, Olof. 2014. *Religionskunskap 1. Om mening, värde och tro*. Studentlitteratur. First edition.
 - Göth, Lennart, Katarina Lycken Rüter, and Veronica Wiirström. 2021. *Religion 1 för gymnasiet*. Natur & kultur. Second edition.
 - Ring, Börje. 2019. *Libers religionskunskap*. Liber.
 - Tidman, Nils-Åke, and Kerstin Wallin. 2012. *Relieflivsvägar. Religionskunskap för kurs 1*. Gleerups. Second edition.
 - Tollstadius, Bengt. and Ingemar Öberg. 2020 *Mittpunkt. Religionskunskap 1*. Studentlitteratur. Third edition.
 - Tuvesson, Robert. 2018. *En människa, tusen världar*. Gleerups. First edition.
- There is no central authority in Sweden that examines and evaluates textbooks; instead, each teacher is free to select those they find suitable. However, teachers are obliged to structure their teaching according to the aims and

central content as laid out in the syllabus. Therefore, the publishing houses have a commercial interest to adhere to the syllabus (Ammert 2011, 30). Hence, the books tend to have similar structures in the chapters on world religions: the founder (except for Hinduism, of course), central scriptures, views on God, views on human beings, religious branches, rituals and holidays, gender relations, and adherents in Sweden. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are invariably presented in this chronological order of historical appearance.

The chapters on Islam, therefore, often begin with the Prophet Muhammad, followed by the Qur'an, and often, but not always, hadiths are also mentioned. The historical narrative focuses on the early history, from the birth of Muhammad to the death of Ali. The caliphate is briefly mentioned, and sometimes the crusades. Shia Islam is always presented in a special section (though Ashura is often included in the section on Islamic rituals). Doctrine is often structured along the five pillars and sometimes followed by the six articles of faith. In the sections on the Islamic view of God and human beings, similarities and differences with Jewish and Christian traditions are highlighted. The section on gender relations has a prominent place. The veil is sometimes discussed here, sometimes under a section on rules for food and dress.

Below, I will examine the seven textbooks, focusing on five themes: "Minor factual errors and ambiguous formulations" that might not be untrue in themselves but might easily be misconstrued. The second theme is "Islam as an agent and generalizations," that is, formulations that ascribe ideas, opinions, and will to Islam. The next theme is "Historical perspective," where I discuss the textbooks' narrative of early Islamic history and the extent to which they discuss the reliability of historical sources. The following theme, "Islamist perspective," is about what Islamic tradition and what interpretations are presented as normative. The final theme concerns how the books portray gender relations in Islam.

3 Minor Errors

There are some minor errors in the textbooks, for example, statements that according to the Qur'an, it was Ismael whom Abraham was about to sacrifice (Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, 349; Tidman and Wallin 2012, 89). It is true that this is the common position in the Islamic tradition, but the Qur'an does not name the son in question; he is identified in later commentaries.

One can also find generalizing statements, such as that it is "wrong" or "unthinkable" to translate the Qur'an (Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, 349 and Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 77). While this idea does exist, and many

Muslims indeed consider the Arabic version the authentic one, translations into Muslim-majority languages are widespread. However, Muslim translators often refer to them as “The Message of the Qur’an” to avoid confusion with the original. One such example is a Swedish translation from 1998 by the convert Mohammed Knut Bergström, which received the approval of the prominent al-Azhar University in Cairo. This approval would hardly have been granted if all translations of the Qur’an were considered “wrong” or “unthinkable.”

Another error is Franck’s (2014, 166) explanation that Medina means “the city of God.” The word Madina means “city,” and the full name of the city in question, Madinat al-Nabi, means the city of the Prophet.

Tollstadius and Öberg (2020, 82) claim that what the Prophet Muhammad has said and done is written down “in the text collection Sunna,” and that “for a long time Sharia was the only law applied in Muslim countries.” The Sunna, or, rather, the Hadiths that are the reports on the Prophetic Sunna, is not written down in a single collection, but rather consists of a whole library of numerous collections. Sharia was never the single law used in Muslim countries, not even the only religious law. Christian and Jewish laws were applied within these communities. The political rulers issued decrees with legal force in parallel to the laws applied by Muslim judges. In addition, customary laws were applied.

There are some ambiguous formulations that pupils might misunderstand. In a discussion on Sunni versus Shia, it is stated that according to Sunni, the Revelation ends with Muhammad (Tidman and Wallin 2012, 115) or that according to Sunni, Muhammad was the last one to have contact with God, but that the Shia think that there have come more people after Muhammad who received messages from God (Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 78). Göth and colleagues (2021, 192), for their part, unambiguously state: “Shias also think, in contrast to Sunnis, that their leaders can receive new revelations from God.”

I know from my own experience as a teacher that students sometimes have the idea that it is only in the Sunni tradition that Muhammad is considered the last prophet and understand the Shia Imams as later prophets. In Shia tradition, the Imams are considered infallible interpreters of the Revelation, guided by divine inspiration, but they are not regarded as prophets who have received new revelations.

Typically, the difference between Sunni and Shia is explained in a short section on the leadership contest after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, when it is said that the Shia wanted an offspring of the Prophet and Sunni the most pious or the most apt Muslim. The importance of the reverence of the twelve Imams together with the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatima (“the fourteen immaculate ones”) in Shia is rarely mentioned, except by Tuveßon (2018, 182).

As a consequence of all this, Shia appear as both a derivation and a deviation from a normative Sunni tradition.

4 Islam as an Agent and Generalizations

There are some formulations that treat Islam as an agent that “means” or “sees” things in specific ways (Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, 328, 336, 338, 346). More common are generalizing descriptions such as, “For both Muslims and Jews, religion is very much a way of life” (Tidman and Wallin 2012; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 94) or “Muslims want to live according to Muhammad’s Sunna” (Tidman and Wallin 2012; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 95). A study question reads: “What happened to the twelfth Imam and what is it that all Shia Muslims are waiting for?” (Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, 353), implying that *all* Shias actually are waiting for the return of the Imam. Another formulation is: “In specific Qur’anic schools, most Muslims learn the Qur’an by heart” (Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 77). Such formulations risk giving the impression that Muslims function as what Otterbeck calls “theological robots” (Otterbeck 2005, 803), unquestionably adhering to every rule and every doctrine. Empirically, it is doubtful that the majority of the world’s Muslims have attended Qur’anic schools, and it is extremely unlikely that a majority has learnt the Qur’an by heart.

To be fair, most authors do try to show the internal variety among Muslims by stressing the existence of different interpretations of the Qur’an and Sharia (Franck 2014, 174; Tidman and Wallin 2012, 93; Göth, et al. 2021, 204) as well as the varying degrees of religious practice and engagement among adherents (Franck 2014, 174; Ring 2014, 191ff; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 81; Tuveesson 2018, 199). In Ring, a nearly identical section appears in the chapters on each world religion, in which only the name of the religion in question is changed. The text emphasizes that all human beings are different and that not everybody agrees on everything, but that there are certain points of departure that can give a general picture of the religious tradition in question. In the section on Islam in Sweden, two of the books include interviews with three Swedish Muslims in order to cover a range of attitudes, from one of disengagement over someone who only celebrates the great holidays to someone who strives to fulfill all religious obligations (Tidman and Wallin 2012, 106–108; Ring 2014, 192). In the latter example, the author uses three fictitious Muslims, in line with the chapters on the other religions, where three fictitious persons serve to illustrate a spectrum of attitudes.

5 Historical Perspective

In his article, Otterbeck (805f) notes a lack of discussions about source criticism in the sections on early Islamic history. The Qur'an provides few details about Muhammad, and the earliest hadiths were written down at least 150 years after his death. He also notes a tendency in the textbooks to conflate an Islamic – often a modern Islamic – historical narrative with that of Montgomery Watt, who sought to develop a socio-economic historical explanation from Muslim sources. Watt's critics, however, contend that he accepted these sources uncritically.

Of the textbooks I have examined, only Tuveesson (2018, 179) clearly structures his narrative along the lines of Watt, emphasizing the social and economic transformations in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Muhammad. In the other books, this is only hinted at with lapidary mentions of the importance of trade in Mecca or that criticism of egoism, greed, and injustice was important in Muhammad's message.

None of the books discusses the reliability of extant sources. Tuveesson alludes to this question by using markers such as "according to stories," but does not discuss it further. Source criticism is also nearly absent in the chapters on the other religions. However, in the chapters on Christianity, Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson (2014, 274f) and Tollstadius and Öberg (2020, 60) claim that it is "certain" or "proven" that Jesus really did exist, while Tidman and Wallin 2012, 55) state that it is "likely." In Ring (2019, 155), we can read that Jesus is mentioned in Roman sources, but it is unclear whether he said and did everything reported about him. Ring adds, "It is the same with Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, and other religious personalities in history." This is the only mention in any of the books of ongoing discussions about the historical existence of Muhammad.

One reason for the omission of source criticism might be the revisionist trend among non-Muslim scholars such as John Wansbrough (1977), Patricia Crone (1987), and Michael Cook (Crone and Cook, 1979), in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on the scarcity of contemporary historical sources relating to the Prophet, these scholars presented alternative hypotheses that questioned the very existence of the Prophet and proposed that Islam emerged from a Jewish or Jewish-Christian sect through a more extended historical process. Such theories might, of course, appear controversial to believing Muslim pupils. However, in recent decades, the pendulum among scholars seems to have shifted once again, with Angelika Neuwirth (2017), Fred M. Donner (2010), and Aaron W. Hughes (2013) finding it reasonable to accept the historical existence

of Muhammad, even though the historical events that led to the formation of Islam remain in obscurity.

It is also worth noting that none of the books mention two issues that are probably the most controversial in narratives about the Prophet's life today: Aisha's age at the time of her marriage to the Prophet and the conflict with three Jewish tribes in Medina. According to Islamic tradition, Aisha was six when she married and nine when the marriage was consummated. This was not an issue even in Christian polemics against Islam until the modern age, but is something that is repeatedly held against the Prophet in contemporary anti-Muslim discourses.

Likewise, the conflicts with Jewish tribes and their expulsion from Medina after three major battles with Mecca are topics that today are used to prove the inherent antisemitism of Islam and Muslims. These omissions might be wise, considering the limited space for discussions that put such issues into historical context.

6 Islamist Perspective

Similar to Otterbeck's findings from twenty years ago, the textbooks I have examined often structure discussions of contemporary Muslim approaches to politics on Jan Hjärpe's division into four ideal typical positions: Traditionalists, who follow the authoritative interpretations of the legal schools (*madhahib*), whom he contrasts with modernists who allow a broader range of interpretation by emphasizing the principles in the Islamic tradition rather than substantive rules. Fundamentalists see Islam as a comprehensive religion with a blueprint for social order, unlike secularists who view religion as a private matter (Hjärpe 1983, 42). Hjärpe's book had a significant influence in Sweden because it was published shortly after the Islamic revolution in Iran and at a time when it became increasingly clear that religion was not losing its social and political influence in an inevitable historical development, as proposed by the classical secularization paradigm. One reason why his book is still cited is that it is accessible to a broader public.

All textbooks examined use this categorization except the ones by Göth and colleagues (2021) and Tollstadius and Öberg (2020), the latter reducing Hjärpe's four-partite division into a twofold one between fundamentalists and modernists.

In Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson (2014, 343), traditionalists and fundamentalists both oppose changes in, for example, gender relations because they think that the Qur'anic rules should apply at all times, while fundamentalists

also want the Qur'an to be the foundation for the governance of society, promote harsh punishments, and are opposed to democracy. Modernists and secularists, on the other hand, both advocate for democracy; the former by referring to principles in the Islamic tradition, while the latter promote a separation between religion and state, as well as complete freedom of religion.

This linking of modernism, secularism, and democracy is a common thread that runs through the textbooks. Ignoring modern examples of secularist authoritarian states, such as Iran under the Shah and Kemalist Turkey, easily gives the impression of a necessary incompatibility between Islam and democracy. Tuveson (2018, 186f), however, further divides Islamism into militant and democratic branches. However, by claiming that traditionalists follow the five pillars, believe in the six articles of faith, and avoid pork (177), this category is seemingly expanded to include virtually all practicing Muslims.

The textbooks examined in this study are more cautious in associating Sharia with corporal punishments than those examined by Otterbeck and Härenstam. Often, Sharia is mentioned in connection with Hjärpe's four categories, where Islamists are said to want to apply Sharia as a legal system. Otherwise, Sharia is discussed in terms of Islamic ethics rather than criminal law. Only Franck and Tollstadius explicitly mention corporal punishments. In a section on ethics, after discussing ethical rules that are common to all religious traditions and those specific to Islam, Franck (2014, 172) mentions the amputation of hands for theft, with a reference to Sura 5.

As noted above, Tollstadius and Öberg (2020, 82) claim that Sharia used to be the only law applied in Muslim countries, and then describe its punishments as "very harsh," exemplifying with amputation and stoning. They do note, however, that today most Muslim majority countries do not have laws based on religion. Tuveson (2018, 204), for his part, more accurately observes that in most Muslim countries, only the family laws are based on Sharia.

All books except Franck discuss jihad. Typically, it is noted that the root meaning of the word is "to strive," often against one's own ego, and that, in terms of armed struggle, it should be in self-defense. Tollstadius and Öberg's (2020, 82) short discussion is similar to the others, but the heading "Holy war" and a following assignment to discuss suicide bombers clearly lead the thought to a more aggressive understanding of jihad.

7 Gender

Women are more visible in the textbooks examined in this study, compared to those in Otterbeck's article. However, two books still claim that everybody

(Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 80) or both men and women (Tidman and Wallin 2012, 98) dress in white during the pilgrimage. As Otterbeck (2005, 799f) notes, women dress in their ordinary clothes.

All books include a section on gender relations in the chapter on Islam, as well as in the chapters on the other religions. Invariably, a complementary division of roles is presented as Islamic, whereby men and women have equal value but different rights and obligations towards each other. Sometimes this view is presented as coming straight from the Qur'an ("In the Qur'an it is said," in Tuveesson 2018, 196) or by generalized statements such as, "Islam means that ..." (Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, 84). At other times, it is presented as the traditional view (Göth et al., 2021), the point of departure in Islam (Ring, 2019), or simply what many Muslims think (Tidman and Wallin, 2012, 114).

Tollstadius and Öberg state, quite unequivocally, that "The hierarchy within the family is that the man is above the wife, brother above sister," without any qualification whether this is "the traditional view" or the view of "some" or even "many" Muslims. To mitigate this impression, they continue that many girls and women find these rules to be a safety measure (Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 85). On the following page, there is an assignment in which the reader is asked to imagine that a female friend has started to date a Muslim guy, and does not know anything about Islam. The assignment is to write a letter to her explaining Islam. One can only imagine what kinds of advice non-Muslim students have been inspired to write down.

In Tidman and Wallin, we read that: "According to the traditional view, the woman is first the property of her father, and then she becomes the property of her husband" (Tidman and Wallin 2012, 110), which sounds more like something from the 2,000 years old Hindu manual *The Laws of Manu* than from the Qur'an or the Hadith literature. To be fair, the authors add that this view is far from the only one among Muslims.

In the sections on gender, the Qur'anic verse 4:34 is never quoted; however, two books recommend that readers look it up and read it on their own (Ring 2019, 204; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 85). This is probably the most controversial verse in the Qur'an, as it seems to allow men to physically punish their wives, albeit as a last resort. Here, we must ask ourselves how pupils will understand this text without guidance from textbooks, and probably not from the teacher either, to contextualize it historically or to discuss different ways of interpreting it.

Another verse that is often referred to (in Mattsson Flennegård and Eriksson 2014, and Franck 2014, 204) and, sometimes quoted (Tuveesson 2018, 207), is 24:31, in which believing women are told to "lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments". This verse is often referred to in discussions on female dress. Rarely is the preceding verse quoted in which

believing men are told to “lower their gaze and guard their chastity,” (but men are not told not to display their adornments). Tuveßon only quotes the verse about women, but with the clarification that there are dress rules for both men and women. He also discusses different interpretations within the Islamic jurisprudential tradition, *fiqh*, of the verse’s meaning (the English translation above is itself an interpretation).

The sections on gender often also include discussions on Muslim feminism (Franck 2014, 167, 174; Tidman and Wallin 2012, 114; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 85; Tuveßon 2018, 195). Tuveßon also includes a brief note on queer and HBTQI movements in Muslim countries.

The most problematic issue related to gender is that of female circumcision, often discussed in relation to male circumcision. It is invariably explained that the majority of Muslims do not practice female circumcision and that the practice is confined to certain geographical areas where it is practiced by Muslims, Christians, and adherents to other religions. This is all true, but if this statement is taken seriously, one would expect to find similar sections in the chapters on Christianity, of which there are none (Göth, et al. 2021, 2021, 202, Ring, 2019, 198; Tidman and Wallin 2012, 110; Tollstadius and Öberg 2020, 81). This begs the question of what impression remains among the readers after finishing the book. On the one hand, female circumcision is not specific to Islam; on the other, the discussion of it is to be found in the chapter on Islam.

8 Discussion

Otterbeck concluded his article with three main proposals: To make clear whose interpretation is presented as Islamic, to offer several perspectives, to address prevailing prejudices, and to contextualize what is mentioned. He shows how prejudices shape perception through the example of descriptions of Sharia that privilege hudud punishments at the cost of its relevance for rituals and ethics. The books examined in this study primarily focus on ethics and rituals when discussing Sharia, with some omitting hudud punishments altogether. Those that address hudud punishments clearly do so with prejudices in mind, stressing that they are not applied in most Muslim majority countries. However, they still tend to imply, or even explicitly claim, that these punishments were the default in the past. More historical contextualization would be needed here. What time in history is discussed? To what extent were adulterers whipped, stoned, or had their hands cut off for theft? And what punishments were applied to similar crimes at the same time period in other places, such as the Byzantine Empire, Western Europe, and especially in the Nordic countries? In fact, there is no evidence that the hudud were the usual punishments. Even

in the early history of Islam, the application of corporal punishments appears to have decreased over time, following a historical process similar to that of Europe (Vikør, 190ff, 297). Similarly, the Qur'anic verse 4:34, which seems to allow men to punish their wives physically, may appear less uniquely misogynic if pupils learn that men had this right in Sweden until 1864.

As for Otterbeck's proposal to present the five pillars of Islam as a common, but not the only, way to introduce Islamic fundamentals to Muslims without deep religious knowledge, the books in my examination still present these pillars as the core of Islam, though several books try to problematize this with presentations of individual Muslims with various levels of religious practice in the section on Islam in Sweden.

Most books also present Muslim feminist interpretations as a contrast to more conservative views on gender relations, and more widely modernist interpretations in contrast to Islamist ones. However, these sections are often short, so these modernist interpretations appear as exceptions.

Writing textbooks is a difficult and even ungrateful task. In the case of religious education, the books should cover the history, rituals, holidays, and most important principles of faith of the five major world religions, as well as the variety of expressions of lived religion among contemporary adherents. All this should be presented in a way that pupils can easily comprehend and learn, maybe in a couple of lessons for each religion.

There is a clear ambition among all the textbook authors examined to present the five world religions on the same terms, with similar chapter dispositions. It is, however, not always successful, as when discussions on female circumcision are invariably placed in the chapters on Islam.

Today, the number of Muslims in Swedish classrooms, both as pupils and teachers, is even greater than when Otterbeck wrote his article twenty years ago. Far from all of them come from families that fit the ideal typical image of Muslims who pray five times a day, rigorously fast during Ramadan, or abstain from alcohol. Some have Muslim mothers and non-Muslim fathers. School textbooks should not make them feel as if they are deviating from their own religion. Conversely, Muslims who strive to follow religious rules should not be labeled "traditionalists" with all the other implications of rejecting modernity, and even democracy, that this word connotes.

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The Biblical Rhetoric of Malcolm X: a Cartography of “Scripture” between 1960 and 1965

Joel Kuhlin

1 Introduction

During his tenure in the Nation of Islam (NOI) and in December 1962, Malcolm X (X) delivered a lecture later known as “The Black Man’s History” at Mosque No. 7 in Harlem. The topic of the speech was the central myth for the NOI and Elijah Muhammad’s theology, known as “Yacub’s History.” The speech contains twenty references to the “Bible.” It takes a deep dive, particularly into the “history” found in the Books of Genesis and Revelation. Benjamin Karim remembers addressing the crowd before X on this day and in line with other occasions, “depending on the time allotted me and the subject of Malcolm’s lecture, I would go into history – Egyptian history, world history, archaeology – trying to impress on the audience, as Malcolm had taught, the importance of history to us, that history of which we had been systematically deprived” (Karim 1971, 21). X, per usual, after an initial address to the crowd, then stepped up to the lectern and greeted the audience with “A-Salaam-Alaikum.” Noteworthy is that X is remembered to have carried a handful of three-by-five-inch cards, some newspaper clippings, and most importantly for present purposes, a “King James” Bible (Terrill 2004, 84n68). What is the significance of the Bible, rather than the Qur’an, being specifically recalled as ready-to-hand in a typical rhetorical situation?

X is rightly recognized for his harsh critique of (White) Christianity. At the same time, the apocalyptic imaginary of his oratory, especially during his long years as minister of NOI, tells the tale of a strained, yet essential, relationship with the Bible. Peter Goldman and Louis DeCaro Jr. have noted the central yet rather ambivalent influence that Christianity exercised upon the religious imaginary of X (Goldman 1979; DeCaro Jr. 1998). Interestingly, the role of biblical material in the rhetor’s creative imagination has yet to be studied.¹ This

1 X saw “the future of the blacks affirmed in Scripture, too: in the flight of Moses from Egypt and of Lot from burning Sodom; in God’s promises to Malachi that He would raise up a man named Elijah and that soon thereafter would come a day that would burn as an oven; in the

is intriguing, given the repeated instances of X declaring, for instance, in the debate with Bayard Rustin (Nov. 1960) that “we believe that Mr. Muhammad’s presence among so-called Negroes here in America is in line with biblical prophecies” (Atwal 2000). DeCaro Jr. states that X – in contrast to Elijah Muhammad – “undoubtedly excelled in his ability to use the Bible, scouring its pages for verses that could be framed in his arguments against Christianity [... and that] if anyone ever honed Black Muslim biblical application to a fine art, it was Malcolm X” (DeCaro Jr. 1998, 87). Given this context, emphasizing not least NOI as a fundamentally post-Christian new religious movement in the world of American Islam, what rhetorical function did the Bible have in X’s oratory during the NOI years (1950–64)?

The importance of considering the biblical archive’s effect upon the rhetoric of X is important in contemporary research for at least two reasons. Firstly, while the connection to Christianity and “Christian scripture” is documented in relation to the thought of the infamous NOI minister, a reception historical approach and analysis of the Bible in relation to (political) Islam, broadly and in the 1950s–1960s America, remains underexplored.² Secondly, a dependence upon biblical material in X’s oratory re-addresses the problematic of anti-Christian rhetoric, and a critique of contemporary Christian preachers, including Martin Luther King Jr., among them. This is interesting from the perspective of the history of religion, as well as a rhetorical and source-critical approach to the Black nationalism and civil rights movements during the 1950s–1960s.

prophecies of the Book of Daniel that the thrones would be cast down and that the Ancient of Days, the hair of his head like pure wool, would sit and rain fire till the beast was slain, and his body destroyed, and given to the burning flame. Malcolm, being spiritual, took solace in all of this and taught the faithful to await it. But Malcolm was an activist as well and did not expect to be merely a spectator at the judgment. He never stopped reading Scripture, but he was drawn more and more in his last years to the wild apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation, in which the righteous make war against the wicked and even Jesus takes up the sword.” (Goldman 1979, 79. Cf. DeCaro Jr. 1998, 192).

- 2 An analysis of biblical reception in NOI and X is largely absent. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* (eds. Hammer and Safi 2013), “the Bible” only appears a handful of times. An analogue absence is found in *Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America* (ed. Gutjahr 2017), where Muslims’ reception of the Bible is completely absent. Interestingly, a discussion of politics, contemporary culture and Islam (beyond film and literature, in America and elsewhere) is missing in the entry of “Bible in Islam” in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (Bakker et al. 2016). Similarly, in its entry for “Nation of Islam,” X is not mentioned (Harriss, 2022), while in the entry “Malcolm X,” “biblical rhetoric” for the rhetor remains imprecise. Surprisingly, Harriss does not discuss important features mentioned in subsequent article on the NOI’s biblical reception and use of Ez. and Rev. (Harriss 2019; cf. Harriss 2022).

2 Theory, Method, Delimitations

As a new religious movement, NOI found theological material from different esoteric movements in circulation during the first half of the 20th century.³ In this exploratory study, I aim to demonstrate the relevance of a theory of "reception criticism" and qualitative analysis of the Bible for an investigation of X, and to encourage further critical study of the relationship between Black Muslim leaders in the NOI and Christianity. The apocalyptic political theology of X stands in continuity with the tradition of Black preachers and Jeremiads drawing upon biblical figures (Estabrooks 2016, 58–83), and central themes from the Books of Genesis and Exodus, the Book of Malachi, the Gospels, and the Book of Revelation.

This study will focus on the articulation of "Scripture" in speeches, interviews, and correspondences from "Harvard Law School Forum" (March 24, 1961), Interview with Alex Haley (May 1963), "Black Revolution" (June 1963), "God's Judgement over White America" (December 4, 1963), and "The Letter from Mecca" (April 20, 1964). Holly Morse's notion of "reception criticism" is a theoretical standpoint, opening up for "biblical rhetoric" as a viable object of study in the oratory of Black Muslim leaders. One aspect and conclusion of Morse's "reception criticism" is to highlight the importance of employing different modes of exegesis for a reception history of the Bible in contemporary society (Morse 2015, 259–62). X's rhetoric is approached as a dataset analyzed through a qualitative and quantitative content analysis in *NVivo* and *Voyant*. The collection of texts was uploaded into *NVivo* and *Voyant*, generating an overview of occurrences of "biblical rhetoric" and various visual aids that illustrate the same.

This entire dataset consists of approximately 550,000 words in total. From this totality, a series of terms and phrases was coded in *NVivo*, with initial content codes developed in accordance with the research question. The codes respond to the use of the Bible in X's oratory (see below). *NVivo*'s query functions and visualizations, such as word clouds and coding matrices, were instrumental in identifying patterns and relationships within the textual corpus. *Voyant Tools* was mainly important to get a birds-eye-view of the textual corpus, while *NVivo* aided immensely in locating specific clusters of biblical

3 While the study's focus is to highlight a general usage of the Bible in the rhetoric of X, it will be important to briefly underline its relation of the so called "History of Yacub" and Rev. for NOI. In this regard, Rev. undoubtedly reveals an essential role of biblical, apocalyptic material for NOI and X (cf. Goldman 1979, 79 and Harris 2022 on the centrality of "Yacub's History").

rhetoric. The content analysis revealed several key themes, terms, and topoi of biblical rhetoric, which were further explored through a rhetorical analysis and interpreted in the context of the research question regarding the reception of the Bible in X. Lastly, as a note on limitations, I have consulted and included *The Autobiography* (X and Haley 1965) in the dataset without including it in the analysis of the dataset below. The reason is that *The Autobiography*, written with Alex Haley, differs in tone and genre from the transcribed oratory collected by Atwal and Karem, with X's oral performance at the center (cf. Benson 1974).

3 Conceptualizing “Scripture” in Malcolm X’s Rhetoric

In the first speech of the dataset, “Harlem Freedom Rally” (1960), X makes references to the Book of Jonah in the Old Testament, and the

city of Nineveh in the Bible to whom Jonah was sent to warn is a good prophetic example of today. They were actually spared because they repented when the warning came to them from God. God will spare our slave master today too if he will repent.

In the final speech of the corpus, “There’s A Worldwide Revolution Going On” (February 15, 1965; just days prior to his murder), X paraphrases gospel-tradition from the New Testament (in relation to Martin Luther King and nonviolence).⁴ From the first to the last speech in the dataset, the Bible serves the function of an essential locus of *scriptural authority*, from the perspective of the (post/Christian) audience and the rhetor himself. Importantly, however, “Christian scripture,” and its reception in NOI, is first and foremost used for its ability to support the Black Muslim movement and causes. It is therefore somewhat of an *ambiguous authority*. It is considered corrupted in its current form and requires correct contextualization with the teachings of NOI in order to disseminate theological clarity.⁵

4 “[A]s long as you have someone coming in from the outside telling you how you should do it and how you shouldn’t do it – and always what they tell you is nonviolence, peaceful, love everybody, forgive them Lord, they know not what they do. If you get into that kind of bag, why you’ll never get anywhere.”

5 “Malcolm taught that the Bible was full of lies in its present version, and that an untainted version was concealed in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. [...] Elijah Muhammad had translated this Bible from its original Arabic into English in order to bring the truth to black people. Without Muhammad’s true knowledge of the original Bible, Malcolm taught, black people would be lost, since the common Bible was translated to suit white people and

In the analysis below, I will concentrate on the ability of “scripture” to create points of intensity within the biblical rhetoric of X. It will be argued that a biblical rhetoric takes the shape of a “clustering” around references to passages, phrases, idioms, places, and names that demonstrate key features of the reception of the Bible in the dataset. The relevant background of scripture’s rhetorical significance is clearly seen in relation to the present methodological codes of a biblical rhetoric, found with relation to the following groupings, and terminology (along with the term’s frequency in the dataset):

TABLE 12.1 The biblical rhetoric of Malcolm X: figures and places, phrases and term, and idioms and texts

Figures and places	#	Phrases and terms	#
Devil (Satan)	143	Bible	74
Moses	124	Sin (both as noun phrase and verbal phrase)	32
Jesus	106	Biblical (“prophecy” ×5)	23
Yacub (“Jacob” – patriarch)	87	Scripture (“Christian” ×3; “Holy” ×1)	17
Pharaoh	50	Kingdom (“God’s”)	5
Abraham	38	Old Testament	1
Christ	32	New Testament	1
Angel	19		
Hebrews	17	Idioms and texts	#
Egypt (“biblical”/ with “Hebrews” etc.)	17	Wolf (“white”; parabolic animal in Mt. 7:15; 10:16; Lk. 10:3; Jn. 10:12; Acts 20:29)	57
Israel (“lost tribe of”)	14	Fox (parabolic animal in Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58,13:32)	52
Jehovah	14	“Turn the other cheek” (Mt. 5:39; Lk. 6:29)	34

white religion. Christianity was thus an ‘unnatural,’ ‘concocted’ religion based on the Bible’s lies – lies that were cleverly designed to keep black people ignorant,” DeCaro Jr. 1998, 110 (on NOI and the Bible, see 45–46, 48–52, 57). A partial transcription of a speech by X, on June 16, 1961, illuminating: “So the Bible is a good book. It’s the Word of God. But you have to understand it. The book says when it’s about to close: ‘Blessed are those that read and understand.’ It don’t say reading it will make you blessed. You’ve got to understand it to be blessed. If reading the Bible [pounding his fist on the podium] would make you blessed, there wouldn’t be a Negro in America suffering. But nobody reads Bibles more than the Negro and no one catches more hell than the so-called Negro here in America” (DeCaro Jr. 1998, 230–31).

TABLE 12.1 The biblical rhetoric of Malcolm X (*cont.*)

Figures and places	#	Idioms and texts	#
Noah	10	Sheep (parabolic animal in gospel traditions, e.g. Mt. 9:36, 10:6, 16; 12:11–12; 15:24; 18:12; 25:32–33; 26:31; “long lost”/“lost”; “black”)	27
Magicians (Pharaoh’s, from the Book of Exodus)	9	Judgment (“God’s”; “hour of”; “day of”; Ex. 2:12, Rom. 1:32, 2 Thess. 1:5)	25
David (king)	8	Gospel (of “black nationalism”/“of Christ”/“of truth”/“of white nationalism,” etc.)	17
Babylon	7	Shepherd (“good”; “false”)	10
John (of Patmos; author of the Book of Revelation)	7	(Book of) Revelation	8
Paul (apostle)	6	“Love your enemy” (Mt. 5:44)	6
Daniel (prophet)	5	Goats (parabolic animal in gospel parable found in the Mt. 25:33; “white”)	5
Red Sea	4	(Book of/event of) Exodus	4
Scribes and pharisees (“scribes, priests and pharisees”; “... scribes and pharisees”)	3	Armageddon	5
Sodomites	3	(Book of) Genesis	2
Solomon (king)	3	Resurrection (“of the dead”: Mt. 22:31; Acts 17:32; Heb 6:2)	4
Goliath	3	“Last days” (Heb. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3)	4
Virgin (Mary; “the Blessed”)	2	“... when God comes he can give the ‘entire kingdom to whomsoever he will” (paraphrase of gospel tradition)	2
Sodom and Gomorrah	2	“He that leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he that kills with the sword shall be killed by the sword” (Rev. 13:9–10; slightly adapted from KJV)	2
Nineveh	2	“Every one under his own vine and fig tree” (Micah 4:4; KJV)	1
Jonah	1	Luke’s Gospel	1

The content codes are not distributed evenly throughout the dataset.⁶ In the following, "scripture" will be treated as a master signifier and primary expression of a biblical rhetoric. In relation to the seventeen times the term appears (in "Harvard Law School Forum"; the 1963 interview with Alex Haley; "Black Revolution"; "God's Judgement over White America"; "The Letter from Mecca," in the *Autobiography* with Alex Haley), an overview of salient traits of a biblical rhetoric will sufficiently demonstrate the function large. It is therefore not the case that a biblical rhetoric articulates anything like an essential surface value of the textual corpus studied, *en toto*, or forms a "secret" entry point into an imagined "essence" of X's oratory. With that said, the Bible nonetheless remains a heartstring of X's theology, supplying crucial sources for apocalyptic historiography and prophetic fulfillment in the present time. In short, biblical rhetoric effectively demonstrates the post-Christian context of this Black Muslim movement during the 1950s–1960s (Gardell 1996; Curtis IV 2001; Gibson and Berg 2017).

Scripture is a point of intensity of X's rhetoric, objectifying multiple terms listed above in the dataset.⁷ In the following, two traits summarize salient aspects of X's biblical rhetoric: scripture as compositional idea, and scriptural interpretation.

4 The Idea of Scripture

In classical theory of rhetoric, different parts of a speech were often related to the single concept of an underlying "idea" (Gr. *phantasia*; *dianoia*; *idea*; cf. Kuhlin 2024, 74, 175–76). In a review of "scripture" in the dataset, X can be seen as expressing a unified, yet complex, idea of the Bible as scripture. The idea is supported by a corresponding biblical rhetoric, which employs references to the Bible in relation to the codes above. To begin, the Qur'an (Koran/Qu'ran) is

6 These content-codes match the frequencies of equivalent terms in the dataset. In short, the code "Moses" is therefore selected in relation to the appearances of the figure of Moses, in the corpus. It is important to remember that the dataset records not only enunciation of biblical terminology, but also interlocutors in a debate and so on. A scrutiny of codes and their patterns is therefore needed. The heuristic concept of a "biblical rhetoric" is a result of an analysis of the content codes. Noteworthy is also the rhetorical "code-switching" involved with the code "Israel", that often signify the state yet nonetheless carries with them implicit biblical connotations.

7 In the interview, letter, and speeches analyzed here, the following codes appear: *Scripture*, *Moses*, *Jesus*, *Christ*, *Noah*, *Lot*, *Daniel*, *David*, *Goliath*, *Bible*, *Jehova*, *Pharaoh*, *Magicians*, *Abraham*, *scribes*, *priests*, and *pharisees*, *Babylon*, *Egypt*, *Sheep*, *God's judgement*, *biblical prophecy*, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, *Lost Tribe of Israel*.

referred to a mere six times in the dataset. This is to be contrasted to the 65 references to the “Bible” and “Scripture.” Scripture primarily refers to a Christian Bible – divided into the Old Testament and the gospels; never the Qur’an. According to Louis DeCaro Jr., “Malcolm X preached from the King James version of the Bible – something he normally did” (DeCaro Jr. 1998, 148; 41, 46–47).

After the schism with Elijah Muhammad, X’s “Letter from Mecca” states that “Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad and all other prophets of the Holy Scriptures.” The use of scripture here is interesting because of its obscurity. Elsewhere in the dataset, X refers to the Qur’an as “The Holy Book,” in distinction from the Christian Bible. It cannot be determined what purpose the conjoining of the use of “Holy” and “Scripture” serves. Even though the phrase “Holy Bible” is found twice in the *Autobiography*, “the Holy Scriptures” remains unprecedented and could arguably refer to the Qur’an and the Bible, in this context. If not, the break with NOI means also a transformation within the theological vocabulary and extending the notion of scripture to include the Qur’an.

The most prominent features of the idea of the Bible are unraveled with the concept of scripture. In the speeches, interview, and letter where the term appears, the Bible reveals an idea that is strongly affiliated with *history* and *prophecy*. Taken together, X hereby reveals a sense of time and temporality, since the Bible as history speaks of the power of the past and the Bible as prophecy of the importance of recognizing the task of the present and imminent future. The temporal axis of the rhetoric is important.

You and I were born at this turning point in history; we are witnessing the fulfillment of prophecy. Our present generation is witnessing the end of colonialism, Europeanism, Westernism, or “White-ism” ... the end of white supremacy, the end of the evil white man’s unjust rule – “God’s Judgement over America”.

In short, the Bible provides textual material that is interpreted as history and prophecy for the present age.

In the interview with Alex Haley (May 1963), X states that

[X] Christ wasn’t white. Christ was a black man.

[Haley] On what Scripture do you base this assertion?

[X] Sir, Billy Graham has made the same statement in public. Why not ask him what Scripture he found it in? When Pope Pius X died, *Life magazine* carried

a picture of him in his private study kneeling before a black Christ. What was the source of their information? All white people who have studied history and geography know that Christ was a black man.

During the years with NOI, X argued that the end of history was close. On December 4, 1963, he delivered his final speech representing Elijah Muhammad and NOI. "God's Judgement of White America is a mature expression of X's eschatology during his tenure as NOI minister (Ahmed 2020, 470). Together with Elijah Muhammad, X was greatly inspired by Christian dispensationalism (especially Jehovah's Witnesses; Gomez 2005, 329; DeCaro Jr. 1996, 83; 1998, 16–17; Gardell 1996, 161, 378n105). Following Elijah Muhammad's theology, the Bible served the purpose of relaying the history of the world up to 6,000 years ago, when the white man Adam was born. The current "dispensation" is found to be "preached by Jesus 2,000 years ago," where X also finds the present age, that "ushered in a new type of civilization, the Christian civilization, better known as the Christian world" ("Harvard Law School Forum; cf. "Black Man's History").⁸ God's judgment is appointed to destroy this world because of its devilish nature and the racist purpose of the White world to subdue Black people.

Yet the Bible is more than merely history. The figures of Moses, Yacub (Jacob), Elijah, and Jesus are particularly important and demonstrate the topological potential of the Bible. In this manner, the Bible speaks not only of the past but also of the present and the future.

You must understand that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad represents the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy to us. In the Old Testament, Moses lived to see his enemy, Pharaoh, drowned in the Red Sea – which in essence means that Mr. Muhammad will see the completion of his work in his lifetime, that he will live to see victory gained over his enemy. (From the Interview with Alex Haley)

It is also written in your own scriptures that this prophetic figure would not be raised up from the midst of the educated class, but that God would make His choice of a man from among the lowly, uneducated, downtrodden and oppressed masses, among the lowest element of America's 20 million ex-slaves. [...] Just as the learned class of those days disagreed and opposed both Moses

8 See discussion on the NOI doctrine often referred to as "Yacub's history" or "the myth of Yacub", and its gnostic function in X's programmatic speech "Black Man's History," in Kuhlin and Smith 2020, 32–38.

and Jesus primarily because of their humble origin and status, today Mr. Elijah Muhammad is likewise being opposed by the learned, educated intellectuals from among his own kind primarily because of his humble origin and status in their eyesight, and efforts are made by these modern day “magicians, scribes, and Pharisees” to ridicule Mr. Muhammad by magnifying the humble origin of his many followers. (From “Harvard Law School Forum”)

What is meant by prophecy? Robert E. Terrill draws attention to the fact that “Black Muslim theology explicitly is a program of biblical interpretation,” where the Bible ought not be left to wrongful interpretation. This is seen most clearly when X proclaimed that “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s mission is to teach the so-called Negroes a knowledge of history, the history of ourselves, our own kind, showing us how we fit into prophecy, Biblical prophecy” (Terrill 2013, 86).

Lastly, appeals to scripture arguably serve the purpose as “nodes” that create a wider “network” that maps all occurrences where an appeal is made to the Bible. Katja Rakow recently argued that signifiers such as “‘the Word’ and ‘Scripture’ point to the textual quality of the Bible while downplaying the material dimension of words” (2020, 414). DeCaro Jr. narrates an anecdote, where “Malcolm, during one of his fiery sermons, raised a Bible in the air, dared God to verify its miraculous claims, and then threw it on the floor” (1998, 110). The materiality of the Bible certainly was not central. It was the Bible as Christian text, not as a “Holy Book,” that was central to this action. Nonetheless, X was often seen with a Bible rather than a Qur’an when lecturing. It largely served the purpose of historiographical and prophetic material, and as such displayed an ambiguous authority. In this context, the use of “scripture” in X’s rhetoric can be found to underline the Bible as an archive, which is able to produce several effects in a particular situation, rather than a Holy artifact.

5 Interpretation of Scripture

The use of biblical figures, phrases, and passages reinforces the idea of the Bible, serving primarily as historical facts and allegorical references to the present political moment, particularly in terms of prophecy. Repeatedly, X makes it clear that the NOI stands for a corrective interpretation of the Bible, where outsiders and those who “don’t understand biblical prophecy wrongly label [Elijah Muhammad] as a racist, a hate teacher, or of being anti-white, and of teaching black supremacy” (Harvard Law School Forum). Since early

on in his conversion process, especially during the seven-year imprisonment at the "Norfolk, Massachusetts, Prison Colony" (1945–1952), X spent hours on end in solitary confinement – for poor behavior – cursing "the Bible and God. But there was a legal limit to how much time one could be kept in solitary. Eventually, the men in the cellblock had a name for me: 'Satan.' Because of my antireligious attitude" (Haley and X 1965, 153). In the years to come, however, converting people to the cause of the Black Muslim movement consisted of creating a more convincing interpretation of Scripture than offered by (White) Christianity. This was a trait of NOI, dating back to its founder, W.D. Fard, who is said to have known "the Bible better than any of the Christian-bred Negroes" (X and Haley, 1965, 207).

Until 1964, X embraced Elijah Muhammad's particular version of the doctrine of *tahrif* (Ar. "distortion"), or corruption of the Bible (Harriss, 2022). And after his excommunication from the NOI, X argued that "Christianity is the white man's religion. The Holy Bible in the white man's hands and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of non-white human beings" (X and Haley, 241–42). When asked about who taught him the Bible, X openly defies influence from a Baptist upbringing, stating instead that

I learned it after becoming a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. I didn't learn anything from my father other than how to suffer peacefully and love my enemy, and forgive those who misuse me. But it was after becoming a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He teaches us to read everything, to read Christian literature, Buddhist literature, Jewish literature, we read everything – we're supposed to keep an opened mind and weigh everything. (DeCaro Jr. 1998, 156)

X's exegesis typically consisted of a mixture of appeals to a historiographical critique of a "White" ideologies and allegorical dissemination of NOI-theology. Scripture is not said to be a mysterious text. "Christian scripture" is illuminated with an appeal to scholarly consensus, with an emphatic notion of "history." The Bible is open to public scrutiny, in the shape of scientific inquiry, to those with an open mind. At the same time, in "The Black Revolution," X argued that "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that the symbolic stories in all religious scriptures paint a prophetic picture of today," highlighting the importance of NOI theology for correct biblical knowledge.

In "God's Judgement over White America," the problem of biblical exegesis is stated in the following manner: "Before your pride causes you to harden

your heart and further close your ears, and before your ignorance provokes laughter, search the Christian Scriptures.” X argues that correct interpretation of “Scripture” is never a purely sectarian matter. Yet X can be more antagonistic toward the Bible and appeals to the secret teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

6 Concluding Discussion

The study highlights the rhetorical function of the Bible in X’s oratory, demonstrating how biblical references and the signifier “scripture” were used to create points of intensity and to support both NOI theology and other messages. A qualitative content analysis was used to examine the function of a “biblical rhetoric,” and, from a reception criticism perspective, it has been argued that the concept of “scripture” established key features of X’s rhetoric by drawing attention to themes of history and prophecy. Furthermore, X and the NOI positioned themselves as providing a corrective interpretation of the Christian Bible (specifically the KJV), which they viewed as corrupted in its current form and poorly interpreted. An allegorical approach to the Bible was essential for disseminating theological clarity. In his oratory before the decisive break with NOI, X used the Christian Bible to create a sense of temporality, linking past events with present and future prophecies. This approach reinforced the idea that the struggles of Black people were part of a larger, divinely ordained narrative. X’s biblical rhetoric often incorporated apocalyptic themes and popular biblical figures (e.g., Abraham, Yacub/Jacob, Moses, Noah, Lot, Daniel, Elijah, Jesus, and even Paul), drawing material from the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Malachi, Micah, the Gospels, and, finally, Revelation. He used themes and passages to frame contemporary events as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, emphasizing the urgency and significance of the Black Muslim movement.

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Imaginal Islam in Theosophical and Anthroposophical Perspective

Olav Hammer

1 The Concept of Imaginal Islam

Within the broader field of Islamic studies, considerable attention has been devoted to understanding the ways Islam is presented by outsiders, i.e., people who do not identify as Muslims.¹ The recipient of this Festschrift has made significant contributions to this subfield, studying the frequently very negative images and stereotypes produced by such non-Muslims (e.g., Otterbeck & Bevelander 2006, 2012; Otterbeck 2018). Narratives about Islam crafted by non-Muslims often reproduce and elaborate upon a set of historically persistent tropes that together form what may be termed imaginal Islam.² The ideological stance of particular writers – whether Christian, nationalist, perennialist, or otherwise – typically shapes these portrayals in decisive ways. In other words, imaginal Islam addresses issues relevant within the historical and social context of those who produce these portrayals, rather than aiming to provide factual information.

This chapter presents four case studies illustrating how proponents of a small set of non-hegemonic, post-Christian religions – those within the broader Theosophical family – constructed their own versions of what they imagined Islam to be. As with other forms of imaginal Islam, the authors discussed here used their interpretations to advance a particular discourse about the place of their own movement within its broader social context. As will become apparent, they achieved this by constructing remarkably diverse views on the nature

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- 1 To be precise, non-Muslim outsiders who study Islam in their role as academics and adopt a stance of methodological agnosticism fall outside the boundaries of the present discussion (see Otterbeck 2021).
 - 2 For an account of how these tropes are deployed in discourse about Islam, the reader is referred to works such as Waardenburg 1961; Blanks & Frassetto 1999; Reeves 2003; Dimmock 2013. The now classic (and contested) work on the broader topic of the Western imagination of “the Orient” is Said 1978.

of Islam, which not only promote the core teachings of their respective traditions but also reflect specific historical circumstances.

To set the stage, the following section briefly introduces and contextualizes this family of traditions and examines the writings of the founding figure of Theosophy, Helena Blavatsky. The case study that follows concerns the descriptions of Islam found in the writings and lectures of the Austrian polymath Rudolf Steiner, who spent ten years as a prominent figure within the Theosophical Society before founding his own breakaway organization, the Anthroposophical Society. A subsequent section briefly considers how Annie Besant and Wilhelm Maas, two later writers within the Theosophical and Anthroposophical movements, drew upon the texts of these seminal figures to construct their own, strikingly different views of Islam. A brief conclusion summarizes the general observations made in the case studies.

2 The Theosophical Family of Religions

In the late nineteenth century, a growing number of people in the West began seeking religious alternatives outside the established churches. The arguably most successful religious movement to emerge at this time was Theosophy, created by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), a charismatic figure who claimed to be in contact with a group of highly evolved spiritual entities, the Masters, who imparted profound insights into hidden realities. In her books and articles, Blavatsky presented Theosophy as a modern expression of these insights, which she claimed were also reflected across the world's major religions.³ According to Blavatsky, while some religious traditions, such as Buddhism, were more closely aligned with this primordial truth, others, particularly Christianity, had diverged significantly over time. Islam was also incorporated into this Theosophical interpretation of religious history, albeit in a minor role.

In her first book, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky presented various religions in value-laden terms that reflect their perceived proximity to the spiritual core she claimed to unveil. In the preface, readers are told that the timeless wisdom tradition she sought to present is reflected in the dialogues of Plato, other pre-Christian philosophies from classical antiquity, and the works of a range of sages from ancient India. The established churches, by contrast, are characterized as “tottering ruins” (Blavatsky 1877, vol. I, p. x). Numerous passages

3 Hammer 2024, presents Blavatsky's perspectives on the history of religions.

throughout this massive work go on to reinforce this dichotomy by framing various aspects of ancient Egyptian religion, Greek religion, Gnosticism, and the religions of India in generally positive terms, while disparaging Christianity. Notably, given the purported universality of the wisdom tradition presented by the Masters, Islam is afforded only cursory attention.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time when the study of religion was emerging as an academic field, and Blavatsky drew liberally from other writers outside academia who proposed speculative ideas regarding the origin and development of religion. One such theory, proposed by the British Freemason Hargrave Jennings (1817–1890), suggested that religion had emerged from a primeval worship of the genitalia. Blavatsky discusses Jennings's theories in various passages in her works, and in one of the very few remarks in *Isis Unveiled* devoted to any aspect of Islam, she echoes his theories and asserts that minarets are phallic symbols (Blavatsky 1877, vol. II, p. 5).

What drew her attention more than any other aspect of Islam was the rituals of the dervishes and marabouts. She describes dervishes as “whirling charm-ers” and “Mahometan devotee[s].” She claims that these dervishes, although they may resemble Hindu ascetics, were far less spiritually evolved, dismissing them as simple “mesmerizers,” who “will never reach beyond [a] second class of occult manifestations” (Blavatsky 1877, vol. I, pp. xxviii–xxix). While her dervishes might be recognized as members of some generic Sufi brotherhood, her understanding of the term marabout is more idiosyncratic, conflating the concept of a hajji and a Sufi saint. She explains in the preface to her work that the term (which she here spells marabut) refers to a “Mahometan pilgrim who has been to Mekka” and who is reputed to perform miracles (Blavatsky 1877, vol. I, p. xxxvi).

Her focus on these two categories serves a rhetorical purpose in her polemics against skeptically inclined scientists, whose failings she attributes to their materialism. Blavatsky claims that her own views were based on a more inclusive approach to knowledge – a true science capable of encompassing hidden dimensions of existence that mainstream scientists overlooked. Blavatsky mentions her own record of traveling to distant locations and claims to be a first-hand witness to “the proceedings and modus operandi of the howling and dancing dervishes” and to have “held friendly communications with the marabouts of European and Asiatic Turkey” (Blavatsky 1877, vol. I, p. 43; cf. also pp. 221–3). She suggests that those who represent materialistic science have done neither and are, therefore, ignorant and biased. Occultists like herself, she asserts, are able to explain what happens in the ritual gatherings she purports to have observed. The excitement created by their collective movements and

the accompanying music, she writes, causes the bodies of the participants to “throw off electro-magnetic emanations, which, when sufficiently intense, can throw the whole circumambient atmosphere into perturbation,” ultimately creating “astral conditions that favor psychological and physical phenomena” (Blavatsky 1877, vol. I, p. 498). *Isis Unveiled* is permeated by an insistent polemic against mainstream science and against the materialism of her time, and providing an account of the practices of “dervishes” and “marabouts” fulfils that purpose. How those who practice these rituals might understand them is, in a sense, irrelevant and is not even hinted at in her text.

Her later two-volume magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), also has very little to say about Islam. The index to this work contains only two entries for Islam itself, alongside a few very brief mentions of the Qur’an (three instances), Muhammad (two references), and Sufism (four references). Various terms that were commonly used in Blavatsky’s time to refer to Muslims, such as “Mohammedans” and “Mussulmans,” appear only a handful of times in total. The depiction of Islam that emerges from these scattered passages in *The Secret Doctrine* is decidedly unflattering, even compared to her treatment in *Isis Unveiled*. Blavatsky reiterates her earlier claim that minarets are phallic (Blavatsky 1888, vol. II, p. 85). Muslims are said to share with Christians the erroneous belief in Satan and demons (Blavatsky, 1888, vol. II, p. 232). Their influence on India is described as “lethal” (Blavatsky 1888, vol. II, p. 411n), and the seclusion of Indian women is blamed on them, as women in Vedic times were supposedly “as free as men” (Blavatsky 1888, vol. I, p. 382). Blavatsky also blames the loss of much ancient knowledge on the “Mahomedans,” who she claimed had burned as many ancient texts as “they could lay their sacrilegious hands on” (Blavatsky 1888, vol. II, p. 763n). Although disproving the theories of materialistic science remains a major concern in *The Secret Doctrine*, the “electro-magnetic emanations” of the dervishes mentioned in *Isis Unveiled* are conspicuously absent.

Any explanation for the shift in Blavatsky’s construction of imaginal Islam, from a cursory yet mildly positive interest to an even briefer and decidedly dismissive approach, remains speculative, but one can perhaps see it as part of a broader reorientation. India is already presented in her early work as the cradle of all civilization (Blavatsky 1877, vol. II: 30). Yet she nevertheless sought to recover much of the purported ancient wisdom tradition from non-hegemonic Western religious traditions. *The Secret Doctrine* was written after Blavatsky had moved to India, and in her later work, there is a more sustained insistence that the religions of India had remained closer to the primeval truth. Attacking Islam, in this perspective, may simply have been a more compelling aim than referring to Islamic practices as a way to criticize materialist science.

3 Imaginal Islam in the Work of Rudolf Steiner

The Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) joined the Theosophical Society in 1902.⁴ Over the course of several productive years, he rose through the ranks of the organization and became the leader of its German section, writing books and articles and lecturing extensively. He left the Theosophical Society in 1912, after several years of escalating conflicts with the group's international leadership, and established his own movement, the Anthroposophical Society. Steiner continued to deliver thousands of lectures up until shortly before his death in 1925, covering an extensive range of topics, including the history of humankind and that of various religious traditions.⁵ According to Steiner, the details he presented were derived from a form of clairvoyant insight that revealed realities to him that were normally hidden from human perception.

Steiner's view of history, including the history of religions, is built upon an evolutionistic framework in which successive races or stages, further divided into cultural epochs, mark the spiritual progress of humanity. However, not all groups ascend this evolutionary path at the same pace. Steiner often attributes differences in evolutionary level to the essential qualities of various races and to the "folk soul" of different ethnic groups in a way that aligns with the *völkisch* ideology of his time, which emphasized the spiritual distinctiveness of peoples based on their attributed ethnic and racial identity.⁶ He sees Islam, for example, as an expression of the essential characteristics of the Arabs, for which he coins the neologism *Arabismus*, a nearly untranslatable term that can perhaps be rendered as "the Arabic spirit."⁷ Though Steiner considers Islam a quintessential reflection of the Arabic spirit, he also attempts to account for the fact that there were Arabic peoples prior to the emergence of Islam. According to him, the appearance of Islam among the Arabs at a specific time was the result

4 For Steiner's biography, see Zander 2011.

5 This material has been compiled into a vast corpus, the *Gesamtausgabe*, or Collected Works, usually abbreviated GA followed by the volume number. This convention is adopted herein as well when referring to Steiner's works. Many of these volumes have been revised and reprinted several times. The GA number and the month and year when the lecture in question was held are provided whenever these volumes are referred to, since the year of publication of the specific edition consulted here provides very little information about the place of the text in Steiner's work as a whole.

6 The details of Steiner's understanding of humanity as comprised of a hierarchy of distinct races and peoples can be found in Zander 2001 and especially Martins 2012.

7 The discussion of imaginal Islam in the works of Steiner and his followers is based upon sections in Hammer 2008, that have been thoroughly revised for the present chapter.

of spiritual forces discernible only to those with highly developed clairvoyant abilities.

In Steiner's view, human evolution in bygone days involved a gradual shift from an intuitive perception of spiritual realities to an increasing reliance on intellectual and logical thought. This transition, which took place when our distant ancestors lived on Atlantis and was largely completed by the end of the Atlantean stage, came at a cost: logical thinking, in Steiner's view, tends to become mechanical and focused solely on external appearances. In a lecture held in Stuttgart in August 1908, he describes the Arabic spirit as emblematic of this dry, formalistic mentality.⁸ It is, he claims, only able to grasp what is external, material, and dead. Mosques, he told his audience, are mere external forms from which "the spirit has in a sense been extracted" (*der Geist sozusagen herausgezogen ist*). Steiner contends that the encounter between the Arabic spirit and a very different European mode of thinking, which was shaped by Christian impulses, marked the beginning of modern science. For Steiner, this convergence of two distinct spiritual forces explains the ambivalent nature of the scientific revolution. He argues that Copernicus, who vaguely perceived truths that his soul remembered from an earlier incarnation in Egypt, placed the Sun at the center of the planetary system. Under the unfortunate influence of the Arabic spiritual essence, he transformed a key spiritual insight into a mechanistic view of the solar system. Steiner returned to the theme of Arabic formalism ten years later, in a lecture held in Dornach in January 1918, but now identified Islam as somehow not only encompassing dry and mechanical thought but also its opposite.⁹ The double nature of what he considers to be "the Arabic mentality" (*die arabische Denkweise*) is, according to Steiner, evident both in the abstract and "sophistic" (*spitzfindig*) quality of their thinking, but also in their "luxuriant imagination" (*wohlhlustige Phantasieentwicklung*). Islamic art, he suggests, exemplifies the abstract tendency, while an imaginative excess has supposedly resulted in Islamic beliefs about the afterlife.

In one of his numerous historiographic models, Steiner presents various religions as effects in empirical history produced by the activities of spiritual beings associated with the heavenly bodies. In a lecture held in Berlin in March 1911, Steiner associates Christianity with the Sun and links Judaism to the Moon.¹⁰ Steiner explains that while the Sun emits light and represents a direct revelation, the Moon merely reflects sunlight and hence represents an

8 This paragraph summarizes Steiner's discussion in lecture 11 of the collection *Welt, Erde und Mensch*, GA 105.

9 Published as lecture 15 in *Mysterienwahrheiten und Weihnachtsimpulse*, GA 180.

10 *Exkurse in das Gebiet des Markus-Evangeliums*, GA 124, lect. 9.

indirect revelation. Christianity is thus presented as a religion that has reached a higher evolutionary stage; however, Steiner adds that earlier, and hence lower, stages can have echoes in later epochs. Islam is precisely that: a resurgence of a lunar religious impulse that spread over a vast area without the benefit of being influenced by the Christ impulse. The latter term is crucial to understanding the place of Islam in Steiner's hierarchy of religions. Human development is, in his view, influenced by two spiritual forces: Ahrimanic forces are associated with mechanistic and intellectual tendencies, while Luciferian forces are mystical, hazy, and grandiose.¹¹ The Christ impulse is an essential mediator between the two, a force that can help humanity take a middle path between these extremes and continue on its evolutionary path.

A longer mythic-historic narrative about the Arabic spiritual essence, its expression in Islam, and what Steiner presents as the nefarious spiritual effects of that religion, can be pieced together from passages in two lectures he delivered in Dornach in October 1918.¹² Steiner argues that Ahrimanic and Luciferian forces converged in 666 CE, a date he arrives at through a set of symbolic calculations. He considers 333 CE the midpoint of the Graeco-Roman cultural epoch (747 BCE to 1413 CE), a period of history he claims is significant because it marks the era of Christ's birth. Since Christ was born 333 years before the midpoint, a spiritually momentous event was, for reasons of symmetry, "scheduled" to occur 333 years after the midpoint, in 666 CE. When pre-Christian philosophy was suppressed and the last pagan academy was closed by Emperor Justinian in 529 CE, its members established a new academy in Gondishapur, Persia. Steiner speculates that the academy could have provided humanity with profound spiritual insights once the momentous year 666 arrived, but concludes that the rise of Islam thwarted this potential spiritual advance.

Steiner's most detailed treatment of Islam and "the Arabic spirit" is found in two lectures delivered in Dornach in March 1924.¹³ Here, he takes a more positive tone, telling his audience that there was a golden age of Islamic learning at a time when Europe was experiencing a cultural nadir. The reign of Harun al-Rashid (768–809) is singled out as a particularly significant period in Islamic intellectual culture. Nevertheless, he still characterizes the Arabic impulse in

11 Cf. Zander 2007, 833–5, for a presentation of how these two principles gradually emerged in Steiner's lectures and what they represent in his cosmology.

12 These were published as lectures 14 and 15 in *Die Polarität von Dauer und Entwicklung im Menschenleben*, GA 184.

13 *Esoterische Betrachtungen karmischer Zusammenhänge* vol. 1, GA 235, lectures 8 and 10; of the two, the latter provides by far the most detailed discussion of "Arabism" and Islam.

negative terms as warlike and as one that decayed within the space of a few centuries as an unfortunate effect of its encounter with yet another spiritual essence, that of the Turkish people. The Arabic impulse, however, did not disappear; it merely entered a period of hibernation in a spiritual domain where this spiritual essence remained isolated from any contact with the unfolding effects of the Christ impulse. Steiner appears to elaborate on the comment he made many years earlier about the materialism of Copernicus' heliocentric cosmology, attributing key events in Western intellectual history from the early modern era up to his own recent past to the effects of a reemerging Arabic spiritual impulse. Certain Muslim intellectuals and leaders who were steeped in a culture imbued with that particular spirit were reincarnated after a hiatus of many centuries. Harun al-Rashid, for example, returned to Earth as Francis Bacon, the famous advocate of the experimental method. Darwin, whose theory of evolution through natural selection in Steiner's time had become a symbol of the widening chasm between materialistic science and spiritually oriented worldviews, had in an earlier life been Tariq, the Muslim conqueror of Spain. Other people who had lived during the flourishing of "Arabism," but who are not identified by name in Steiner's lecture, returned as the philosopher and anti-clerical writer Baruch Spinoza and the astronomer and advocate of mechanistic determinism Pierre-Simon Laplace. In other words, modern secular science and philosophy were, according to Steiner, ultimately caused by the same impulse that many centuries earlier had resulted in the rise of Islam.

Steiner's portrayal of Islam stands at the intersection of several key elements of his worldview. Three overarching themes that shape his understanding of religious history in general find expression in his depiction of Islam as an arid and formalistic manifestation of the Arabic essence: the evolutionist and racial-völkisch ideas characteristic of his time, his opposition to the perceived materialism of modernity, and his insistence throughout many of his books and lectures that Christianity, as understood through his own clairvoyant perception, rather than a universal tradition found at the core of all religions but best preserved in India, as the Theosophists claimed, was the spiritual path most suited to the present age.

4 Imaginal Islam in a New Key

In their own ways, Blavatsky and Steiner created versions of imaginal Islam that attribute few redeeming qualities to that tradition. However, some of their successors drew on the narrative motifs found in the texts of these founding figures to create markedly different and more favorable images of Islam.

After a series of conflicts following Blavatsky's death on May 8, 1891, the Theosophical Society was split into two main branches. One branch was led by Annie Besant (1847–1933), a former journalist with socialist leanings.¹⁴ In a lecture titled *Beauties of Islam*, held in 1910, Besant discusses the Islamic tradition in a manner that diverges significantly from the critical tone of her predecessor. Nonetheless, her approach is constructed through a creative use of tropes present in Blavatsky's works, particularly the concept of the fundamental unity of all major religions, the idea that the outer or "exoteric" forms of various religions differ from the core message they purportedly convey, and the call to overcome the materialism of the present age. In her lecture, Besant positions Theosophy as the defender of all religions against modern materialism.¹⁵ She characterizes Islam as "one of the great exponents of Divine Wisdom" and extols "the greatness of its Prophets and the nobility of [Muhammad's] teachings to the world" (Besant 1932, 6). For Besant, the true essence of Islam is embodied in the life of Muhammad, which she portrays as "so simple, so heroic, and so noble in its outlines" (Besant 1932, 9). According to her, any faults critics attribute to Islam are actually the failings of Muslims who have not lived up to the Prophet's lofty ideals. Specifically, she refutes critiques regarding the status of women in Islam and the military expansion of the Islamic realm in the seventh and eighth centuries CE as misguided.

The parts of Besant's text that deal with later historical developments highlight the Islamic world's achievements in the pursuit of learning during what was, for Europe, a period of decline in the early Middle Ages. While Theosophy claims to defend all religions, Besant presents Christianity as a notable exception, portraying it in her lecture as the negative counterpart of Islam. She argues that the Neoplatonic heritage of late antiquity was despised and suppressed by medieval Christians but preserved within Islamic intellectual circles. According to Besant, medieval Christians were hostile to science, viewing it as heretical due to its transmission through Muslim intermediaries (Besant 1912, 35). Philosophy, she claims, reached new heights in the Islamic and Indian worlds, not in Christendom. Besant concludes that Hindus and Muslims represent "rays in the Sun of Truth" (Besant 1932, 55).

In *Beauties of Islam*, Besant quotes passages from the Qur'an and refers to incidents in Muhammad's life as presented in traditional Islamic biographies, though the printed version of the lecture – as is characteristic of the oral presentation genre – does not provide precise source references. Like Blavatsky, Besant adopts a critical stance toward mainstream Christianity, viewing it

14 For details regarding these events, see Wessinger 2013.

15 This lecture was published in 1912 as Adyar Popular Lectures no. 20 and reprinted as a booklet in 1932, which is the edition cited here.

unfavorably in comparison to other religious traditions. Her reference to Neoplatonism, for instance, reflects the importance of this philosophical current in the broader esoteric tradition to which Theosophy belongs. Besant's apologetic treatment of Islam and her hagiographic portrayal of Muhammad should be understood in the context of her residence in India at the time of her lecture. Besant was actively engaged in the movement to end colonial rule in a country with a large Muslim population. The impassioned appeals for mutual understanding among India's religious communities that conclude her lecture also make sense within this particular context. In fact, two other lectures by Besant, one undated and one delivered in 1903, published together in 1932 as *The Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, present Islam in a similarly ecumenical spirit and call for religious dialogue without referring to the Theosophical ideas that are so prominent in *Beauties of Islam*.

Followers of Steiner are confronted with a challenge similar to that of Blavatsky's successors. Steiner's imaginal Islam is characterized by his belief that religions can be arranged hierarchically and that, with the possible exception of a brief period during the early Middle Ages, Islam is a religion on a much lower evolutionary level than Christianity. Steiner's imaginal Islam is also infused with the racial and ethnic theories of the early twentieth century, and later Anthroposophical writers have had to grapple with some of the more disturbing assumptions underpinning his statements about the spiritual essences of various peoples. For several decades after Steiner created his version of imaginal Islam, Anthroposophical writers continued to treat Islam as a historically remote religion that had played a largely negative role in the spiritual evolution of humankind many centuries ago. However, by the late twentieth century, Anthroposophical authors began to present Islam as a living tradition practiced in an increasingly globalized world, one that could not simply be dismissed as the outcome of a mode of thought characterized by dry and empty formalism inherent in the Arabic people. Steiner's views on the essential characteristics and spiritual roots of various religions have nevertheless not been entirely abandoned. While recent Anthroposophical discussions of Islam include information from mainstream historical accounts, these details tend to be filtered and interpreted through a Steinerian lens.

Wilhelm Maas (1937–2012), who engaged with Islam in several works from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, exemplifies this attempt to present a more positive picture of Islamic tradition. In his 1991 book, *Arabismus, Islam, Christentum*, Maas reiterates a range of Steinerian concepts, from the "lunar" character of Islam to the supposedly essential qualities of the Arab people, but he seeks to soften the more offensive aspects of Steiner's framework. For example, Maas asserts that the term *Arabismus*, despite its obvious etymological roots, refers not to a particular geographical, national,

racial, or ethnic category but to a more general mode of thought and a historical trend (Maas 1991, 167). Maas's understanding of Islam relies largely on Islamic sources rather than on an exclusive dependence on Steiner's speeches. However, his work remains thoroughly Anthroposophical, as evidenced by his attempt to demonstrate a profound concordance between Islam and various Anthroposophical concepts.

Ultimately, Maas's presentation of Islam reflects a conviction shared by others within the Theosophical and Anthroposophical traditions: that religious understanding has different levels, and that a person who has progressed further along the spiritual path can access a deeper truth within each tradition that ordinary believers can be completely ignorant of. In this view, the insight of a single spiritually advanced individual outweighs the accumulated beliefs and practices of the vast majority of adherents. Thus, according to Maas, it is only true on an "exoteric" or superficial level that a person who adopts Islamic beliefs and practices is a Muslim. Rooted in the fundamental Anthroposophical notion that spiritual evolution is a path leading toward an ultimate goal of clairvoyant insight, Maas defines a "true Muslim" as a person who has fully developed suprasensible organs of perception (Maas 1991, 11). Although this idea is undoubtedly Steinerian, Maas attributes it to the thirteenth-century Sufi 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnani.

Blavatsky's personal sympathies lay with the ancient religious heritage of India, not with the later arrival of Islam to the subcontinent. Steiner's career unfolded in a time and place where opportunities to interact with people who self-identified as Muslims would have been very limited. By contrast, the writings of Besant and Maas, each in their own way, reflect the fact that they lived in a context where Muslims constituted significant minorities. The remarkable shift in attitude toward Islam, from outright dismissal to a far more favorable view, can no doubt be attributed to this crucial difference. At the same time, their allegiance to ideological forebears led them to construct positive versions of an imaginal Islam that reflected Theosophical and Anthroposophical concerns, respectively.

5 Conclusion

Three salient points emerge from this overview of imaginal Islam in Theosophical and Anthroposophical texts. First is the dominance of normative evaluation over factual description. A reader encountering Blavatsky's works or Steiner's lectures with no prior knowledge of Islam would not learn much about Islamic beliefs or practices, as their pronouncements only refer minimally to elements of Islamic creed and ritual. Second, for most authors within

this family of movements, writing about Islam primarily serves as a means to address perceived problems within their own social and historical context. Blavatsky's interest in *Isis Unveiled* in certain Muslim ritual practices, for instance, derives from their potential as rhetorical weapons against the materialism of mainstream science. Similarly, Steiner's interpretation of Islam is part of a broader historical schema that elevates his version of the Christian tradition above all other religions. Finally, the instrumental use of Islam as a vehicle for ideological messaging allows for widely divergent portrayals. Besant's glowing assessment of Islam as a reflection of divine wisdom and Steiner's dismissal of Islam as dry and "lunar" could hardly be more different. Yet, both make sense if read as part of the overarching ideological projects of each author.

As noted in the introduction, the perspectives that religiously or ideologically motivated authors bring to their work often play a defining role in their portrayals of Islam, revealing more about the authors' personal concerns and agendas than they do about the lived realities and beliefs of Muslim communities. The imaginal Islam presented in Theosophical and Anthroposophical texts aligns with this pattern: it functions less as a window into Islamic thought and practice than as a mirror reflecting the specific priorities and preconceptions of each particular writer and, more generally, of the Theosophical and Anthroposophical ideological presuppositions that each author treated as the very bedrock of their construction of Islam.

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Studying Islam through a Broken Lens: the Use of Gnosticism as an Analytic Tool at the Dawn of Islamic Studies

Paul Linjamaa

The study of Islam in the so-called West has a long history. Initially, it was closely tied to colonial pursuits and explorations of the “new world,” and later became associated with the birth of religious studies as an academic discipline. The study of religion at European universities before the nineteenth century was often synonymous with theology (i.e., Christian theology). It is only with the advent of academic study of foreign cultures and religions – viewed as worth studying and understanding in their own right, rather than merely for what they could tell us about ourselves and “our” own religion (read Christianity) – that Religious Studies emerged as a distinct discipline. By the end of the nineteenth century, several European and American universities had established independent Chairs devoted to Islam, a subject primarily approached through philological, ethnographic, or historical-critical methods (Endress 1994, 5–18; Nanji 1997). Before the creation of specific Chairs devoted to the study of Islam, Islamic Studies could be said to have been part of the larger field of Orientalism, a broad subject area dealing with everything Eastern, particularly languages and texts. As has been thoroughly problematized since the inception of postmodernity, there were some inherent problems with the way Orientalists approached their subjects. This chapter explores one of these inherent problems: the way Islam was approached, presented, and analyzed in light of the concept of “Gnosticism,” a perspective that has lingered within parts of Islamic Studies in the West.

1 An Overview of the Islam-Gnosticism Connection in Islamic Studies

The association between Islam and Gnosticism goes far back in European scholarly pursuits. Several early European experts on Islam and the Arabic language were also interested in Gnosticism, with some even identifying as “Gnostics” at one point in their lives (see further below). One influential early figure in

the study of “the Orient” was the Austrian diplomat and historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856). von Hammer-Purgstall was the founder and publisher of the journal *Fundgruben des Orients* (between 1809 and 1818), one of the first to be devoted to exploring Islamic literature, religion, and oriental languages. In the journal’s final issue from 1818, von Hammer-Purgstall wrote a long article about the background of some strange-looking artifacts and inscriptions found in a property previously belonging to the Knights Templar in the Middle Ages. The inscriptions were mostly in Arabic, but the iconography, he argued, was of Ophite origin. The term “Ophite” refers to a “Gnostic” group originating in antiquity, who interpreted the Genesis story allegorically and venerated the Serpent as a bringer of knowledge and salvation (Rasimus 2009). Early Christian heresiologists described the Ophites (and at times “Gnostics” in general) as a dangerous sect that engaged in horrific rites, including sex orgies and child sacrifice.¹ In the article, von Hammer-Purgstall argues that the Knights Templars’ rites had an Ophite origin and that, since the artifacts found in the former Templar residence were inscribed in Arabic, the Templars must have been introduced to Ophite rites by Muslims. Even though von Hammer-Purgstall does not expand on any details regarding the presumed connection between Ophite Gnostics and Islam, this article can be said to represent the start of what would become a continuous comparison and search for a historical connection between Gnosticism and Islam.

In 1877, the French Orientalist and mystic Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau (1846–1923) argued that the mythic figure Khidr in Islamic tradition had Gnostic roots. Khidr is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an but is often interpreted as appearing in Sura 18:60–82 as the god-fearing man who provides knowledge to those he deems fit to receive it (chiefly, Musa/Moses) (Netton 2013, 347–348). Khidr has at times been depicted as a prophet or an angel, and Clermont-Ganneau argued that he was an aspect of earlier mythical figures in Jewish, Christian, and “Gnostic” lore, such as the prophet Elijah, Samael, and St. George. Another French Arabist and Orientalist, Edgar Blochet (1870–1937), developed this thesis in the article “Études sur le Gnosticisme musulman” and argued that Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic myths – indeed Hellenistic myths, too – about angels and prophets slaying dragons and providing humans with wisdom, were inspired by earlier myths of the prophetic figure Tahmouras, the third Shah of the mythic Pishdadian dynasty of Iran, an important character in Pahlavi (Middle Persian) literature (Blochet 1908–09,

1 The most famous description of these rites is found in *Panarion* 1.26 by Epiphanius. For a description of the context of this text’s composition, see Linjamaa 2016, 316–334.

717–756). Blochet claimed that these Iranian stories were the origins of much Gnostic and some Islamic mythmaking.

It was not just Qur'anic mythology that, according to this way of thinking, drew on Gnostic ideas. The year 1877 also saw the publication of an article by the Hungarian Orientalist Ignác Goldziher (1850–1921), arguing that Neo-Platonic and Gnostic traditions had found their way into the Hadith (Goldziher 1909). The Hadith and Sirah literature contain sayings that describe Muhammad's soul as having existed before he was born, a theological trope Goldziher and other Orientalists, like Henri Lammens (1862–1937) (Lammens 2000, 169–187, c.171), thought to have derived from Gnostic and Neo-Platonic thought (Goldziher 1909, 317–344). Early Sufi scholars, like Sahl al-Tustari, interpreted Qur'anic verses describing God as having created the human soul before the body as supporting the tradition that Muhammad's soul was pre-existent and identified with the light of God (Nūr), the cold light of the Moon, associated with knowledge (Dammen McAuliffe 2003, 45). Goldziher further argued that the Shia veneration of prophets/imams derived from traditions that described God's envoys as different manifestations of the same prophetic power that took form in creation at different points in time, ideas ultimately springing from Gnostic ideas regarding the “redeemed redeemer,” a heavenly figure who steps down in materiality at different times to save people from the shackles of the world (Goldziher 1909, 317–344). Shia Islam in general is overrepresented in the scholarship that associates Gnosticism with Islam, but from around the 1930s onward, there was a virtual explosion of studies on this topic.

The mid-twentieth century saw several prominent scholars like Rudolf Strothmann (1877–1960) (Strothmann 1943), Louis Massignon (1883–1962) (Massignon 1938, 514–522), and later Henry Corbin (1903–1978), Geo Widengren (1907–1996),² and Heinz Halm (b. 1943) (Halm 1982) publish works on Shia Islam and Gnosticism. The reasons for this are likely a combination of the above-mentioned similarities between Shia doctrines about the coming Imams and the late-antique ideas regarding a redeemer figure who steps down several times through history, as well as a growing interest in Gnosticism in European culture and academia more broadly. Gnosticism was a popular topic discussed at the annual Eranos conference, a famous summit gathering many of the leading intellectuals and academics of the mid-twentieth century. At the suggestion of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), the Eranos meetings were initiated and hosted by the Swiss theosophist Olga

2 Widengren 1965. For a new study on the impact of Widengren, see Larsson 2022, esp. Thomassen's chapter on Gnosis and Widengren in Larsson 2022, 275–290.

Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962) to provide an opportunity for the greatest minds of the time to “explore the spirit” and create a context where knowledge of the East and the West could meet.³ Gnosticism was a topic of particular interest, treated as an important instrument with which one could tie Western religious traditions and Eastern wisdom to explore the universal religious sentiment. Fröbe-Kapteyn encouraged speakers at the conference to explore their specific topic of expertise in religion, Islam included, through the lens of the potentially bridging nature of Gnosticism (Shonkoff 2021, 505–523; Lazier 2008).

In three meetings (1951, 1954, and 1956), Henri Corbin explored what he and many others thought was a specific form of “Gnosis” religion (Corbin 1983). Corbin was aware that there was little historical support for attaching the different Gnostic groups in the Mediterranean basin of the first centuries AD to Islam or any other “Eastern” religion. Regarding the relation between Ismailis and Gnosticism, he stated that “there must have existed certain conditions that would have permitted a dialogue” (Corbin 1983, 151). But then, in the very next sentence, he determines that “Whether or not that occurred, no trace of it has remained” (Corbin 1983, 151). Thus, he instead implemented a separation of Gnosis from Gnosticism. The latter term referred to the religious and mythological structures that were tied to the historical and cultural context of late antique Hellenism. Gnosis, on the other hand, was framed as something universal, the pursuit of the transformative potential of knowledge – attached to salvation, redemption, and spiritual enlightenment. Gnosis was not restricted to a historical period. In Ismaili tradition, Corbin wrote, the Gnosis-religion had come to its fruition, a version of Islam that provided detailed distinctions between different kinds of knowledge, proving that Gnosis did not – as some of Corbin’s contemporaries claimed – contrast with “belief.” In Islamic thought, Corbin explained, one can find distinctions made between several different kinds of knowledge, for example “intellective knowledge (‘aql),” “knowledge of traditional ideas which are objects of faith (naql),” and “knowledge as inner vision, intuitive revelation (kashf)” (Corbin 1980, 5–10). It was the latter “kashf,” which most clearly corresponded to Gnosis, a redemptive knowledge passed down through the prophets. Similar claims have been made regarding equivalent terms like “ma’rifa,” an experienced knowledge, and “ilm,” knowledge gained through learning or training (Corbin 1997; Nguyen 2016: 325–343).

For understandable reasons, mainly the delimited scope of the short study pursued here – but more importantly, the fact that I am not a scholar of Islamic theology or philosophy – I am unable to here explore the details of these

3 <https://www.eranosfoundation.org/page.php?page=4&pagename=history> Accessed 2024-12-09.

epistemological and soteriological concepts and their possible relation to earlier Mediterranean equivalents. However, what is striking to note in the short overview above is the pursuit of the Islam-Gnosticism connection, despite the lack of a “smoking gun.” This is not to say that it is inconceivable that there has been some exchange,⁴ simply that there was no such evidence that supported such connections. This deficiency was not unknown to the experts in Islam mentioned above, such as Corbin, but they still pursued the comparison. So, what were the reasons – apart from theological similarities – that so many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of Islam pursued a “Gnosticism connection”? The reasons, I argue, are to be found in the history of the term Gnosticism.

2 The History of an Analytically Dubious Concept

“Gnosticism” is a term historically and contextually laden with polemical implications. It was first introduced in the context of late seventeenth-century intra-Christian debate between Catholics and Protestants. Cambridge philosopher Henry More, the first to use the term, wrote in 1669 that Catholicism was comparable to “ancient Gnosticism,” misrepresented true Christianity and turned it into polytheism (Layton 1995, 334–350; King 2003). More referred here to the many different groups and ideas that were condemned by early proto-orthodox writers – like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius – by labeling them as “Gnostic.” These early Christian proto-orthodox writers claimed that heretical Christians in their vicinities had declared themselves to be “Knowers” (i.e., Gnostics) but were, in fact, more like misguided philosophers because they – unlike true Christ-followers – made a *choice* (ἄρσεις/*haire-sis*) to follow the worldly wisdom of some particular human (like Valentinus, Ptolemaios, Carpocrates or Basilides, etc.) rather than the divine word of God. Some of these “Gnostics” also entertained the idea that creation was not instigated by God, but a lower divinity termed the Craftsman (δημιουργός/*demiurgos*). Thus, in intra-Christian debates of the second to fourth centuries, the term “Gnostic” is constructed and made to represent certain erroneous Christian

4 In fact, Mushegh Asatryan and Dylan Burns have argued there exists new evidence (in the form of recently discovered Ghulāt texts) suggesting that some forms of early Shiite groups bear too striking similarities with some Gnostic traditions to be a coincidence. This work suggests that some contact between Sethians and early Islamic thinkers in a late ancient Syro-Mesopotamian milieu is likely. This research must be considered preliminary, although it is very promising. See Asatryan & Burns 2016, 55–86.

thought. Fifteen hundred years later, in another intra-Christian debate, the derivative “Gnosticism” was coined and made to represent the scattered doctrines attached to these different groups and individuals who happened to be branded as “Gnostics” by the heresiologists.

Nevertheless, the term “Gnosticism” became a popular concept among nineteenth-century theologians and early historians of religion. The former – represented by scholars like Rudolf Bultmann (1955) and Adolf von Harnack (1961[1894]) – used the category in their search for the “pure” origins of Christianity, which they viewed as opposed to the inherent syncretism of Gnosticism (Linjamaa 2017, 25–40). Early historians of religion, such as Richard Reitzenstein (1978 [1910]), identified Gnosticism with dualism, a manifestation of the age-old conflict between the cosmos and a higher, refined existence, between a creator God and a transcendent God. The dualistic worldview was traced to “Eastern” influences, specifically to “Mazdaism,” and had supposedly influenced Judeo-Christian tradition to varying degrees. The German philosopher and historian Hans Jonas, a student of both Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann, introduced another theory about the origins of Gnosticism: its root in human existential anxiety. The conquests of Alexander the Great had begun a furious expansion that ultimately exposed humanity to a sense of insignificance and helplessness. Jonas saw Gnosticism as a way to respond to the growing sense of alienation in the world that took form during the Hellenistic age. His influence on the scholarship on Gnosticism was vast. Though he never attended the Eranos congresses, his approach to Gnosticism echoed its aim: the treatment of Gnosticism as a particular kind of religious pursuit.

Gnosticism was not just a historical and religious curiosity studied and applied as a category by scholars in different disciplines. It became a religious identity associated with a spiritual revival that began in the second half of the nineteenth century. A growing number of rogue Catholics began rebranding themselves as Gnostics in France during the chaotic revolution years when the Catholic Church, along with many other institutions, lost control (at least momentarily). Thus, beginning in France, we see individuals identifying themselves as reborn Gnostics of the old world, people like Eugène Vintras (1807–1875), Joseph-Antoine Boullan (1824–1893), and Jules Doinel (1842–1903). The term “Gnosticism” was also applied more broadly and with growing interest in the quickly rising European occult scene, in the writings of Blavatsky, Gérard Encausse (a.k.a. Papus) (1865–1916), Theodor Reuss (1855–1923), and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). They adopted their own particular view of what Gnosticism entailed, seeing it as naming a sort of perennialism, one of a few remaining and powerful manifestations of an ancient wisdom tradition that had been preserved throughout the ages, but hidden away from the public

(Linjamaa 2023, 1–39). Some of these spiritual explorers, like René Guénon (1886–1951) and Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917), would end up converting to Islam. Guénon founded the journal *La Gnose*, which explored Gnosis broadly as a form of spiritual knowledge, a pursuit that included explorations of Islam.

It is surely no coincidence that one of the important and inspirational figures for the Eranos conference was an individual deeply involved in the reawakened interest in Gnosticism in the nineteenth-century occult scene: the Theosophist G.R.S. Mead. He was among the first to explore the historical roots and spiritual possibilities of Gnosticism. Mead was the first to translate one of the few first-hand “Gnostic” sources available in the nineteenth century into English, the Coptic manuscript *Pistis Sophia*. His writings on Gnosticism were widely read in and outside Theosophical circles.⁵ The schism within Theosophy following Blavatsky’s death led Mead to break off and start The Quest Society, which continued Mead’s interest in Gnosticism by gathering scholars and spiritual seekers to explore the world of religion and science unrestrictedly, including Islam.⁶

However, academics began raising concerns about the analytical viability of the term Gnosticism. What had started as a reference to specific forms of heresy among groups and individuals mentioned in the texts of ancient Christian heresiologists had turned into a universal religious category. A large colloquium was organized to sort out the relation between *Gnosis* and Gnosticism, once and for all. In April 1966, theologians and historians of religion from around the world, with different expertise, gathered in the Italian city of Messina to discuss the topic. The hefty conference proceedings that were published a few years later included an appendix with a collective “[p]roposal for a terminological and conceptual agreement with regards to the theme of the colloquium” (Biancci 1967, x), stating that Gnosis and Gnosticism should be separated in academic studies. The former term was to be defined broadly as the “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite” (Biancci 1967, x), while the latter was delimited to the worldview favored among some religious groups in the second century onward. This worldview was qualified using a large number of specific characteristics, for example, the notion that humans

5 Much remains to be said regarding the actual reach of Mead’s influence, work which is currently being done at Lund University by Paulina Gruffman, in her forthcoming dissertation entitled “Occult ‘Gnosis’ and Comparative Religion: G.R.S. Mead, the Quest Society and Eranos (1892–1961)” is devoted to exploring the reach of Mead’s influence.

6 The Quest Society published a journal entitled *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*. It was edited by Mead and featured articles introducing and exploring a view number of topics, especially ancient and eastern religions, Islam and Sufism included. See for example *The Quest: A Quarterly Review* issues from 1912–1913, which contained articles on Islam and ecstasy.

carried within them a slumbering spark of the divine that had ended up in corporeality through a series of devolutions and needed to be reawakened to return to God.

The efforts of the Messina colloquium did not, however, solve the methodological problems with either concept. Gnosis-religion had become so broadly defined that it lost much of its analytic value. What is more, in 1996, Michael A. Williams argued that the origins of the concept “Gnosis” as the pursuit of salvific knowledge had been misrepresented from the very beginning. In his now classic study, *Rethinking “Gnosticism,”* Williams convincingly argues that the texts and groups thought to represent the more limited category of “Gnosticism” did not place the pursuit of any salvific knowledge at the forefront at all. In fact, the term “Gnosis” seldom appears as a concept in the first-hand sources, and the same was the case with the other characteristics thought to be central to Gnosticism, like anti-cosmism or disinterest in ethics and the social world of corporeality. Williams’ work demonstrated that the term was chiefly a heresiological construct, poorly supported by historical sources (Williams 1996). This has resulted in the term being unusable, and subsequently, the patristic field that was previously known as Gnostic Studies has dwindled, consumed by other adjacent areas.

3 Concluding Thoughts: Why Not Gnosis and Islam?

So, where does this leave us regarding the analytic value of the categories “Gnosis” and “Gnosticism” in Islamic Studies? I argue that both terms are laden with analytical drawbacks which render them problematic if applied without detailed qualification – which most (if not all) of the studies referenced above lack. One reason is its origin in an intra-Christian polemical discourse alien to Islam. What is more, as the Messina definition put forward, Gnosis is supposed to be an *elite* pursuit. But it is also heretical, dualist, derivative, and syncretistic, defined by its opposition to Christianity, which is “pure,” “original,” and open to all.

Gnosticism is also attached to another artificial dichotomy: that between East and West. The colonial implications surrounding the image of the “Orient” are well known (Said 1994). The “Orient” is frequently depicted not only as a dangerous place, full of immoral and uncivilized people, but also as a mystical, magical, and full of potential for the brave who dare to explore it. But this view of the East is no modern entity. Mesopotamian, Persian, and Egyptian cultures were considered ancient already in classical antiquity and were thus often represented as places where secret knowledge abounds for the spiritual

seeker.⁷ In Romanticism, German Idealism, and occult milieus of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, the “Orient” stimulated much thought and creativity (Hösle 2013, 431–454; Herling 2006; Nilsson 2020). The “East” offered insights or perspectives lost to European culture and religion. Religious revivals and countercultural expressions in the West, such as the Beat and “New Age” generations of the 1950s through the 1970s, also display a similar reception, particularly of Hinduism and Buddhism. Similar to how the concept of the “Orient” is generally defined in contrast to the “West,” Gnosticism is, by definition, understood in opposition to Christianity. And just like with the notions about the East, fear and “othering” are accompanied by romanticism. In intra-Christian discourse, Gnosticism is often equated with heresy, but in countercultural contexts, it has been viewed as a tradition that retained aspects of the religious experience that were lost in Christianity. This development follows, I suggest, the same pattern of the Western treatment and reception of the image of the Orient in general.

The above discussions are exploratory in nature and should be taken as a call for further research into the extent of the ramifications the early use of the term has had on the trajectory of the study of Islam – or certain aspects of it – in the West. Given the association Gnosticism has been laden with – framed as the historical and ideological (often “Oriental”) contrast to Christianity (the religion of the Occident) – it is not surprising that it has been prevalent as a category employed within early Islamic studies. However, as indicated in the above survey, there is little analytical advantage in attaching a study to such a polemical and analytically dubious concept. Thus, it is my contention that the application of the terms Gnosis and Gnosticism to a study of the history of a specific religion without serious qualification introduces unnecessary ambiguity. At best, it exposes the study to analytical vagueness; at worst, it introduces pejorative and/or colonial connotations of a Christocentric and/or romanticizing nature.

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7 Plato, for example, legitimized his views – albeit in a narrative form – by tracing their origin (for example the creation story of *Timaeus*) to wise Egyptian sages. For a closer discussions see Linjamaa 2024, 49–67 and Schneider 2006, 241–278.

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PART 3

Music and Soundscapes



Black Rhythm Revolution: Idris Muhammad, Islam, and Jazz

Göran Larsson

Despite both pious Muslim voices and persistent anti-Muslim discourses past and present, scholars of religious studies have convincingly demonstrated that individuals from Muslim cultural backgrounds do not understand, interpret, or practice Islam at all uniformly – quite the contrary. The norm is rather one of diversity, variation, contradiction, and conflict. A case in point is Muslim attitudes towards music. While some Muslim scholars argue that music is unlawful because it is associated with indecency and immorality and that God hates most, if not all, forms of music, others have adopted a more flexible attitude and embraced the possibility of being a Muslim and a musician at one and the same time.

Leaving aside the various attitudes towards music that are found among Muslim scholars,¹ this chapter aims to cast light on one of the many jazz musicians who embraced Islam in the aftermath of the Second World War, namely the American R&B, jazz, and funk drummer Leo Morris, known since his conversion to Islam as Idris Muhammad (1939–2014). Besides providing a brief presentation of Muhammad's music career and his conversion to Islam in the 1960s, with the aid of theories from the field of sociology of religion, I would like to explore what type of conversion we can associate with Idris Muhammad. Unlike better-known conversions to Islam by, for instance, the boxer Muhammad Ali (Larsson 2014), the singer Yusuf Islam (formally known as Cat Stevens; see Larsson 2011), or fellow jazz musicians like Yusuf Lateef (Meadows 2023), Idris Muhammad made little fuss about his conversion. Unlike Muhammad Ali, Idris Muhammad made no political statement about his conversion, and unlike Yusuf Islam, who refrained from performing or playing music for almost a decade, he continued to play and

1 A topic well-covered by the jubilee of this Festschrift: see, for instance, Otterbeck and Larsson 2017, which contains a long list of Otterbeck's publications on Islam and music, or the many references (several of them published as open access) found on Jonas Otterbeck's personal webpage at the Aga Khan University; see <https://www.aku.edu/ismc/people/Pages/jonas-otterbeck.aspx> (accessed December 31, 2024).

record music throughout his career. Also, unlike Lateef, Idris Muhammad did not commit himself to undertaking a deep exploration of Islamic theology. To understand Muhammad's conversion to Islam, I will argue that it is necessary to pay attention to different conversion pathways, a topic that has been explored by, for instance, James Rambo and Steven C. Bauman in their article "Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation," published in *Pastoral Psychology* (2012).

As I will argue, it is also important to study conversion stories that are not focused on making a loud or public statement, like the examples listed above. While I do not claim that Idris Muhammad's conversion is representative, it can serve as an example of how many conversion stories unfold. His conversion is also somewhat opaque, and becoming a Muslim does not drastically change all aspects of his life. His position as a Muslim, therefore, is negotiated and integrated with his former identity as a musician and even as a smoker of weed. Beyond being an interesting case – especially for those of us interested in the intersection of music, religion, and African American culture – Idris Muhammad's conversion story reminds us of how a Muslim identity can be negotiated and maintained in a way that leaves little visible imprint on a person's public life.

Before presenting the outline of the chapter, it is also important to note that there is very little material available to shed light on Idris Muhammad's life. A significant portion of this text draws from the memoir *Inside the Music: The Life of Idris Muhammad* (Muhammad, 2012), which is based on interviews with music journalist Britt Alexander. However, a key caveat must be addressed: the account of Idris Muhammad's conversion comes from a memoir that primarily focuses on his music, rather than on the social context or the inner life of the musician. As such, the musical biography (in this case, Muhammad's memoir) belongs to a specific literary genre. While life writing can take many forms (Lee, 2009), there is little space for exploration of religion or introspection in Idris Muhammad's memoir. This lacuna calls for more research in the future.

1 Outline

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I provide a brief outline of Idris Muhammad's biography and musical career. Secondly, I situate his life and career within the broader context of jazz and Islam before turning my attention to different theories of conversion. The chapter ends with a short discussion and analysis of Idris Muhammad's conversion to Islam, in which I make use of Rambo's and Bauman's theories about different pathways to conversion.

2 A Brief Biography of Idris Muhammad²

Idris Muhammad, born Leo Morris, was born into a Catholic family in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, on November 13, 1939. Like many African American children of his generation, he grew up in poverty, often facing hard work and racism, but he was also surrounded by a loving family, with caring parents and several brothers and sisters. However, it is fair to say that his childhood memories are largely shaped by the multicultural and hybrid context that New Orleans offered in the 1940s and 1950s. The mysterious impulse of the city was also strengthened by its closeness to the Bayou, the Mississippi River, and the many hurricanes that hit the city. New Orleans was clearly a creative milieu that made a deep impression on young Morris. Besides the Creole cuisine and the hybridity of the French Quarter, the city's musical life, which was manifested during the Mardi Gras parades and the living music scene, made a lasting impression.

For example, Leo made his first public appearance as a musician during a Mardi Gras parade when he was eight or nine years old. All his older brothers played the drums, but for some reason, they were not at home when someone knocked on the door of the household looking for a drummer. Reluctantly, his mother allowed Leo to join the parade. Because of his small size, when he was placed on the back of a flatbed truck behind a small drum kit, he could barely see what was happening in the streets. The first tune was "Bourbon Street Parade," but he had no problem keeping up with the beat. The band was happy, and Morris was having the time of his life. For instance, a girl at school who didn't like him saw him sat behind the drums and started to wave and shout enthusiastically, "Leo, Leo, Leo" (Muhammad 2012, 39–42). He recalls:

The icing on the cake was seeing all my friends and seeing that girl. The cherry on the icing, though, is that I played with these old guys—and they seemed to think that I did it real well. (Muhammad 2012, 43)

After this first public performance, he decided that he wanted to become a musician (Muhammad 2012, 43). But from this moment, the need to earn money – often through some kind of hustle – became a recurring theme in

2 The everyday life of young Morris and his musical career as a drummer is described in detail in *Inside the Music*. This book is based on extensive interviews with Idris Muhammad conducted by Britt Alexander, who at the time of the release of the book was working as a freelance journalist for drum magazine publications. Unless otherwise indicated, all information in this section is taken from Muhammad (2012).

Morris's life. For example, as a child, he was willing to take on extra chores, such as shining shoes or trimming rose bushes. Throughout his memoirs, he also talks about studio jobs that paid better than others. Sometimes his eagerness to earn money landed him in trouble. However, poverty and a drive for something more and better were motivational forces for him from early on.

If we return to those early days in New Orleans, we learn that his family was best described as regular churchgoers. However, Morris does not stress the religiosity of his family, although he includes an episode in his memoirs in which he makes his mother furious by asking critical and probing questions about Jesus and God. He recollects that it was quiet and peaceful during mass in the church and that he stared at the life-size crucifix at the front. Then he started a conversation with his mother:

"How long has he been up there like that?" I asked.

"A long time."

"He's God? He can do anything? Can He turn His head to the other side?"
(Muhammad 2012, 18)

This is one of few examples where religiosity is mentioned in his memoirs before his own conversion to Islam.

Let us return to his music career. From the early 1950s, Morris practiced hard to develop his drumming skills and frequently sat in with local musicians. At the age of 14, he started to perform with the Hawkets, and in 1956, he played the drums on Fats Domino's (1928–2017) recording of "Blueberry Hill" (Kunian 2016/2019; Muhammad 2012). During this time, he was basically playing with any musicians who were associated with the music scene in New Orleans. For example, early on, he began touring and recording with musicians such as Sam Cooke (1931–1964) and Curtis Mayfield (1942–1999). In the 1960s, he moved to New York to get gigs and earn more money from his drumming. In addition to playing with R&B and soul singers, he soon became a household name and session player for both jazz and funk musicians. For example, he played and recorded with jazz musicians such as Horace Silver (1928–2014), Pharoah Sanders (1940–2022), Sonny Rollins, John Scofield, and Ahmed Jamaal (1930–2023) (Kunian 2016/2019; Muhammad 2012).

One of his most successful gigs came after he joined the band for an off-Broadway musical that later developed into the hugely successful Broadway musical *Hair*. After his success with *Hair*, Morris joined Roberta Flack (1937–2025) and played on her mega-hit, "Killing Me Softly," released in 1973 by Atlantic Records. Besides touring, he became a session player for both the Prestige label, which recorded mainly jazz, and the CTI label, which mainly

recorded funk-oriented music. With Prestige and CTI, Morris made more than 150 recordings. During this period, he also recorded and released records as a band leader, such as *Black Rhythm Revolution!*, (Prestige 1970), *Peace and Rhythm* (Prestige 1971), *Power of Soul* (Kudu 1974), and *House of the Rising Sun* (Kudu 1976), as well as *Turn This Mutha Out* (Kudu 1977). At this point, Morris embraced Islam and changed his name to Idris Muhammad, a topic that I will return to in the next section (Kunian 2016/2019).

The recordings and collaborations listed above, however, only scratch the surface, and there are plenty more names that could have been mentioned in the long list of recordings made by Idris Muhammad. Besides his own recordings, it should also be mentioned that some of his drum beats have been sampled by music artists like, for example, the Beastie Boys, Notorious B.I.G., Tupac, and Beck. While Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac quote his song “Crab Apple” on their respective songs “Big Booty Hoes” and “Crooked Ass Nigga,”³ his “Loran’s Dance” constitutes the foundation for the Beastie Boys’ hit “To All the Girls,” which is included on their second album *Paul’s Boutique*, released in 1989 on Capitol Records (Kunian 2016/2019).

Although it is difficult to ascribe a particular musical style or a specific way of playing an instrument to him, Idris Muhammad himself summarized his playing style as follows:

All my rhythms are based on two elements. It’s so simple, and that’s what blows people’s minds. The two elements are the Second Line bass drum patterns, and the tambourine rhythms from the Indians dancing at Mardi Gras. Those are the two elements. (Muhammad 2012, 59)

In another attempt to describe his playing style, he compares drumming with the sound of steam-pressing machines that were used for pressing clothes. According to Muhammad, when used, these machines make a rhythmic sound that goes: “Cracka-chew ... pssst-taugh. Cracka-chew ... pssst-taugh” (Muhammad 2012, 60).

Whereas Idris Muhammad’s musical career is remarkable, the constant touring and recording soon took a toll on his personal life. As his success grew, the demands for touring and recording increased, life on the road soon became harder and harder, and more difficult to combine with an ordinary life as a married man. In addition to notorious affairs with other women, he

3 Breakdowns of these samples can be found on YouTube; see: “Tupac & Biggie sample Idris Muhammad,” retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QgSIrzMFhg> (accessed 19 December, 2024).

soon developed a dependency on weed, which he smoked constantly, and also began using hard drugs like heroin (Muhammad 2012, 92–93).

3 Jazz and Islam

As pointed out by scholars like, for instance, Chase (2010), Meadows (2023), and more specifically Richard Brent Turner in his book, *Soundtrack to a Movement: African American Islam, Jazz and Black Internationalism* (2021), jazz musicians in North America were not unfamiliar with Islam and Islamic traditions. Jazz seems to have been one important pathway to Islam, especially for African American. Following the rise of what can broadly be labelled a Black awareness movement in the early 20th century – like, for instance, the rise of the Nation of Islam or the missionizing of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the early 20th century – many African American were drawn to Islam in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (see, for example, Curtis 2009 for an outline of African American Islam).

While Christianity was often associated with either racism or discrimination, or with weak Black church leaders who had become scared, been pacified, or had accepted an inferior position as Blacks, Islam became a compelling alternative way of countering systemic racism and discrimination. By adopting a Muslim identity and converting to Islam, many jazz musicians also found a powerful tool that could be used to sidestep the racial segregation that existed in hotels, bars, and clubs in many parts of North America. When confronted with racist slurs and prohibitions – for example, “we do not serve colored people” – it was possible to reply that “we” are not Blacks, we are Muslims (several examples of such counter-narratives are given in Meadows 2023). The fact that Islam, at least in theory,⁴ does not accept any racial, ethnic, or linguistic boundaries, and that all Muslims are equal in the eyes of God, was a great attraction for many African Americans who converted to Islam. According to estimates made by Meadows, approximately 187 American jazz, R&B, and funk musicians did so in the mid-20th century (see the long list of names given in Meadows 2023). Furthermore, it should be noted that Islam also served as a means of reconnecting with either a real or imagined Africa, a topic of significant importance for several African American religious movements, such as the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam, and the Nuwaubian Nation (Curtis IV & Sigler, 2009; Palmer, 2010).

4 For a critical discussion about Islam, race and color see, for example, Lewis 1971.

However, it should be stressed that conversion to Islam can mean many different things and that there were significant differences among those who embrace Islam. Some changed their lifestyle completely, stopping the consumption of pork, alcohol, and other drugs. Many changed their given names, which they often called “slave names,” to Muslim-sounding names. Some changed their musical repertoire and incorporated more eastern influences, while others undertook the Muslim pilgrimage, or *haji*, and began to pray. However, other musicians, such as Yusef Lateef (1920–2013) (Meadows 2023) or Idris Muhammad, made a distinction between their Muslim identity and their artistic work. Thus, it was possible to continue to perform in clubs and venues that served alcohol and to keep playing music, much of which was seen as sinful by Muslim scholars. This is an example of a pragmatic way of being Muslim in a context that is not governed by Islamic rules and regulations. But to be fair, it seems that many, if not most, of those musicians who converted to Islam were more interested in a personal life change and in finding ways of combating racism and discrimination than in submitting entirely to Islamic law. This illustrates that a conversion – for that matter, a deconversion or the process of leaving a religion – is not always clear-cut. There is often room for negotiation and in-between positions, which serve as a reminder that religious identity or belonging is frequently a matter of positionality and negotiation, rather than a simple black-and-white change (see, for instance, Lundqvist 2020).

4 Conversion

As pointed out by scholars like, for instance, Lewis L. Rambo and Steven C. Bauman (2012), who have studied conversion (conversion, deconversion, de-affiliation, etc.) using theories and methods taken from psychology, the change to a religious belief or religious belonging (including a turn to a secular or atheistic lifestyle) should be seen as a process that involves several steps or building blocks. These authors argue that the conversion process involves several steps to which the researcher must pay attention, and that, as scholars, we should not only emphasize one aspect, one step, or a specific “crucial moment” if we want to acquire a holistic understanding of a conversion. From a heuristic point of view, we can therefore distinguish between “context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences,” argue Rambo and Bauman (2011, 879). They continue by saying that:

Our underlying assumption is that conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field involving people, institutions, events,

ideas, and experiences. The study of conversion must take into account not only the personal dimension, but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics in which a person is embedded. (Rambo and Bauman 2011, 880)

Regarding Morris's conversion to Islam, therefore, his decision to convert and leave his childhood faith (Catholicism) and to change his name to Idris Muhammad seems to have been quite unplanned. However, it is reasonable to argue that his conversion was related to personal problems (i.e., his drug addiction, divorce, and a hard-working life) that had been building up over the years. Following a falling out between himself and his wife, his memoirs include the following presentation of his first encounter with Islam:

I go into the church and I light some candles. One day I meet this man who apparently thinks I am Muslim because I am wearing a beard. And he sees this sadness in me and so he explains to me about Islam. How it would help me to regenerate my life because I am sad about my wife and what was happening and I am really down. So this man explains Islam to me and one thing leads to another and him saying that maybe my life will be changed. (Muhammad 2012, 175)

This confrontation or "awakening," which was clearly associated with personal problems (especially his failed marriage and his life as a person with an addiction), led to him embracing Islam and changing his name. Thus, he started to read up on the Muslim faith, and this "change" had a transformative effect on him (Muhammad 2012, 175). Unfortunately, there is no information about what kind of Islam he was introduced to and what it meant to him to "read up on the Muslim faith" (Muhammad 2012, 175), nor is there any information about the person who introduced him to Islam. Maybe the lack of context can be explained by the fact that his memoirs are focused on his music, and that Britt Alexander is a journalist writing for drum magazines. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to discern to what extent the conversion had an impact on Idris Muhammad and how. His memoirs could therefore best be described as a musical biography, rather than an academic study of religious conversion. However, as far as I know, this is the only material that casts any light on Muhammad's conversion to Islam. Although Idris Muhammad's memoirs provide limited information about why he converted to Islam or which form of Islam he embraced, his case remains interesting. It serves as a reminder that many conversion stories are not always well-thought-out – many individuals are not necessarily on a "quest" for meaning or "religious enlightenment." His approach to embracing Islam is also notable, as it involves an implicit or

explicit negotiation between his identity as a Muslim and his role as an active musician that must handle many situations in which his Muslim identity can be compromised or even put in question.

However, since his memoirs do not contain a form of rhetoric that is often associated with the Nation of Islam – such as claims that Black people are the chosen ones and that the enslavement and suffering of Black communities are to be blamed on the so-called “White devil” (Gardell 1996) – and he explicitly distances himself from Black awareness movements like the Black Panthers, Martin Luther King Jr., or Malcolm X, it seems plausible that he was introduced to Islam by followers of the Ahmadiyya movement (cf. Muhammad 2012, 154). As compared to the Nation of Islam, the Ahmadiyya movement puts less stress, if any, on racial theories, and unlike the Nation of Islam, they emphasize that there should be no racial differences in Islam, as all Muslims, no matter what their race, are equal before God.

Furthermore, there is no information in the memoir indicating that whoever first told Idris Muhammad about Islam was someone who held a special place in his life. Besides the encounter in the church (see quotation above), the individual who taught Muhammad about the Muslim faith and how to perform *wudud* (pre-prayer ablutions) is presented as “a Sunni Muslim friend of mine” (Muhammad 2012, 175). However, to put it in the words of Rambo and Bauman, in this case, there is evidently no explicit “Emotional bonding between the convert and advocate” (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 886). The Sunni Muslim friend does not play a central role in the memoir, and unlike the many musicians with whom he plays over time, this friend is not named.

However, if we apply the other steps that Rambo and Bauman suggest, it is possible to analyze Idris Muhammad’s conversion. A strong trigger for turning to Islam was his personal problems, as Leo Morris, and it was a deep feeling of being trapped and caught in a constant crisis that prompted him to turn to something new. The “crisis” is therefore an opening. Let us return to Idris Muhammad’s own words:

I changed my life when I became Muslim, and from that day until now I have always been successful. I have been in a lot of pain. I had been in a lot of trouble. My first wife had left me and I was searching for something to pull me out of this rut. I had become a junkie. I was a *neat*, which means that really nobody knew. I was a clean junkie. I wasn’t around a lot of people who were junkies. (Muhammad 2012, 176)

Even if Islam provided an opportunity for Leo to change his life and gain a new meaning, it is more difficult to argue that, as Idris Muhammad, he was

on a quest for something new. He is not passive, and he does not lack agency, but he is not actively engaged in the “process in which people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life” that Rambo and Bauman call a “quest” (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 884). Islam is rather something that Muhammad confronts without looking for meaning, and there is no prior example of him soul-searching in his memoirs. Still, his encounter with Islam is very powerful, and he cannot resist, as Islam resonates with his “unconscious needs” (Rambo and Bauman 2012, 884). His new religious belief appears to empower him, providing a tool to regain control over a difficult life situation and offering the means for success. All these aspects seem to have been of great importance in Idris Muhammad’s life.

But to understand his conversion, we also need to emphasize its social and cultural contexts. Thus, it is important to stress that he was situated in a context that was open to Islam, to which many of his fellow musicians had already turned (cf. Meadows 2023, “context”). To become a Muslim was therefore part of a plausibility structure: i.e., Islam as a viable and potent possibility was a new option that many African Americans embraced during the 1960s and 1970s. By applying Rambo and Bauman’s methodology and paying closer attention to the macro- and micro-context/s of conversion, it is important to stress that the macro-context provided both possibilities and problems for African Americans. On the one hand, the civil rights movement held out the hopes for equality and respect, but on the other hand, American society was still ingrained in racism and discriminatory structures. This last aspect was, for example, picked up by movements like the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam, which provided an alternative to the White majority society. This aspect is often emphasized by African American jazz musicians who turned to Islam and, by becoming Muslims, found a way of handling and fighting racism within society, and more specifically within the music industry and show business (e.g., Ackfeldt 2019; Meadows 2023; Turner 2021). By incorporating the social macro- and micro-contexts into the analysis, the conversion process is not only about the individual, but also about the prevailing social structures (Rambo and Bauman 2012).

Contrary to many conversion stories, Idris Muhammad’s conversion to Islam does not include much information about his new religious identity or his commitments as a Muslim. There are some notes about him going to Mecca and performing the pilgrimage (*haji*), as well as slaughtering a lamb in New York in the early 1970s to perform the *Id al-adha* ritual (Muhammad 2012, 178–179, 200). However, besides these snippets, there is, for example, no indication that he became active in any religious community or congregation. Islam was, rather, a private matter and something he kept to himself, at least according to his memoirs. There are also few indications that his turn to Islam had

great consequences for his lifestyle. Besides the references to his going on the *hajj* five times, there are not many examples of him praying, and he continued to smoke weed after his conversion (Muhammad 2012, 211). His turn to Islam is, however, strongly associated with personal and professional success. Like many African American musicians who embraced Islam, his interest in African music also grew stronger after his conversion. For example, he traveled to Sudan to study drumming techniques (Muhammad 2012, 182, 186). The following quotation, on a *hajj* trip to Mecca, can serve as an illustration that his conversion is strongly associated with personal and professional success:

Every time I go to Mecca, it seems like the first recording I do upon my return is a hit record for them. Whoever I came into contact with, they have a hit record. (Muhammad 2012, 179)

As Idris Muhammad's spiritual life progressed, so did his musical career, this being "a great period in my life" (Muhammad 2012, 178).

5 Conclusions

By analyzing Idris Muhammad's conversion to Islam in the late 1960s, I have provided an example of a conversion story that is neither loud nor public. Thus, it constitutes an example of a kind of opaque conversion that can serve as an example of how many individuals seem to approach and handle new religious identities. But more importantly the chapter aims to combine two research topics that have recurred in Professor Jonas Otterbeck's oeuvre, namely the nexus between Islam and music (especially popular music; see, for instance, Otterbeck 2021) and the place of converts to Islam who have "used" the religion as a resource either for solving personal challenges or for developing and expanding their artistic creativity. But while Otterbeck has mainly studied halal-pop (Otterbeck 2023b), Goth musicians who have turned to Islam (Otterbeck 2023a), or Black Metal musicians (Otterbeck, Mattsson, and Pastene 2018) who in some way or another are related to Islam, this chapter has placed the focus on an R&B, soul, jazz, and funk drummer who turned to Islam in the late 1960s. My study builds on the research conducted by scholars such as Chase (2010), Meadows (2023), and Turner (2021). Compared to these pioneering works, my contribution to the study of music and Islam primarily consists of the analytical approach I have employed here.

With the help of theories that address the different components (or steps) that are common in conversion stories, I have tried to unpack Idris Muhammad's conversion to Islam and compare it to the inferences made by

Lewis R. Rambo and Steven C. Bauman (2012) in their studies of conversion narratives. Without repeating the main points from the analysis, I have argued that some of the steps that Rambo and Bauman associate with typical conversion narratives are more present in Idris Muhammad's conversion to Islam than in some other cases. For example, his turning to Islam was connected with his personal life situation and the problems he was facing at the time of his conversion (i.e., drug addiction, divorce, a very demanding working life with constant recordings, and a hectic life on the road). But the social context, namely that Islam was a popular religion to which many of his fellow musicians turned in the 1960s, is also important. At this point in time, Islam and becoming a Muslim were part of a plausibility structure among African Americans in America. However, there are few indications that Muhammad had been on a quest for some deeper meaning in life prior to his conversion, and there are relatively few examples showing that his turn to Islam changed his life in drastic ways. There are examples of him performing the *hajj*, but otherwise, there are no examples of him praying in his memoirs. His religious beliefs were rather a private matter and not something he wanted to discuss or include in his public life. In all its simplicity, this showed that conversion to Islam could mean many different things for those musicians who turned to Islam in the 1960s. While, for example, Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) stopped playing music for almost a decade when he became a Muslim in the 70s, Yusuf Lateef emerged himself in Islamic theology, and the boxer Muhammad Ali made a political statement when he converted to Islam in the 1960s, Idris Muhammad just continued to play music and made very little fuss about his new religious identity.

In line with scholars like, for instance, Chase (2010), Meadows (2023) and Turner (2021), I argue that more future studies should be devoted to the nexus between R&B, jazz and funk musicians, and Islam – especially in the 1960s and 1970s – and that popular culture is an important, but often neglected field of studies that should be explored further to gain a deeper understanding of the role and function that Islam plays in North American and European societies, including among so-called lay Muslims. To expand the field of studies, it would therefore be necessary to conduct interviews with non-musicians who were influenced by musicians like Idris Muhammad or Yusuf Lateef and determine in what ways their conversions to Islam also influenced other understandings of the religion. While several studies have addressed the nexus between Islam and hip-hop (i.e., Ackfeldt 2019), to the best of my knowledge there are few if any studies that have tried to analyze the role and function of Islam and Muslim cultures in the vibrant and lively psychedelic funk scene of the 1970s with bands and musicians like, for instance, *Funkadelic* or *Parliament*, two groups that circulated around the genius of George Clinton, or in the creative but also spaced-out world of the jazz musician Sun Ra (1914–1993).

Hopefully, this will provide some new avenues of thought that scholars like Chase, Meadows, Turner, Otterbeck, and I can explore in cooperation with a new and more vibrant generation of scholars in the future.

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The One-Eyed Curse: Dajjāl in European Extreme Metal

Douglas Mattsson

Extreme metal music is an umbrella term for subgenres of the broader metal music genre that engage in so-called transgressive musical, aesthetic, lyrical, and bodily expressions (Kahn-Harris 2007). Within this canopy, the genre of black metal has particularly caught the attention of religious studies scholars due to the use of explicit Satanic, pagan, occult, or Nordic religious themes within black metal music and aesthetics (Mørk 2009; Hagen 2011; Granholm 2011; 2017; Faxneld 2015; Thompson 2018). These cultural compositions, furthermore, commonly combine a veneration of Satan with hatred towards God and religion. However, due to the genre's crystallization period in Northern Europe (especially in Norway) in the early 1990s, much of the explicit aversion towards religion has been aimed at so-called Judeo-Christian traditions. To utilize Islamic themes and traditions in a similar transgressive manner has been rare. In his seminal work *Extreme Metal* (2007), the British sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris even went so far as to state that "Islam [...] has never been the object of aesthetic transgression" (Kahn-Harris 2007, 48).

In the following years since Kahn-Harris' observation, things have changed. Although his assertion in many regards holds true, some black and extreme metal bands in Muslim majority countries (Otterbeck, Mattsson, and Pastene 2018; Mattsson 2022; 2025; Eckerström 2022; 2024), as well as some in Europe and North America (Faxneld 2017), have started to incorporate Islamic themes in a transgressive and blasphemous way. Following Otterbeck's (2021) suggestion that Islamic studies scholars should explore "[w]hat *individuals, groups, states (etc.)* do with that which we call Islam" (Otterbeck 2021a, 48), regardless of their personal identification as Muslims or not, this chapter aims to explore how Islamic semiotic resources (ISRs) are utilized within European extreme metal. The focus will be on how two European extreme metal bands have employed ISRs. These are here understood as communicative acts such as sounds, images, gestures, and clothes that have acquired an "Islamic" affordance through social, cultural, and historical processes and therefore become recognized as "Islamic" (Ackfeldt 2025; Mattsson 2025). More specifically, this chapter investigates how references to the apocalyptic figure of Dajjāl are

utilized by two European extreme metal bands as well as the potential meanings Dajjāl acquires in their cultural production. Before turning to these examples, it is important to provide some contextual background on Dajjāl.

1 The Bringer of Evil

The figure of *al-Dajjāl* is one that most Muslims would have heard of. Although not mentioned in the Qur'an, Dajjāl occupies, particularly from the 18th century onwards, a central role in works dealing with the apocalypse and the end of times (Cook 2002). In these, the apocalypse, referred to as "the last hour" (*as-sa'a*), is preceded by a few greater and lesser signs (*'alamat al-sa'a al-sughra wa-l-kubra*). That is, moral decay, adultery, and corruption will be widespread, and murder, theft, civil war, and natural disasters will haunt the Muslim community. In addition, two violent tribes, Gog and Magog (*Ya'jūj* and *Ma'jūj*), will wreak havoc across the world until God finally destroys them (ibid.). More relevant for the context of this paper, however, is that one of the ten big signs heralding the end of times is the imminent arrival of Dajjāl (Cuciniello 2022).

Although Dajjāl has been construed slightly differently in various geographical and historical locations, for example, regarding what he will do, the powers he possesses, his origin, and what he looks like, most sources mention a few recurring characteristics (Cook 2002; 2008; Filiu 2011; Cuciniello 2022). For one, Dajjāl is often described as having seductive powers, and the Arabic word Dajjāl commonly translates as "cheat" or "imposter." Some traditions state that he was born while his mother lay in her grave, and others that he is a Jew from the eastern part of the Muslim world (Cook 2002). At times, Dajjāl is described as a terrifying monster, or alternatively, as a ridiculous figure of enormous stature. Significant emphasis is paid to Dajjāl's eyes; due to blindness or damage, only one is functioning, which is described as intensely radiant and, branded on his forehead, are the three letters k-f-r (*kafir* – "unbeliever"). Just like the Antichrist in Christian tradition, Dajjāl aims to lead the faithful astray, and his ability to perform miracles means that only a few Muslims will be able to resist his temptation. These similarities have also led Dajjāl to be at times referred to and translated as the Antichrist (Cook 2002; Filiu 2011).

Dajjāl will not only attempt to seduce and misguide Muslims; his aim is much more sinister. With the aid of his alluring powers, Dajjāl will have gathered a huge following that will help him in his attempts to conquer the Muslims' heartlands, and those who oppose him will be tortured and murdered (ibid.).

To put it briefly, Dajjāl constitutes one of the most formidable adversaries for the Muslim community at the end of times, but despite this, he will prove

unable to conquer the cities of Mekka and Medina and ultimately be defeated by Jesus and/or the saviour figure *al-Mahdi* (in some traditions equated with Jesus) by the gates of Lūdd. In the words of the 9th-century Muslim scholar and hadith compiler Abu al-Husayn Muslim:

Then Allah will send the Messiah, son of Mary, who will descend [from heaven] to the white minaret on the east side of Damascus [...] Jesus will search for the Antichrist until [he reaches] the gate of Lūdd, where he will kill [the antichrist]. (Abu al-Husayn Muslim, quoted and translated in Filiu 2011, 17)

Although the Muslim tradition tells that he will ultimately be defeated, Dajjāl has emerged as one of the most prominent adversaries of Islam. From a theological point of view, Dajjāl “defines evil and everything that he does is diametrically opposed to God’s purpose on earth.” (Cook 2002, 101). Importantly, this has, as Cuciniello (2022) notes, also rendered the term Dajjāl as synonymous with an enemy of Islam. Dajjāl has:

been seen as a personification of evil by identifying him with several controversial individuals who are not always easily identifiable from a historical point of view, demonstrating that ‘the Lying Messiah’ is also synonymous with the enemy of the Islamic community. (Cuciniello 2022, 138)

Dajjāl’s general conceptualization as an enemy of Islam and the descriptions of him and his role in apocalyptic literature provide a framework of events that can be mobilized by extreme metal bands. We now turn to two examples of when Dajjāl has been utilized as a semiotic resource by European extreme metal bands.

2 Curse Upon A Prayer and Necrowretch

The Finnish band Curse Upon A Prayer formed in 2010 and has to date released four full-length albums, one of which is of particular relevance here. The band’s third album, *Infidel*, was released by the Finnish label Saturnal Records in 2020. Although the band had invoked Islamic themes in the song “Rotten Tongues” in their previous 2015 release, *Infidel* is entirely dedicated to lyrical themes centred around Islam. This can be exemplified by song titles such as “The Portrait of Iblis,” “Haram,” “Call to Prayer,” “Fitna,” “Infidel,” “Jahannam,” and “Al-Masih ad-Dajjal.” The last example is worth examining in detail due to its reference to Dajjāl:

‘Al-Masih ad-Dajjal’

I am He / Averse to his putrid word / A curse darkening his imperfect light / I am
the enemy tumult & the filth / Between the lines of the holiest of lies

And by my blessing / I bring them to their knees / I make them bleed & scream
for release / For the true salvation / Is of pain & revenge / A death sentence /
For a petty existence

I am He: / The Saviour for deceivers / The seed of doubt in believers / The para-
dise I grant shall shine as / Flaming Hell for them / Through its seven gates
I release torment / Upon those serpentine spined men / & leave their hearts
burdened / For my word shall defile their faith / In awe they shall fear my
name

Now bend over, spread your legs & praise! / Accept my lot & I promise to lead
you astray!

I am He: / The Saviour for deceivers / The seed of doubt in believers / The para-
dise I grant shall shine as / Flaming Hell for them / Through its seven gates I
release torment / Upon those serpentine spined men / & leave their bleeding
hearts burdened / For my word shall crumble their faith / In awe they shall
fear my name

Al-Masih ad-Dajjal

The title of the song “Al-Masih ad-Dajjal” can be translated as “the deceitful Messiah,” a conception mentioned in several classical apocalyptic accounts (e.g., Cuciniello 2022). As is evident, the lyrics of the song draw upon many of the characteristics attributed to Dajjāl from the Muslim tradition and eschatological literature. We are meant to understand the narrator of the song as Dajjāl himself through the line “I am He,” with an additional emphasis on the capitalized “He” in the lyrics, which acquires a subversive quality since this capitalization is commonly reserved for God alone. In the song, Dajjāl’s ability to lead Muslims astray and position himself as a beguiler is highlighted through the lines “Saviour for deceivers” and “seed of doubt in believers.” Moreover, the lyrics align with the traditional casting of Dajjāl as an enemy of Islam and Muslims. However, in contrast to the traditional narratives found in eschatological literature, Dajjāl is not killed by Jesus or the Mahdi in the song but instead portrayed as the bringer of a final end to Muslims and Islam: “My word shall crumble their faith,” and “In awe they shall fear my name.” Dajjāl is thus used by *Curse Upon A Prayer* as a semiotic resource to communicate an antagonistic stance towards Islam and Muslims; an anti-Islamic message that is further accentuated in the cover artwork for *Infidel* (2020). The common motif of a crescent moon and a star is depicted in the artwork, but the symbols are rotated and switched (Fig. 16.1.). This composition can be perceived as an

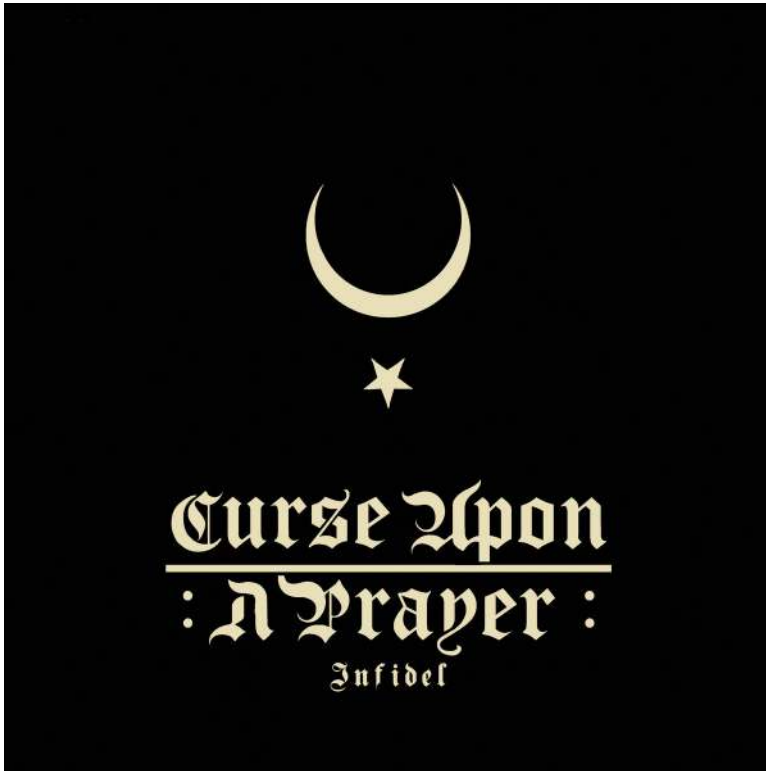


FIGURE 16.1 Curse Upon A Prayer, *Infidel* (2020) Saturnal Records (Artwork by unknown)

attempt to create an 'Islamic' interpretation of the inverted crucifix common in black metal.

The second example is the French blackened death metal band Necrowretch. Formed in 2008, the band has released five full-length albums to date, of which their latest composition, *Swords of Dajjal*, was released by Season of Mist Underground Activities in 2024 (a subsidiary of the famous French extreme metal label Season of Mist). The title track from their last release will now be examined.

'Swords of Dajjal'

The stars are dying / Upon the ruins / Of ancient Ghadames
 Distortion of time / Frequent, sudden / And unexpected deaths
 When the hearts of men / Are poisoned by Sins / And lust for the Devils
 Rise of idols / Beast of the Earth / Swords of Dajjal

And the Black Legions / Will come from the East / To rape and raze the world /
 A massacre, a feast
 The Covenant of Death / In a darkened pyre / The end of all days / In forty nights
 of Fire

As can be seen, the clearest semiotic resource that refers to Islam is the figure Dajjāl. Just as *Curse Upon A Prayer* does, Necrowretch draws upon an Islamic apocalyptic narrative but stresses different components, such as the devastating violence that will follow upon Dajjāl's entry into the world. The lines of the fifth verse, where "Black Legions" will come from the east and lay devastation to the world, are most likely inspired by the two tribes Gog and Magog (*Ya'jūj* and *Ma'jūj*) mentioned in eschatological narratives. Similarly, the "forty nights of Fire" is arguably based on a Hadith in which Muhammad is stated to have said that Dajjāl would remain on earth for: "Forty days, one day like a year, one day like a month, one day like a week, and the rest of his like your days" (quoted and translated in Cuciniello 2022, 132).

The artwork for the album cover (Fig. 16.2.) introduces additional ISRs. Centred in the image stands a demonic figure draped in a black robe. Carved into its forehead is a pattern that resembles two 'inverted' crescents that are split in the middle, and two radiant eyes confront the viewer. The figure in Necrowretch's artwork diverges from the common description of Dajjāl in that it does not have the three letters k-f-r (*kāfir*) branded on its forehead, and has two instead of one functioning eye. Nevertheless, the figure could be interpreted as the band's (or artist's) own rendition of Dajjāl. Particularly noteworthy is the sword that Dajjāl clutches in his left hand. The end of the sword is split in two. In Muslim historiography, the double-edged sword is commonly known as *Zulfaqar*, which was wielded by the fourth caliph (and the first Shia Imam) and the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib. As a semiotic resource, the *Zulfaqar* is invested with a great deal of meaning for many Muslims. The peculiar design of the sword, widely known as "Ali's," is not only famous but also represents Ali's commitment to justice and his struggle against the enemies of Islam. To then, as portrayed in the artwork, have Dajjāl wield the same weapon against, we can assume, Islam and Muslims, inverts, or at least redefines, the meanings commonly ascribed to *Zulfaqar* and what it stands for.

These examples from *Curse Upon A Prayer* and Necrowretch illustrate that European extreme metal bands have evidently also begun to incorporate ISRs into their transgressive artistic expression. How are we to understand this relatively new relationship, and specifically the use of the figure of Dajjāl? Evidently,



FIGURE 16.2 Necrowretch, *Swords of Dajjal* (2024) Season of Mist Underground Activities (Artwork by: Stefan Thanneur)

there are many potential answers to such a question; however, I will propose two dimensions worth considering: controversy and subcultural capital.

3 Controversy and Capital

Although rare, the use of references to Islam within extreme metal dates back several decades. As early as 1987, in the album *Into the Pandemonium* (1987), the Swiss black metal band Celtic Frost included a sampled *adhān* in the introduction to their song “Caress Into Oblivion,” and the Polish band Behemoth similarly ends their song “At the Left Hand Ov (sic) God” with a Sufi-chant of the *shahada* in their album *The Apostasy* (2007). Although these examples seem to have avoided adverse backlash, other instances where black metal bands have included Islamic references have sparked controversies and

negative repercussions (Faxneld 2017). For instance, in their album *Noregs Vaapen*, nominated for a Norwegian Grammy in 2011, the band Taake includes the song “Orkan” containing a lyrical segment that curses Muhammad and Muslims: “Til Helvete med Muhammed og Muhammedanerne” (To Hell with Muhammad and the Muhammadans). Similarly, in 2003, the Swedish band Lord Belial released the song “Purify Sweden,” which includes the lines: “Purify Sweden! / All fucking mosques must burn / Purify Sweden! / Molest all Islamic believers.”

Consequently, both bands have suffered unfavourable media attention, their tours have at times been cancelled, and record labels have disowned them (Faxneld 2017; Hohnen 2023). This speaks to the potentially contentious nature of utilizing ISRs as part of extreme metal productions that blaspheme against or transgress normative religious positions. The debated nature of the matter is, however, also tied to larger discourses of positionality and power. This was observed by Faxneld (2017), who noted that blaspheming against Islam in European black metal is a disputed matter within the scene. Broadly, the debate is separated into two positions. Some state that blasphemy against Islam is acceptable or even warranted because black metal should communicate a general stance against religion. Others link anti-Islamic expressions to issues of racism, arguing that there is no need for explicit transgressive expressions against Islam since black metal already entails a critique of religion. It thus suffices for black metal to be anchored in a culturally specific context (in this case, Christian) (Faxneld 2017).

Indeed, Curse Upon A Prayer relates to this discourse in an interview conducted for the online zine *Black Metal Daily* in which their new album *Infidel* (2020) was discussed:

BMD: As has been the case before, the album is a savage attack on Islamic faith. I'm curious: why do you focus specifically on Islam? As we know, a large part of the anti-Christian themes prevalent in the second wave stemmed from the Black Circle being immersed in Christianity whilst growing up in Norway – what circumstances led to you developing such hatred for the Islamic ideology in particular?

CUAP: [...] Utilizing these Islamic themes in an artistic manner is a summary of several things; it's not just the slave mentality of the ideology itself but the way people tend to react when it comes to challenging Islam. There are still, for example, a good amount of black metal bands out there who still choose to rely on those very overused Christian themes, but run away like sheep when real resistance occurs. They want to be perceived as something “radical” but they want to do it within safe frames. And that's a strange equation indeed. I'd say

this whole question between Christianity and Islam is a good tool to separate the wolves from those sheep. There shouldn't be any middle ground nor excuses. There's no respect for a man who betrays his values when actual conflict occurs. (Black Metal Daily 2020)

In the quote, Curse Upon A Prayer relates their use of ISRs to discourses of authenticity and extremity common to the genre (Kuppens and van der Pol 2014). Black metal, as any musical or subcultural scene, creates internal hierarchies of “insiders” and “outsiders” based on perceptions of authenticity. However, one aspect that distinguishes black metal from other subgenres of metal, according to Kuppens and van der Pol (2014), is the constant appeal of, and the importance given to, this notion. The authors suggest that it may even be considered as a point of departure for the genre itself: “the black metal subgenre could be argued to owe its very existence to the concept of authenticity” (Kuppens and van der Pol 2014, 151). The construction of authenticity is commonly determined by what can be considered “true,” or “true KVLT” (cult) black metal (Kuppens and van der Pol 2014; Bujalka 2019; Wallin, Podoshen, and Venkatesh 2017). In the interview above, the concept of “authenticity” is tied to the notion of being “extreme” and to separate oneself from “those sheep,” that is, bands that do not utilize references to Islam. These crude statements directed towards other black metal bands are common within the genre and can be understood as part of the band's attempt to claim what Kahn-Harris calls “transgressive subcultural capital.” In his seminal work *Extreme Metal* (2007), Kahn-Harris differentiates between two forms of cultural capital within extreme metal: mundane and transgressive. Whereas mundane capital can be accrued through a sustained investment in scenic practices, such as running a fanzine, or by displaying in-depth knowledge of subgenres and their history, transgressive capital

is claimed through a radical individualism through displaying uniqueness and a lack of attachment to the scene. Indeed, transgressive subcultural capital can be claimed through a critique of the scene itself and, by implication, of mundane subcultural capital. (Ibid., 127)

Importantly, black metal is one genre that thrives on transgressive subcultural capital: “black metal bands continue to be far more vigorous in claiming transgressive subcultural capital than mundane subcultural capital” (ibid., 128). This is partly related to the genre's establishment in Norway during the early 1990s, when societal and legal norms were transgressed in the name of artistic integrity, ideology, and authenticity. Transgressive subcultural capital is elitist,

granted to bands and individuals who are perceived to transgress musical or artistic norms, or are deemed musical innovators.

Evidently, what is perceived or recognized as transgressive differs depending on the cultural, historical, and social context in which the transgression occurs. Otterbeck (2016), for instance, observed in his analysis of the Swedish comic strip Rocky that “obscene” jokes targeting “Islam” or “Muslims” were generally unremarked upon. In comparison, jokes that made use of Jewish stereotypes received negative media attention. This, in turn, could be understood against a backdrop in which antisemitic expressions have received more attention in Sweden in comparison to Islamophobic expressions (*ibid.*). Jewish and Muslim stereotypes were simply not invested with the same transgressive potential (Otterbeck 2016). However, it is not only the socio-political context that determines what is perceived as transgressive. Transgression is also evaluated based on what a specific act or expression has been *preceded* by.

That is, in a context in which ISRs have rarely been utilized within extreme metal, producers can be bestowed with subcultural capital for exploring such references and expressions not previously engaged with. Curse Upon A Prayer and Necrowretch’s use of Dajjāl can be seen as an endeavour to harness transgressive subcultural capital by making “Islam” “the object of aesthetic transgression” (Kahn-Harris 2007, 48), which, as we have seen, has rarely been done otherwise. Simultaneously, whether intentional or not, to utilize Dajjāl as an ISR can also be understood as an attempt to avoid the negative repercussions that previous black and extreme metal bands have experienced by not advocating the murder of Muhammad and Muslims, nor by suggesting burning mosques. That is not to say that Curse Upon A Prayer and Necrowretch’s alteration of Dajjāl’s typical defeat to triumph, or their utilization of his meaning potential as an “enemy of Islam,” is not transgressive from a normative Muslim position, but that it likely would not result in the same outrage as targeting Muhammad.

Additionally, the utilization of Dajjāl as a semiotic resource might relate to the fact that Dajjāl, in comparison to Iblis, who is known to be venerated by various Sufi-Muslim groups (Bodman 2011), is not invested with the same ambiguity. As expressed by Necrowretch in an interview with Suzanne Sanchez for *New Noise Magazine*:

We choose to focus on the Dajjal character, basically the antichrist in the Muslim religion. The Coran [sic] says that he’ll appear as a false prophet only to bring doom to this world, with an army of demons coming from the east. (Sanchez 2024)

Despite the factual inaccuracy (Dajjāl is not mentioned in the Qur'an), Necrowretch clarifies their reason for focusing on Dajjāl in their release – he is seen as the Muslim equivalent to the Antichrist in Christian tradition. This, in turn, may suggest that extreme metal bands are striving to expand their artistic repertoire and are incorporating Islamic equivalents to the Christian semiotic resources commonly found within the black and extreme metal genres.

4 Concluding Remarks

Although the study of Islam and popular culture has been a growing and well-researched field (Nieuwkerk, LeVine, and Stokes 2016; Rashid and Petersen 2023), many investigations have focused on how self-identified Muslims either produce “Islamic” art (Otterbeck and Larsson 2017; Otterbeck 2021b), or individuals’ personal reconciliations between their Muslim identity and their art (Aidi 2004; LeVine 2008; Nasir 2020). In this chapter, I have intended to draw attention to another point of entry to the field: how Islamic semiotic resources are used as part of an “anti-Islamic” repertoire, or in order to express hostile messages towards religion. The fact that neither the band members of Curse Upon A Prayer nor Necrowretch identify as Muslims does not mean that their use of ISRs is inconsequential. Rather, the aim has been to investigate how these resources (whether words, sounds, images, traditions, or concepts understood as Islamic) are utilized by artists, regardless of their identification as Muslim or non-Muslim (Ackfeldt 2019). Indeed, “Islam” is produced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Petersen and Ackfeldt 2022; Ackfeldt and Petersen 2025). However, so far, little attention has been paid to how references to Islam emerge in popular music as a critique of religion. This chapter has provided just one, out of potentially many, examples of this. Otterbeck’s argument that scholars of Islam should take an interest in what various actors “do” with what we call “Islam” holds much potential to draw inspiration from. One way forward is to study how various social actors utilize ISRs, how these are presented, and for what potential reasons.

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Noise and Islam

Anthony T. Fiscella

Worship none but Allah. (Qur'an (3:64))

Believers! Intoxicants, games of chance, idols and divining arrows, are abominations devised by Satan. Avoid them, so that you may prosper. (Qur'an (5:90))

This, the paradise which the righteous have been promised ... rivers of wine delectable to those that drink it. (Qur'an (47:15))

Revolution of music is paralleled by the increasing proliferation of machinery (Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise* (1913))

It's all about man's rights versus social control. (Halim El-Dabh (speaking about one of his compositions, McCutcheon 2017))

1 Entrance

January 25, 2025.

I arrived too late for the gathering. I sat in the stairway and did alone what the group behind the door did together. I sat silently. I stared out the window at the gray sky and desolate array of peopleless buildings. I heard noise.

Two mechanical clothes dryers on the floor above jointly ran irregular elliptical cycles of loud, whirring hums.

WhiiiiirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRRX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRRRrrrrrrrrRRRRXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRXXXXX
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XXRRRrrrrrrrrRRRRXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRR
 RrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRXXXXXXXXXXRRRrrrrrrrrRRRRXXXXXXXXXX
 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRXXXXXXXXXX
 XXRRRrrrrrrrrRRRRXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRRRrrr
 rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrRRRXXXXXXXXXXRRRrrrrrrrrRRRRXXXXXXXXXXXXX
 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXRRRRRR.

A “perfect” noise track. With machine as performer and me as audience. I came for silence. I received noise. An annoyance? An intentional absurdity created by “God”? Or, at least, an opportunity ... to listen.

I pondered.

- Cosey Fanni Tutti, of influential industrial/noise project *Throbbing Gristle*, said: “Industrial music was closest to journalism, a documentary in black and white of the savage realities of fading capitalism.”¹
- Margaret Thatcher said: “There Is No Alternative” (*TINA*), which sounded like a neoliberal version of an alcoholic justifying another drink.
- Sustainability activists counter similarly: “We have no Planet B,” no alternative: either we allow industry to wreck our world or we subordinate economics to ecology.
- Choices↔Addictions↔Habitual Disruptions.

Industrial/noise subculture developed, in part, as a form of agency – an extreme act of personal autonomy in the face of hopelessness and/or a personal act of hopelessness in the face of extreme atrocity. Islam, in contrast, developed partly from a sense of hope for a better life through submission to God and a moderate path between extremes.

Islamic institutions have both regulated noise (Akbar et al. 2021) and produced noise (Riyanto 2024).² Some of the earliest noisicians in the world came from predominantly Muslim countries: Halim El-Dabh from Egypt (1921–2017) and İlhan Mimaroglu (1926–2012) from Turkey.

How, one might wonder, does noise (subculture) relate to Islam?

¹ See Graham 2016, 184.

² Interestingly, Islam and noise clearly merge unexpectedly in one video/track posted by Islamic charity Ribaati in the UK (with 88,000+ views as of August 2025): 11 hours of “Quran white noise” (verses sung from the Quran over white noise to soothe babies to sleep): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U08o-BmL_ys. In another odd merger, we see a noise label such as Nauscopy release a collection of old 78 RPM music from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East as if its obscurity and noncommercial sound qualified it as “noise”: <https://nauscopy.bandcamp.com/album/so-that-beauty-shall-not-perish-online-version>.

2 Glossary

Addiction stems from Latin *ad* “to” + *dicere* “to say.” It initially implied the *power* (of gods and, later, debt collectors) to *speak* to the *addicted* (indebted), someone *without* power, spoken *to*, *enslaved* (often due to unpaid debt, sometimes through gambling). Later, *addiction*, in a positive/voluntary sense, could mean *devotion*: enslaving oneself to a “noble” cause (gods or government) (Rosenthal and Fairs 2019). If addiction appears as a habit of short-term gratifications that contribute to longer-term harm (against self and/or others), Alexander (2010) and Maté (2022) posit addiction as the result of trauma and/or loss of meaningful and healthy *connections* to self, nature, and others.

Industrial refers to both the mechanized production developed in the late 1800s–early 1900s and a music style pioneered by certain bands in the 1970s and 1980s who documented human capacity to commit atrocity and conditions where “society as a whole takes on the appearance of a factory” (Baudrillard in 1976, quoted in Hegarty 2007, 109). Industrial subculture, often nearly identical to noise thematically, has tended to emphasize “gore, sexual deviance, serial killers, fascism, and violence” (Gunn et al. 2022, 41) in artwork, texts, and design – usually, but not always – to shock and/or expose.

Islam, Arabic origin meaning “submission,” also relates to *salam* (“peace”).³ The “Islamic” world here refers to both predominantly Muslim countries and any (sub)culture built on traditions related to the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an/hadith.

Music derives from the Greek *mousikē* (Arabic: *musiqaa*) as in *technē* (“art”) of the “Muses” from *Mousa* (one of nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus) and related to *amuse* (Old French *amuser* to “delude,” “mock,” or “entrap”). As a tool of power, music “became representation and commodity” in 1700s Europe (Kohl 1997, 5). The term “industrial music” originally referred to what companies played to increase production, improve job attendance, and align worker morale with employer interests (Cardinell 1943; Halpin 1943). Jacques Attali wrote in *Noise: The Economy of Power* (1977) that music’s “appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political” (1985, 6). As such, music forms a terrain of contestation both in general⁴ and specifically within

3 This and subsequent etymologies culled from Online Etymology Dictionary: <https://www.etymonline.com>.

4 See Kohl 1997 and Sakolsky 1995 which also contains work by Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson), often portrayed as a “Muslim anarchist” due to his identification with lifestyle anarchism, heterodox Sufism (largely via Ibn ‘Arabi), the Moorish Orthodox Church, and “Temporary Autonomous Zones.” Bey wrote: “Islam is popularly believed to ‘ban’ music; yet obviously this is not the case, since so many Indian musicians converted” (Bey 1995, 29).

Islam.⁵ This pertains, too, to noise. As Greg Hainge put it, a “notion of sonic warfare lies at the heart of modern experimental music” (2013, 39).

Noise likely stems from Proto-Indo-European root *nau* (boat) to *nausea* (lit. “seasickness,” disgust, annoyance, etc.) or from Latin *noxia* (injury or damage, akin to *nocere* “to hurt” and *nex* “slaughter”). Generally regarded as *unwanted sound*, “noise” shall refer here to the subculture that identifies as such, “noisy” neighboring subcultures (e.g., black metal, noisy beats, industrial, musique concrète, cut-up, ambient, dark wave, and, to some degree, hardcore punk), and the non-musical sound art/electroacoustics produced in more academic contexts – all while privileging noise subculture *proper* as prototypical. Thus, we have basic parameters: *the less that something sounds* (a) melodic, (b) structured, (c) moderately paced rhythm, (d) clear, and/or (e) radio-friendly and *the more that something sounds* (f) dissonant, (g) improvised/random, (h) extremely slow, fast, or arrhythmic, (i) distorted, and/or (j) directed toward a niche group, the more we shall label it “noise.” Likewise, the more that “noise” connects to DIY tape trading, homemade zine production, club scenes, social deviance, and independent labels, we shall regard it as noise *subculture*.⁶

Power (Old French *pouvoir*; Vulgar Latin *potere*, “to be able,” from the Proto-Indo-European root *poti*, “powerful,” “lord”) here, entails the ability to *do* something – often exerting social leverage *over* someone else, yet potentially alone *through* some means or *with* someone else.

Profit, which arbitrarily functions as a central pillar for industrial society, seems to qualify as a *societal* addiction that, in turn, fuels *personal* addictions of consumers in a feedback loop of profitable sales that obstruct collective sobriety/sustainability.

Elsewhere, Bey recited spoken word over Eastern-flavored ambient-trance (sometimes ethereal noise) tracks by Bill Laswell. He also served as a social/ideological bridge between Orientalist Beatniks (e.g., Gysin, Burroughs) and the taqwacore scene (Knight 2012). *Noise & Politics* podcast host Christoph Fringeli (of Praxis Records, *Datacide* zine, and noise/break-beat projects Slaughter Politics, Noface, etc.) mentioned Bey’s associations with pedophilia and Sufism concluding: “Hakim Bey represents the most flawed forms of individualistic anarchism” (Fringeli 2022).

5 See Otterbeck *et al.* 2018 and Saefullah 2020.

6 *Sonically*, noise subculture has more in common with academic-oriented electroacoustics and sound art by classically trained musicians but has more in common *culturally* with DIY hardcore punk and black metal scenes (where they sometimes merge sonically).

3 Setting: Islam and Addiction

Some people get addicted to *alcohol*. Muhammad issued three responses during his lifetime: first, moderation, then abstinence, and, finally, total ban. The following centuries of Islam saw three more stages related to addiction: first, criminalization (*jurm*), second, portrayal as a spiritual disease (*mard ruhani*), and finally, most commonly today, an Islamicized version of AA's 12-Step program (*Millati Islami*: "the path of peace") (Ali 2014, 922).⁷

Intoxication *sometimes* leads to addiction. Sometimes not. Some Dervishes treated alcohol more like sacrament than sin (Karamustafa 2006). Hafez of Shiraz (1325–1390) said "Wine (*khamr*) has flowed in my veins like blood" and Shaikh Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (865–925) invented distillation (Matthee 2014, 100).

Caliph ibn Walid (d. 744) compared *music* to alcohol: "avoid singing for it decreases shame, increases desire, and destroys manliness, and verily it takes the place of wine and does what drunkenness does [...] for singing is the instigator of fornication" (Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012, 232).

Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) described music as having a "sensual power" alternating with its presence and absence toward the "the greatest of all human pleasures" (Granot and Shair 2019, 597). The seductive capacities of music make it forbidden (*haram*) in certain Islamic contexts, while most traditions consider chanting for eulogies/services and music for work/military purposes permissible (*halal*) (Otterbeck and Ackfeldt 2012, 230). Music and trance have also (a) served as a bridge to the Divine (Gribetz 1991), (b) functioned as "religion" (Stewart 2017), (c) helped heal from addiction (Bensaid *et al.* 2021, 144), and (d) even proven addictive (Ahrends 2017).

Likewise, *belief in God* has both helped *heal* from addiction (e.g., 12-Step) and proven *addictive* (a type of "drug" that believers "don't want to live without," Wellman, Jr. *et al.* 2014, 651). Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801) wrote: "Last night I became intoxicated with love for my Lord and woke up inebriated from it" (ās-Sulamī 1999, 78). Karl Marx famously stated: "The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" ([1843] 1971, 131–132).⁸

7 Irony: English speakers derive "alcohol" (*al-kohl*) from a language (Arabic) that spawned the largest non-drinking culture in the world.

8 In response, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz quipped: "In the United States today, opiates are the religion of the people" (1974, 53).

Whereas wealthy elites have oppressed, God (and music) have paradoxically fueled both protest and sedation.

Some Sufis saw power's seduction as more dangerous than alcohol. To quote Rabia again, "I once used the light of the sultan's lamp to sew by, but it bound my heart. I undid every stitch, and then I used the light of God's sun to do my work" (Gibbs 2020, 78).

If a community of believers (or music fans) can function as a surrogate for *kinship* (MacIntyre 2004), then they might foster Alexander and Maté's solution to addiction: *connection*.

Some tendencies in Islam (or Catholic Workers, engaged Buddhism, etc.) prioritize worship, ritual, care, community, and ethics over societal addiction to money and power. Yet, so far, we do not see any major systemic program anywhere designed for detox and recovery from the allures of power or profit. Could noise provide *connection without seduction, trance without God, and community without profit*?

4 Plan

This cursory "telescopic" overview arbitrarily selects from my limited awareness of approximately 400+ projects on Bandcamp, Discogs, and elsewhere (invariably including hoaxes and/or one person using different artist names).⁹

This chapter asks: Does any noise (sub)culture exist in the Islamic world? What do noise artists, inside and outside of the Islamic world, say about Islam? How might noise relate to Islam, power, and addiction?

Like noise artist Masonna's short, hyper-intensive 1-minute "concerts," this chapter intentionally crams *too much* information into *too little* space.

9 While some Satanists in the U.S. have defended Muslims, some Scandinavian black metal bands singled out Islam as particularly reprehensible. This led to a debate over a distinction between Middle-East-based bands (e.g., Knight of Fire) "legitimately" critiquing Islam-as-Power (a form of rebellion) and European black metal bands (e.g., Lord Belial and Taake) critiquing Islam-as-Foreigner (a form of racism) (Faxneld 2017, 100–101). The words, however, can seem identical such as songs by white nationalist Moharebeh (US) entitled "At Night the Mosque Burns" and "Murder Muslims" compared to "Burn Your Local Mosque" and "Massacre Muslims" by Iranian exile Mogh in Germany. Between this factor and the overbearing persecution of metal musicians in Muslim-dominant countries (Crowcroft 2017; Fermont and Faille 2016, 65), where members of black metal bands operate clandestinely via pseudonyms, it seems difficult to distinguish between "real bands" with fake names (e.g., Ayat) and "fake bands" with fake names who lie about their location/identity (e.g., Seeds of Iblis, False Allah, Janaza, and Mulla, see Mjöltnir n.d.).

4.1 Backdrop 1: Timeline Related to Noise/Islam

1913: Futurist Luigi Russolo (1855–1947) theorized about noise.
1924: Ata Türk abolished the 407-year-old Ottoman Caliphate.
1926: The now-huge Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement began.
1928: Hassan al-Banna and others founded the Muslim Brotherhood.
1930: Wallace Fard Muhammad and others founded the Nation of Islam.
1932: U.S. and British-backed Wahhabi forces created the Saudi Kingdom of Arabia (with vast oil fields discovered in 1938).
1944: Halim El-Dabh created the first example of musique concrète, “The Expression of Zaar.”¹⁰
1948: The Israeli state massacred Palestinians and displaced 1 million people.
1950s: Sufi trance musicians, the Master Musicians of Joujouka, met Throbbing Gristle guru Brion Gysin in Morocco, who, with William Burroughs, introduced them to the West and misleadingly propagated the phrase “nothing is true, everything is permitted” (NITEIP), falsely credited to the dying words of Hassan-i-Sabbah (1081–1124), the founder of the Nizari Ismailis aka “Assassins” (Geiger 2005, 146; Fiscella 2020, 289). Karlheinz Stockhausen composed classical “noise” (emphasizing dissonance and arrhythmia). The 1,210-year-old Ibadi Imamate in Oman ended in 1959.
1960s: İlhan Mimaroglu composed noise works such as “Agony” (1964) and “Wings of the Delirious Demon” (1969). Nihilist Spasm Band released noise(y) songs like “Destroy the Nations” (1968). Dada and Fluxus movements inspired noise music (e.g., Ben Patterson, Yoko Ono, and John Cage), alongside the spaced-out free-jazz of Sun Ra. In 1967, Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in less than 6 days.
1970s: The 1,065-year-old Zaydi Imamate in Yemen came to an end in 1970. Rolling Stones Records released *Brian Jones Presents the Pipes of Pan at Joujouka* (1971). In 1975–1976, Throbbing Gristle and Industrial Records developed out of the COUM Transmissions art collective in London with Cosey Fanni Tutti (b. 1951), Chris Carter (b. 1953), Peter “Sleazy” Christopherson (1955–2010), and Genesis P-Orridge (1950–2020). Indonesian composer Slamet Abdul Sjukur (1935–2015) produced the environmental work “Jakarta 450 Tahun” (1977) from the sounds of Jakarta. Jacques Attali published *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977). British anarcho-noisepunk art-band Crass took shape (1977). Mamman Sani Abdullaye made his first minimalist recordings in Niger (1978).

10 This track built on field recording of a zar/zaar ritual. Developed in the horn of Africa more than 100 years ago, “[t]he relationship between Islam and zar practices remains poorly explored, despite the obvious and profound connections” (El Hadidi 2016, 6).

In 1979, British-Pakistani punk band Alien Kulture formed and an Iranian revolution overthrew the Shah establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran.

1980: Influential projects Laibach (Slovenia), Einstürzende Neubauten (Germany), Whitehouse (UK), and Merzbow (Japan) all launched this year. Canadian noisepunk band Tunnel Canary (UK) released *Jihad*.

1982: Israel invaded Lebanon, leading to the founding of Hezbollah. According to interviews, the invasion inspired Bryn Jones (1961–1999) to form influential noisyloops/ethno-beat-focused Muslimgauze “to remind the Western society what is happening in the Middle-East!” (Urselli-Schärer 1998).¹¹

1983: San Francisco-based RE/Search published the formative *Industrial Culture Handbook*, where publisher V. Vale wrote a variation of NITEIP: “Nothing is forbidden, everything is permitted,” an unofficial ethos for noise subculture (1983, 2). Muslimgauze released *Hammer & Sickle* EP and *Kabul* LP (first mentioning Palestine on 1985’s *Blinded Horses*).

1986: E. Manu Eel (Malaysia) released electroacoustic-oriented work (e.g., “Mutatis Mutandis”).

1987: Sheik Yassin co-founded Hamas in Palestine.

1988: Public Enemy released the track “Bring the Noise” with ideological inspiration from the Black Panthers as well as Louis Farrakhan and Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam.

1990s: The Hardline scene started in 1990, influenced vegan straightedge metalcore, and key members eventually converted to Islam (Eeyore 2022). Inspired, in part, by Public Enemy, Boo Yah Tribe, Crass, and Malcolm X, the former Pakistani-British drummer for Southern Death Cult (later The Cult), Aki Nawaz, co-founded Fun-Da-Mental in 1991. Splinter projects 2nd Gen and Scalper pioneered noise-rap. The Digital Hardcore scene developed in Germany after Atari Teenage Riot (Alec Empire, Carl Crack, and Syrian-German Hanin Elias) formed in 1992. Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) formed (1993). Tian An Men 89 Records started in 1993, releasing punk and underground music from Eastern Europe, Africa, and countries like Morocco, Turkey, Syria, and Kazakhstan. The Shalabi Effect formed (1996). Noise and black metal subcultures developed in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Middle East with projects such as The Camel/Sound of Ruby (Saudi Arabia), Taddart (Algeria), Ayat (Lebanon), Floral Of Forever (Brunei), Worldhate/Kekal (Indonesia), and To Die (Indonesia). The Taliban established the First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996.

11 Fringeli 2009 and others have critiqued Muslimgauze for “anti-Semitism” because of his adamant anti-Zionism but, aside from song titles, graphics, and a few short interviews, Muslimgauze intentionally kept political statements brief (with nothing overtly anti-Jewish that I have seen).

2000s–2010s: Indonesian noiserock pioneers Seek Six Sick released their first cassette in 2001. Academic literature arose on industrial and noise subcultures,¹² metal and Islam,¹³ hip hop and Islam,¹⁴ punk and Islam,¹⁵ and later noise in predominantly Muslim countries.¹⁶ Anarcho-punk bands Marjinal (Indonesia), Demokhratia (Algeria), and Detox (Lebanon) released music in 2005, 2007, and 2009, respectively. Uprisings across the Middle East took place in 2011, overthrowing governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and eventually Syria (in 2024). Film documentaries on punk, metal, and noise came out, such as *Taqwacore: Birth of Punk Islam* (2010), *True Life – Resist the Power, Saudi Arabia* (2010), and *Bising: Noise & Experimental Music in Indonesia* (2014). Noise labels, releasing material from around the Muslim world sprouted up: 100 Copies and Sound of Noize (Egypt), Modular Mind, Annihaya, and Ruptured Records (Lebanon), Exist Records and BLTNM (Palestine), Drowned By Locals (Jordan), Anoise (Iran/Germany), Radio Khiyaban (Netherlands), Rhadâb (Morocco), Nashazphone (Egypt/Algeria), and the innovative alternative-economy-oriented Yes No Wave label in Indonesia (who lifted ethno-noise Senyawa to global attention; see Agato and Rasudi 2017). Notable noise compilations appeared, including *Ruptured Sessions Vol. 2* (Lebanon, 2009), *INDONOSIA* (Indonesia, 2016), *Pekak! Indonesian Noise 1995–2015* (2018), *Noisy Ground* (Turkey, 2019), *Noise à Noise 19* (Iran, 2019), *Not Your World Music: Noise in South East Asia* (2016), and *Anthology of Contemporary Music from Middle East* and similar compilations from Unexplained Sounds Group (2016–2020).

2020s: In response to Hamas guerrilla/terror attacks beginning October 7, 2023, Israel occupied Gaza and killed tens of thousands of Lebanese/Palestinian men, women, and children. Benefit compilations appeared in support of Palestine featuring hundreds of bands performing hardcore punk (e.g., *A HOMELAND DENIED*, 2024; *KONTRA GENOSIDA*, 2024), noise/ambient/leftfield electronica (e.g., *C2E: Emergency for Gaza*, 2023; *Resist To Exist*, 2021; *Transmissions*

12 See Hainge 2013; Hegarty 2007; Novak 2013; Potter and Whittaker 2022; Reed 2013; and Wallis 2016.

13 See Crowcroft 2017; Hecker 2016; LeVine 2008; and Otterbeck *et al.* 2018.

14 See Ackfeldt 2019, Gunn *et al.* 2022, Khabeer 2016, Knight 2007, and Sagir 2021.

15 No full-length Muslim punk monograph exists but too many dissertations and articles to list. See overviews (Aidi 2014; Fiscella 2012), forays into the taqwacore scene (McDowell 2017), Indonesia's punk scene (Martin-Iverson 2018; Saefullah 2020), Pakistani punk/metal scene (Usmani 2011), and, most recently, Ouahbi 2024, that covered Ikhras, Zoufriya, and Zanjeer. So far, we see almost no relevant research about punk/hardcore bands like The Muslimz, Haram (NYC), NØ MAN (DC), and Taqbir.

16 See Fermont and Faille 2016; bin Mokhtar 2013; and Menus and Stellfox 2019.

for Palestine, 2024; *Women of Noise for Palestine*, 2023; *Zilzal'z Sonic Ceremony*, 2024), and black metal (e.g., *Black Metal Against Blackout*, 2024; *Free Palestine – Comp I*, 2023) as well as noise compilations *RESIST COLONIAL POWER BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY* (2023) for both Haiti and Palestine and *Land 01* (2024) for the displaced in Lebanon.

4.2 Backdrop 2: Noise Subculture and Power

Because it mimics and amplifies the “unwanted sound” of industrial society, noise exerts power in various ways:

- (a) we see power *over* others, such as Whitehouse frontman William Bennett’s desire to create “power electronics” that “could bludgeon an audience into submission,” which Daniel Wilson compared to “the political suppression of the masses by the powerful, be it dissipating teens with high-pitched deterrents, or destroying Palestinian settlements with noise bombs” (2016, 120, 122). Overt racists, nationalists, and social Darwinists exist in both black metal (Buesnel 2020) and noise (Reed 2013) as tiny minorities;
- (b) we also see power *through*, when people assert control over machinery and their own bodies in personal expressions. Thee Temple Ov Psychick Youth taught that, though programmed, *we can use ritual to reprogram ourselves* psychically and physically: “It is up to everyone to accept the power that their bodies are endowed with” (Dines and Grimes 2021, 200);
- (c) finally, we see power *with* others structurally in DIY networks that sustain noise subculture independent of a corporate music industry (Benhaïm 2018; Eddebo 2024, 554; Hermawan 2024, 29; Martin-Iverson 2018; Menus 2022, 464). Group agency also manifests socio-psychically through labor collectives and “collective trance” (Fermont and Faille 2016, 78, 86–94).

4.3 Backdrop 3: Noise Subculture in Predominantly Muslim Countries

Outside of the more classically trained, art, and academic settings of Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt, it seems that “punk and (perhaps even more) the grindcore scenes often have connections with noise, especially in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia” (Fermont and Faille 2016, 67). One finds in Indonesia a “solid presence of the Do It Yourself (D.I.Y.) culture [...] because many Indonesian Noise artists nowadays are from the Hardcore Punk and Metal scenes” (Hermawan 2024, 29). Indonesia has one of the largest noise scenes in the world, with hundreds of projects and zines replete with booking agencies and clubs. Sarah Benhaïm documented five noise record labels from five countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, and the U.S.) and, out of 938 releases,

only one came from a predominantly Muslim country: Turkey (2018, 120). In Malaysia, “the small, local experimental and noise music scene does not face any kind of censorship” (Fermont and Faille 2016, 66). Unlike anarcho-punk, noise does not tend to express a common view (Graham 2013). That said, one study of 20 Malaysian noisicians found that 45% held anarchist views, 40% simply “hated politics,” 10% supported an opposition party and 0% supported the government so, despite noisicians generally not viewing their scene as “political,” 45% “agreed that, fundamentally, Noise is a form of protest” (bin Mokhtar 2013, 42).

5 Material: Noise and Islam

With punk, one could discern three “waves” in relation to Islam: first, non-Islamic/anti-“religion” punk (e.g., Demokhratia or Alien Kulture); second, Muslim punks/converts using Islam as an anti-colonialist marker (e.g., Aki Nawaz of Fun-Da-Mental or Aditya Abdurrahman of Sub Chaos/Underground Tauhid); and third, re-imagining Islam through punk eyes, challenging traditional Islamic authorities (e.g., *The Taqwacores* and writers such as Sabina England) (Fiscella 2012, 260–261). Black metal/industrial/noise scenes lack similarly clear “waves.” Most such projects – including black metal and especially Indonesian noise – remain silent on Islam and the few mentions often seem ambiguous (a common tendency in noise – especially in lieu of lyrics).

Nonetheless, we can discern minority tendencies in noise (some shared with punk):

- “Islamic” band/song names
- General opposition to “religion”
- Intentional mockery or “blasphemy”
- Islam as anti-colonialist/anti-Zionist
- “Islamic” imagery
- Positive reference to Sufism
- Islam as a private matter (see Table 17.1)

Non-Muslims (e.g., Muslimgauze, Kamp Chaos, Haraam, and Bedouindrone) and some black metal musicians tend to use general images of Islam/Islamic culture (e.g., see Fig. 17.1), whereas punks and noisicians in Muslim-dominant countries or who have a Muslim background may mention specific groups, policies, or branches they support or oppose, such as Zanjeer’s anti-Taliban song or the tongue-in-cheek appropriation of Hezbollah’s logo by Vote Hezbollah (US) and Detox (Lebanon). Most noisicians with a Muslim background don’t reference Islam in their work.

TABLE 17.1 Charting a subcultural Islam: noise*/ambient°/black metal†/darkwave-industrial#/experimental≈/noisy-ethnic-beats§/hardcore-punk+/hiphop=

	Non-Muslims/ non-Muslim background living in a non-Muslim country	Muslims/Muslim background living in a non-Muslim country	Muslims/Muslim background living in a predominantly Muslim country
"Islamic" band/song names	"Shaheed" Haraam*#°§ (Denmark) "Islamic noise" <i>Krovavaya Soska</i> * (Russia) "Jihad" <i>Tunnel</i> <i>Canary</i> *+ (UK) <i>Noise Jihad</i> * (Russia) "Muslim Pray" <i>Byroleiw</i> * (Poland) "Fatwa" <i>VDO</i> ≈§ (US)	"Bitch, I am Islam" <i>Saint Abdullah</i> * (Iran/Canada/US)	"Sword of Islam" <i>Atman Halal</i> * (Kyrgyzstan)
General opposition to "religion"		"Satan Is The Only Friend I Got" <i>Atish Pare</i> * (Iran/ Denmark)	"Against The Abrahamic Syndicates" <i>Debopom Ghosh</i> <i>Must Be Killed</i> *≈† (Bangladesh)
Intentional mockery of Islam or "blasphemy"		"Islamic State Kids" <i>Proud Muslims</i> ≈ (Iran/Sweden)	"I am Satan!" Al-Namrood† (Saudi Arabia)
Islam as anti- colonialist/ anti-Zionist	" Hamas Arc" <i>Muslimgauze</i> § (UK) "Gaza" <i>Bedouindrone</i> *° (Belgium)	"Islam for me was more punk than punk" (Saini 2004) <i>Aki Nawaz</i> § (Pakistan/UK)	

TABLE 17.1 Charting a subcultural Islam (*cont.*)

	Non-Muslims/ non-Muslim background living in a non-Muslim country	Muslims/Muslim background living in a non-Muslim country	Muslims/Muslim background living in a predominantly Muslim country
Islamic/Sufi imagery/ symbols	<i>Abu Nein</i> # (Sweden) “Riad noir” <i>Abu Ama</i> * (Germany)	<i>Naujawanan</i> <i>Baidar</i> *≈ (Afganistan/US)	“Revolt Yourself” <i>El Mahdy Jr.</i> § (Algeria) “Drama Drama” <i>Ola Saad</i> * (Egypt)
Positive reference to Sufism	“Allahu” <i>Qalandar</i> *≈ (US) <i>Drunken Sufis</i> ≈ (US)		“bridge between islamo-sufism and industrial music. [...] the world is crumbling apart ... judgement day is nearing, repent before it’s too late.” ^a <i>Prophän</i> * (Morocco)
Islam=private faith/practice			“If you believe in God and religion, please do it, as long as you don’t disturb those who disagree with you” (Menus 2022, 186). <i>Indra Menus, To Die</i> * (Indonesia) “Religion is a private domain” (Menus 2022) <i>Gilang Damar</i> <i>Setiadi, TSAATAN</i> * (Indonesia)

a See Prophän 2021: <https://khemiarecordslondon.bandcamp.com/album/proph-n-those-who-fight-in-gods-way-k0i8>.

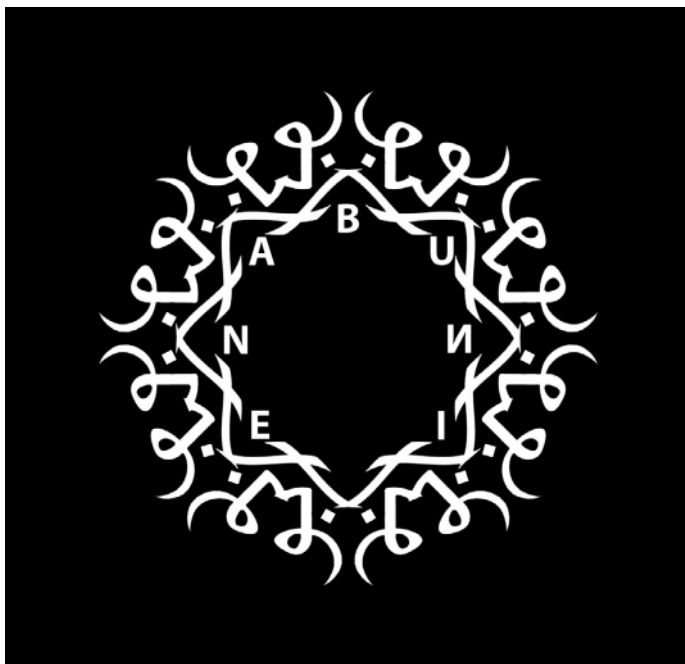


FIGURE 17.1
Abu-Nein logo

6 Parting Words

Does any noise (sub)culture exist in the Islamic world?

Absolutely.

What do noise artists say about Islam?

Nothing in unison. Very little in general.

How might noise relate to Islam, power, and addiction?

Noise and Islam may share an unlikely commonality: *resistance to music and the seductive drug of capital's siren song*. Native American scholar Jack Forbes ([1979] 2008) described the “white man’s” ruthlessness and greed as a type of psychosis: *wétiko* (“cannibalism”). Fredy Perlman (1983) complemented Forbes’ intersocietal/anticolonialist analysis with a macroscopic view of human *his-story* and the devastating allure of technology that he dubbed *Leviathan*: a vast complex of hierarchical relationships, bureaucratic laws, and technical instruments that invariably commodifies/consumes people just as it commodifies/consumes nature and animals. In identifying with *Leviathan*, people lose themselves, their autonomy, and humanity. *Leviathan*, an all-consuming

Machine of Civilization, uses human labor while unreflectively annihilating the very prerequisites for human (and animal) survival. Noise and Islam share this struggle/jihad of resistance.

What can we do? How shall we respond? [Do any other (research) questions matter more?]

Whether through plastic pollution, habitat eradication, carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, chemical toxicity, or some eruption of weaponized “artificial intelligence” or nuclear war, we live precariously. Like an epidemic of disaster, we see localized climate Armageddons, rising fascism, war, and genocide. Noisicians reflect and critique all of this while building communal/economic alternatives.

Sociologist Robin James (of noise duo citation:obsolete) argued that neoliberalism’s “resilience discourse” places the burden on individuals to adjust to an unhealthy society. Exemplifying desperate responses, James cited “Into the Death,” and “Delete Yourself (You Have No Chance to Win)” by Atari Teenage Riot (1995), which she described as an *ethic of death* (2015, 48) reminiscent, perhaps, of Hamas and other groups’ celebration of martyrdom. James’ observation seems to resonate with Hegarty’s: “Noise is akin to the masochistic contract” (2007, 124). Perhaps this voluntary *Masochistic Contract* defines the non-consensual *Social Contract* – more accurately described as an *Anti-Social Contract* of domination (Kly 1989, 8).

In other words, if societal addiction to profit and power smothers people’s capacity to hope/work for a decent alternative, some will refuse to comply, scraping their fingers bloody on their cell bars in masochistic *protest*: not a vision for a better world but a refusal to accept this one. Not acquiescing into complacency with music but resisting through noise.

Jacques Attali hoped for an uncommodified music scene, but the major energy drink company endorsement of “Vegan Straight Edge Merzbow” showed that Leviathan can commodify anything – even noise.

Yet, here we see the lens of addiction also provides a potential opening: if society and its structural addiction via *wétiko*/Leviathan, has both responsibility and power to change, then DIY networks of obstinate (and abstinent?) resistance and the Islamic world (seeking balanced sobriety) might complement each other in global revolt against the rule of profit, a massive *mutual* intervention and 12-Step program devoted to collective/relative sobriety. Our Higher Power/Mother Earth will outlast us, leaving Leviathan as a momentary rustle of plastic waste in cosmic wind, yet struggle endures. Turkish vegan straightedge band, xRISALEx, screamed “Behead the Leviathan,” which *could*

mean: remove profit as the highest priority and replace it with nature, connection, and genuinely human(e) relationships. If music serves power in seduction, noise may disrupt the (dis)connection.

7 (No) Exit

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Resources

Jogja Sonic Index: <https://jogjasonicindex.com>.

Encyclopaedia Metallum: www.metal-archives.com.

Indonesia Noise-Experimental zine: https://ia800209.us.archive.org/7/items/indonesia-noise-experimental-mini-zine-2024/Indonesia%20Noise-Experimental%20Mini%20Zine%202024_text.pdf.

Syrphe-database: http://syrphe.com/african&asian_database.htm.

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Sensing the City: Sonic Rhythms and Embodied Change in the Megacities of Cairo and New York

Maria Frederika Malmström

No, not again! My body remembers. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic left New York City a radically transformed urban space, shifting from the “normal” cacophony of a noisy megacity to a city of thick silence. The sonic alteration was a familiar experience for me, reminiscent of the quieting of Cairo following the dispersals of the Rabaa’ al-Adawiya and el-Nahda sit-ins of August 14, 2013. During what would become the largest massacre of demonstrators in protest history, I, along with my fellow Cairenes, experienced a loss of navigation in the cityscape. Yet, in 2013, this abrupt change in rhythm was perceived as something more concrete, albeit threatening, since Egyptians were, if possible, more prepared. It was the side effect of a national, embodied trauma, in which the military state killed its own unwanted citizens. In 2020, however, both for me in New York City and for my friends in Cairo, the lack of sound felt more nebulous and abstract.

In late May 2020, the sounds of NYC radically changed once again, as protests spread to denounce police brutality against Black people, in general, and Black men, in particular, following the murder of George Floyd, an African-American man, at the hands of a white police officer. Although I had left NYC by then – having traveled back to Sweden in April – I followed the news closely and stayed in daily contact with friends and colleagues across the United States. What stood out was that they talked about how the soundscape of the city had changed from one day to the next. The people in focus also talked about what they called “the new fatigue.” Nino, a friend and a neighbor living on the Lower East Side, told me that his ears were “too sensitive” and he could not take it anymore. He wrote in a text message:



All original audio recordings have been made available online and may be accessed via this QR code and the following link: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004761483-020>.



FIGURE 18.1 New York City street during lockdown, 2020

First I tried to adapt to the novel silence of the city in the beginning of the lockdown and then to the new sound of ambulances. And now ... two weeks ago, when they opened the city again some sounds came back, in a limited way of course. It is not the normal NYC, but we relaxed a bit ... and then this ... Suddenly the air is filled with loud sounds of shootings; sound of helicopters day



FIGURE 18.2 Cairo street during lockdown, 2020

and night; screams from demonstrations. I cannot take it. It is like your experiences from Cairo, Maria! The ear is the most dominant sense, for sure. I am so tired now, even if there are no new riots in the streets ... I do not have the energy to take my daily long walks any longer, Maria. I joined some demonstrations in the beginning, but now, I do not do it anymore. It is like 9/11 every day, Maria. From March until now.

When I listened to his voice, heard the tiredness in it, followed the news, and received sound clips and photos from my friends in NYC, my body immediately tuned in again – I reexperienced the tiring and stressful events of Cairo in 2013. I have written about this elsewhere:



SOUND CLIP 18.1 Shootings, Cairo, 2013



FIGURE 18.3 Street curfew scene, Cairo, 2013

We – a couple of female friends in Cairo from different generations and earlier disparate lived experiences – were still completely ignorant of the details of what was going on and what the next step would be. The sounds of war against its citizens during the day terrified us all. In addition to the erratic gunfire from different grades of firearms, we were also bombarded by booming voices through megaphones, sirens, helicopters that circled again and again overhead, and the roar of military jets passing over our heads repeatedly. To experience Cairo empty, dark, and silent during curfew during the night was a total contrast to every moment of my previous interactions with the city. In sharp contrast to the intense volumes that saturated our days, night introduced a completely different and even more threatening rhythm. The new Cairo was a ghost town. (Malmström 2019)

The sound of silence, triggered by a decree from Egypt's interim government in mid-August 2013, had not been an element of the soundscape in a similar way before. The silence imposed by curfews during the uprisings in early 2011 was perceived in an entirely different light. Political opponents of the Mubarak regime recall the altered sonic rhythm of Cairo at that time as a breath of freedom and promise of a potential better future (Malmström 2019).

These vignettes of the sound of silence, as well as sonic intensity in Egypt and the USA – where sonic experiences are connected to unpredictable violence, whether from a military regime or a global pandemic – are examples of how embodied reactions to sonic atmospheres (Eisenlohr 2018) depend on specific contexts, temporalities, and earlier, relational, individual lived experiences. But even if the sound of silence during the pandemic in New York or the sonic intensity thereafter in relation to George Floyd demonstrations are very different from the sounds of war or the sound of silence after the 2013 massacre in Cairo, or those during the uprisings, there are many similarities as well. This chapter aims to explore different ethnographic fragments, including autobiographical accounts, of such dynamics to bring the backstage and the frontstage of politics into a deep dialogue. This will be done through the use of two connected bodies of theory – affect and rhythm.

Massumi's understanding of affect as an intense force that shapes and flows through bodies, where it becomes tangible and experienced as emotions (1995), is useful for thinking with to understand sonic politics. The effects (emotions) generated by affective forces (here, unpredictable, violent sound or abrupt silence) can both shape and constrain the actions of individuals and groups because vibrations are felt in the body. I use Massumi's interpretation of affect to explore how sound produces affect, and how sound penetrates walls and borders, since these are always porous (Filipović 2017; see also Rice 2016; Abu Hamdan 2016, 2018 about borders, sound, and prisons). Drawing on Lefebvre's (2004) notion that there is always a rhythm where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure, I examine the role of altered rhythm in relation to temporality: how it might be experienced, embodied, and materialized. To that end, I elaborate on two unique cases in relation to dramatic rhythm changes: Cairo in 2013 and New York City and Cairo in 2020, as experienced by a few selected subjects, including myself. That said, it is not possible to make any generalizations. Still, my argument here is rather that bodies, sonic matter, and urban space are intimately linked to each other, and changes to the familiar rhythm of the everyday seem to produce emotions such as disorientation and anxiety. However, as in the case of the 2011 uprisings in Cairo, other emotions were also produced, such as hope and the imagination of a better future.

1 Fieldwork and Method

My networks in Cairo for this chapter consist of collaborators who have become friends: politically active Cairenes, both women and men, who sometimes refer to themselves as intellectuals or members of the new bourgeoisie.

In this context, it is important to be perceived as intellectual, political, and pro-feminist; to have a girl/boyfriend(s) and marry later in life; to party, to know the cool people and places, and to live downtown. My networks in NYC for this chapter include colleagues and friends – liberal men and women who self-identify as intellectuals and cultured. Here as well, being seen as intellectual, political, and pro-feminist is key, as is having a girl/boyfriend(s) and not necessarily to marry, being socially active – including frequently attending dinners, parties, and cultural events, etc. – knowing the cool people and places, and living downtown. In light of the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter here, I have chosen not to provide any further information about any of them, to ensure the safety of my Cairene's contacts and to enable a balanced comparison between the groups.

For my research, I tried to go out as much as possible, engaging in “sense walking,” a methodology by which I try to experience the streets in an intersensory way, not focusing on my sight. An intersensorial approach mobilizes all perceptual means, whereas focusing on a single sense at a time (sound walking as methodology) can attune one to changes in the materiality of affective vibrations or in the everyday rhythm. Although it is impossible to shut down our other senses, it is possible to consciously focus on listening to the alterations of the empirical soundscape. I have used material from a previous fieldwork in 2013 and onward, as well as phone calls, FaceTime, social media messages, text messages, photos, and sound clips recorded during the pandemic.

This project entails new methodologies, challenges, and inquiries. For example, it is sometimes impossible for the researcher to conduct interviews during uncertain and violent events. However, it remains possible to listen to one's own body and surroundings and to use these subjective experiences in conversation with others' experiences of the same event to grasp collective affective experiences. This is also why I have included autobiographical accounts of my sonic experiences in different settings. It is important to note that the autobiographical method refers to a specific form of research. The data collected is based on my own life experiences, which are also used as a method to compare experiences in conversations with my interlocutors.

Thinking and writing about sensory knowledge and emotive elements is not easy: the blurred binaries of the knowledge of being and feeling have their limitations. Of course, the researcher must take notice of their own embodied and lived experience of affect, but how can one read the transmission of affect (Brennan 2004) between bodies, collectives, and material surroundings? If we are not self-contained in terms of our energies, if the transmission of affect comes via interaction with other people and our environment, and if this has a physiological impact, how can we understand these processes and their consequences? Furthermore, employing rhythmanalysis in combination with more

standard ethnographic methods requires the researcher to listen to and think with their own body in lived temporality – lived experience being key – including hearing, smelling, touching, seeing, and tasting the traces that mark out the (changing) rhythms. This is the first step in grasping change in the making, since emotions resonate with the material and sociographical environment.

As noted, I combine the study of affective experience and rhythmanalysis with other research tools, such as interviews and conversations about shared experiences, as well as short accounts (from phone calls, FaceTime, social media messages, text messages, photos and sound clips) to explore how experiences are communicated and how different bodies are affected differently, depending on previous lived experiences, contexts, and temporalities, but also how previous experiences might be embodied and how they become actively embodied. This approach has allowed me to investigate the varied meanings of different abrupt changes in rhythm in Cairo (in 2013 and 2020) and in NYC (2020), raising questions about change, repetition, difference, contrast, and continuity. My methodology enabled me to listen to myself, as well as to the houses, streets, and cities of Cairo and New York, and, not least, to individual and collective bodies (cf. Malmström 2021).

2 Affect and Rhythm

As I have previously pointed out together with LeVine (2019), like all elemental forces, affect can be understood as possessing the qualities of both matter and energy – that is, the force can be considered as a particle and as a wave, material and non-material at the same time. By considering the physical impact of sound waves, even on deaf people, we can understand how waves can produce substantive and psychological responses in those with whom they interact. And yet, not only does affect carry a charge, but it is also both a sensation experienced by a human body in relation to another (human or nonhuman) body (Barrios 2017, 5) and a “narrativizable action–reaction circuit through which this charge moves, generating feedback that momentarily suspends the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future” (Massumi 1995, 161–162).

And as Goodman explains, affect suggests:

the potential of an entity or event to affect or to be affected by another entity or event. From vibes to vibrations, this is a definition that traverses mind and body, subject and object, the living and the non-living. One way or another, it is vibration, after all, that connects every separate entity in the cosmos, organic and nonorganic. (2012, xiv)

The vibrations of sonic intensity – or the lack thereof, as shown in the examples above – are important stimuli within people’s experiences and have a unique power to induce strong affective states. They can mediate consciousness, including heightened states of attention and anxiety.

Sound entails not only motion, but frequency and rhythm as well. Lefebvre understands rhythm as a way of reading a space and as the repetition of a measure at a certain frequency: “We are only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin to suffer from some irregularity” (Lefebvre and Régulier 2004, 77). For Lefebvre, our bodies serve both as our shelters and as a

site and place of interaction between the biological, the physiological (nature) and the social (often called the cultural), where each of these levels, each of these dimensions, has its own specificity, therefore its space-time: its rhythm. Whence the inevitable shocks (stresses), disruptions and disturbances in this ensemble whose stability is absolutely never guaranteed. (Lefebvre and Régulier 2004, 81)

The theoretical framework of rhythm analysis helps me understand how different rhythms coexist and how bodies sonically remember and react to dramatically altered rhythms and frequencies. What shocks and stresses bodies and produces space as unfamiliar and frightening is not merely the alteration of a city’s ambiance and sonic architecture, but the dramatic changes it brings to everyday rhythm and frequency. Thus, bodies, things, and cityscapes influence one another. It is essential to acknowledge that embodied memories and emotional responses may vary based on factors such as past lived experiences, cultural and socio-political contexts, and differing temporalities.

3 A Global Wave of Silence: NYC and Cairo

An unprecedented wave of silence spread around the world in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, according to researchers who found that vibrations from human activity slumped under national lockdowns. Records from seismic stations all over the planet show that high-frequency noise caused by industrial plants, traffic, and other activities fell as much as 50% as country after country imposed restrictions that grounded planes, emptied roads, and brought down the shutters on shops and businesses (Sample 2020).



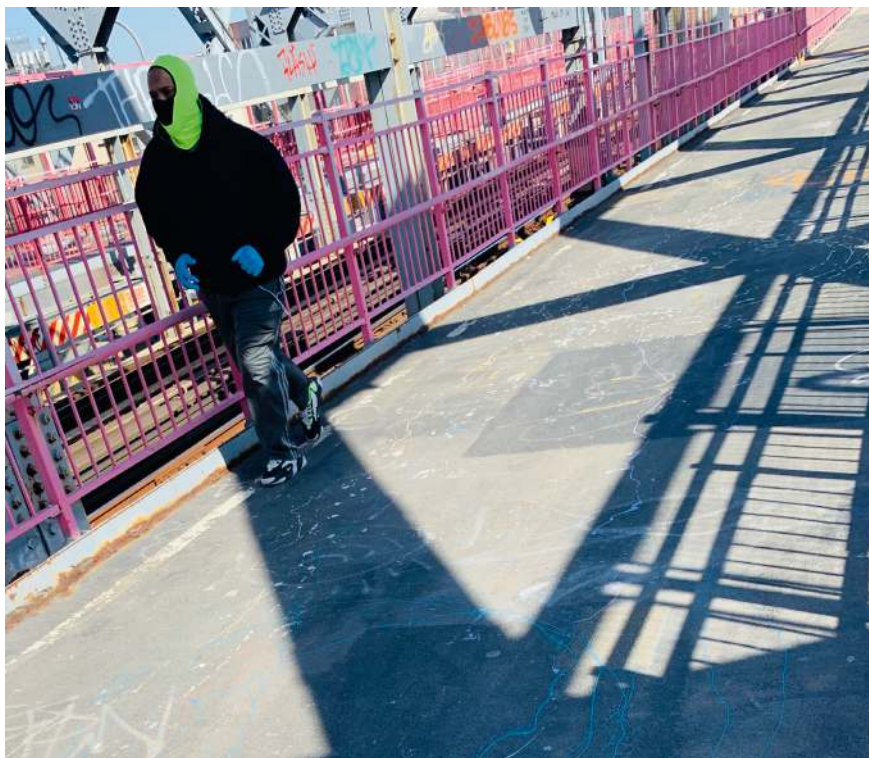


FIGURE 18.4 Daily walks and a new body language and artefacts, 2020

During the pandemic, cities around the world became novel listening spaces. The drastic seismic quieting unfurled during a short time span, starting in China at the end of January and spreading to Italy and the rest of the world by March and April. The most significant sonic drops were observed in metropolitan areas such as New York and Singapore. When the lockdown was imposed in NYC in March 2020, my body's immediate reaction was very similar to my embodied response in 2013: fear, intense anxiety, and bodily pain. I did not know that I was still being affected by prior intense sonic experiences. It felt like everything I had experienced in Cairo in 2013 recurred in an instant. However, unlike in Cairo, when we stayed together in one household and could comfort each other, in NYC in 2020, I was alone and "forbidden" to touch anyone. No gatherings were allowed. I was permitted to visit supermarkets and pharmacies only when necessary and could go out for short daily walks, wearing a mask and gloves. I could not meet friends or colleagues in NYC, even if their houses were only five minutes away. I could not meet friends and family



FIGURE 18.5 Homeless individual on New York City sidewalk, 2020

from other parts of the world, as flights were canceled and borders closed, which made me even more anxious. To stay sane and alert, but also to feel connected – that we were in this together – I read as much news as I could, I called friends both near and far, and they called me. Repeatedly calling friends was a pattern I recognized from Cairo in 2013. In fact, I called some of the same people (from Egypt, Sweden, and the USA) as I had in 2013 in Cairo. This time, however, it was not a local event; the whole globe was affected.

SOUND CLIP 18.3 Manhattan birds and the voices of homeless men in lockdown NYC, 2020



In NYC, I listened to the silence during both day and night in this otherwise extraordinarily loud sonic megacity. For the first time, I was able to hear the songs of birds from my home in the Lower East Side. During my daily walks, I gazed out at and sensed the surreal, empty streets of the closed city – a feeling intensified by the fact that many owners of delis and laundromats preferred to shut down during this uncertain period, despite being perceived by the state as essential businesses. I stayed in close contact with friends in NYC who witnessed the same surreal landscape, although the experience did not seem to

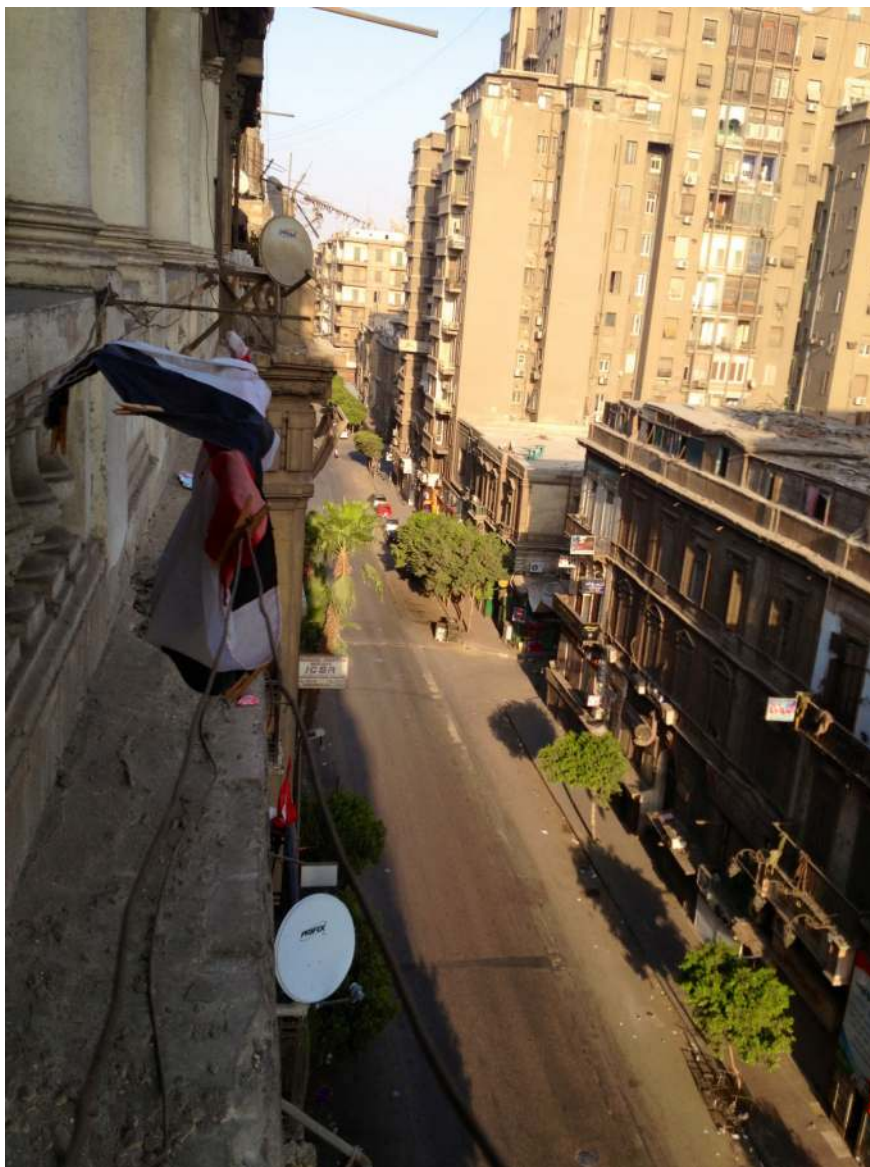


FIGURE 18.6 Cairo street under curfew, August 15, 2013

affect them as anxiously as it affected me, at least at first. I also struggled to convey the experience of NYC as a ghost city in conversations with friends and family in Sweden, since Sweden not only has a smaller population but a government that chose a more open spatial and social strategy in relation to the pandemic.

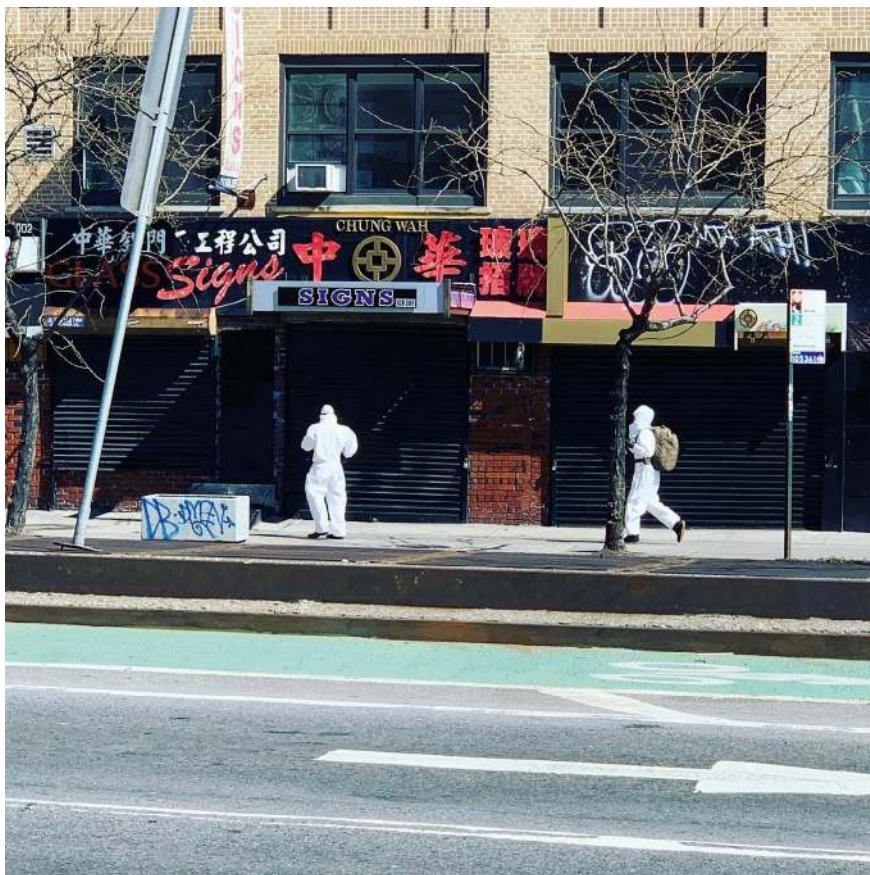


FIGURE 18.7 EMTs in protective gear during 2020 pandemic

After a short while, I listened to a new sound in NYC, a sound that comforted me in the otherwise silent city. A different body now claimed space. It was the sound of voices from homeless people and drug addicts, who had made a temporary home in the closed streets and in the park after the nearby shelter on the Bowery closed following the virus outbreak.

After a while, another new sound appeared: this time it was the sound of ambulance sirens. It was a familiar sound; at the same time, there was a novel meaning to it. Every time I heard the sound, my body trembled with a sonic fear reminiscent of my time in Cairo in 2013, and many years later, following my experience there. After Cairo, I became terrified every time I heard the sound of helicopters. I froze for a minute or two every time I heard one. Comparing those experiences with the sound of the ambulance, I recognize a shared theme: a similarity in abrupt changes in rhythm, uncertainty, and the



FIGURE 18.8 Deserted JFK terminal, NYC, during 2020 lockdown

unknown. The sound of ambulances, police, and fire trucks is part of the sound architecture of NYC, but during this period, ambulance sirens sonically communicated a totally new meaning: It was the sound of COVID-19, the sound of death and fear. My body and the bodies of many of my NYC friends reacted intensely to this new meaning of the familiar sound of ambulance sirens.



FIGURE 18.9 Empty corridors at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport during 2020 lockdown

As mentioned earlier, I left NYC in early April and travelled back to Sweden for imagined safety, effectively undoing my 2013 journey from Cairo to NYC. During my previous trip, I left Cairo for New York City due to safety concerns. In 2013, as a foreigner and a scholar in Cairo, my position was different; I had alternatives that most people around me did not. I could leave the country, and



FIGURE 18.10
Sticker in Cairo elevator (2014),
referencing failed revolution

I could seek help from my embassy, privileges unavailable to most Cairenes. This time, I left NYC for Sweden for safety reasons as well, but upon arriving in Sweden, I felt more unsafe than ever, as I was accustomed to the stricter regulations in New York State.

A majority of my friends in Cairo, who were politically active and experienced both joy and despair during the uprisings of 2011 and in 2013, openly discuss their own and others' tangible long-term affective responses – including depression, denial, anger, fatigue, and a sense of hopelessness – not least following the sonic coup d'état in the summer of 2013. In the first weeks of the curfew and state of emergency that summer, Cairo moved toward something unfamiliar. Everything seemed in flux during the period, making it difficult to orient oneself in the novel Cairo. My friends and I were unable to navigate, not only because of security risks, but also because everything had changed in ways we could see, smell, hear, touch, and taste (cf. Malmström 2019). At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the curfew was imposed in Cairo in March 2020, some friends I had known for many years reached out to me in NYC. The male friends, in particular, urged me to stay safe and even tried to

dissuade me from my daily walks, openly showing their vulnerability and anxiety about the virus, including a constant fear for their own death. They explicitly conveyed their need for emotional support and love, as demonstrated by the excerpts from social media conversations below. Initially, I did not plan to write about these conversations, but when I began to reflect on the similarities and differences between past and current experiences in Cairo and NYC, I asked my friends for permission, and they all agreed.

Alaa, March 18, 2020.

Stay at home ya Maria, please. Stay at home and stay safe. I am very worried about you. I am staying at home until the end of this virus. I am so scared for your health.

Ahmed, March 20, 2020

I hope you are fine? Please stay safe. Here in Cairo, they do not want us to know the real truth about the virus. But I am worried. Very worried. I am very worried. Take care.

Mohamad, March 21, 2020.

Are you ok? Safe? [When I told him I was on my way out for a walk, he said:] Uffff. Maria. Nooo, do not go out, please. Stay at home. And take care. If you go out, do not touch anything. Clean your hands all the time. Do not kiss or hug. Do not touch. [Long pause.] I think this fucking shit will kill me, Maria. I feel that. Do not know why. I am afraid. I am very scared. Take care, Maria. Ya rab (Oh, God). Stay safe. Stay alive. Please. I love you.

Ali, March 22, 2020.

How are you? Do not be afraid. I am with you. Do you need money? Do not worry, Maria. We will meet again, inshallah (God willing). Promise me! Stay safe. Stay alive.

Mustapha, April 13, 2020.

I am very worried. You know, people need to go out for work. So ... it is dangerous. Very.

Mohamad, May 28, 2020.

Maria! I think I met a friend who has corona. I am very worried now. I am staying in my home and I take vitamins and I am praying. Please pray for me.



FIGURE 18.11 Revolution “Celebration” in Egypt, January 25, 2014

Four prominent sensorial themes emerged for me in my conversations with my Cairene male friends: care, emotional need, fear, and (explicit) weakness. Although all Egyptian men – regardless of class, generation, or other intersectional categories – are expected to demonstrate *gedaana* (جداعة), *shahama*



FIGURE 18.12 Cultural center in downtown Cairo, 2017

(شهامة), or *mubada'* (مبادئ), which involve expressions of care, most especially for relatives, but also friends (in particular care for all women, not just their female relatives), expressions of fragility are distinct from acts of care or concern. How can we identify and attend to the vibrational politics of disruption – such as the long-term affective sounds of state violence against its own citizens by day and the sounds of silence enforced by curfew at night – and the affective mobilization of bodies in rhythm, which can be exploited by contesting forces as a form of political violence (Malmström 2019)? Is it possible to interpret fragility as a result of the dramatic shifts in rhythm in 2013 – aka the wounds suffered by the collective body of trauma – in relation to the new abrupt rhythm changes during the pandemic (in addition to the fear of the pandemic in itself), as compared to bodies from other political contexts who have not experienced such politically produced sounds of silence? My friends in Egypt often discuss sounds like fireworks, helicopters, and knocks on the door at dawn (often by security police) in ways similar to how I relate to my experience of sensitivity to helicopter sounds. One concrete example of this is a political activist now living in NYC, who told me that we could not meet as planned (one week before July 4), because the sound of fireworks triggered memories of the revolution and a fear response in him, prompting him to stay at home during that period.

4 Riots and Massacres in Cairo and in NYC



SOUND CLIP 18.4 Demonstrations in NYC

While the reasons behind the sonic changes in Cairo in 2013 and in NYC following George Floyd's death in 2020 are entirely different, there are significant similarities in the extreme disruptions of the sonic rhythm in both cities. As another male Egyptian political activist friend, who was forced to live in the Diaspora, stated in NYC during the spring of 2020, about the events in Cairo in 2013 and in NYC in 2020: "The similarities are uncanny." In Egypt, the state apparatus represses political bodies – especially male activist ones – while in the United States, Black bodies – especially those of Black men – are subject to repression. Both categories are deprived of rights, safety, status, and dignity. These men are, in both cases, politically, socially, culturally, and often physically displaced from spaces within their city. Many of them live in constant fear of arrest, abduction, or detention.

Secondly, there are also numerous similarities between those most affected by the virus and the categories of citizens targeted and stigmatized by the state (in both NYC and Cairo, especially, in the latter case, for those in prison or living in low-income or informal areas), as Mark LeVine noted in a conversation on June 13, 2020:

'I can't breathe' – the last words of too many Covid victims. 'I can't breathe' – the last words of too many African Americans being killed by the police. If we would have paid attention to the latter, we would never have had to face the former to anything close to this extent.

Thirdly, as I mentioned earlier, my friends and I – it was especially obvious to me with those I lived with during this period – experienced a loss of navigation in Cairo due to sudden disruptions to the rhythm of the everyday, which were closely connected to the specific context. Even though these events happened years ago, and the trauma may be buried, when the new sound of silence returned, our bodies reacted and responded intensely and immediately¹ – and differently than for the Swedes I communicated with at the time. I observed similar intense reactions and responses among my NYC friends, if I compare their reactions between the sound of silence during the pandemic

1 See also Fahmy 2020 for a wonderful historical overview of everyday sound and the politics of sound as one of the key tools for uncovering the alterations that went on in urban Egypt first half of the twentieth century.

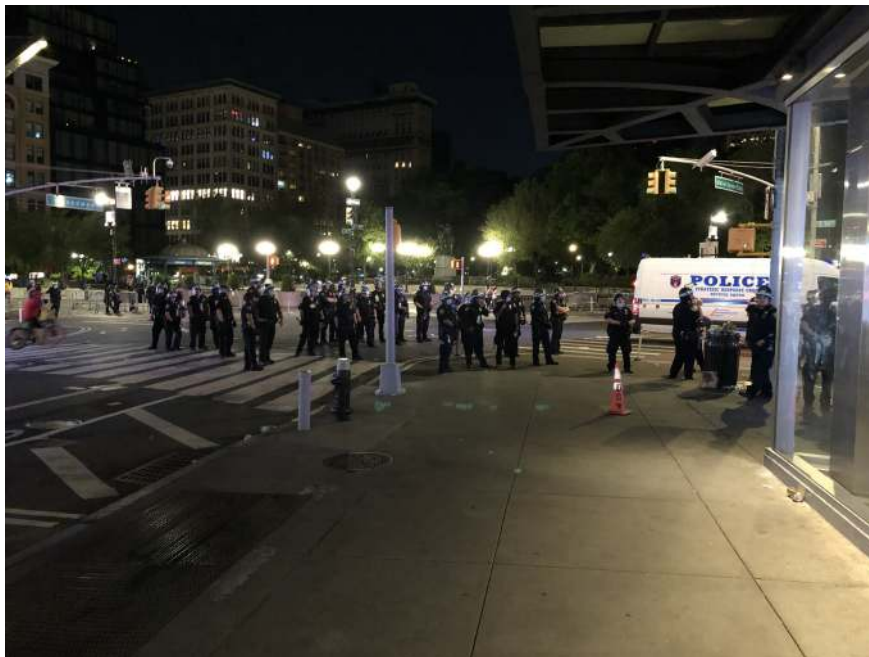


FIGURE 18.13 Black Lives Matter protest, 2020

and the noise during police clashes and BLM demonstrations. Could it be that some bodies might be more sonically vulnerable and frayed than others due to previous dramatic alterations in rhythms and frequency? How much do alterations in sonic rhythm affect our sense of safety? Are the male political activists in Cairo that I know more sensitive to these sonic transformations than their “sonically non-experienced/traumatized” middle-class counterparts in Stockholm, for example, who lack such experiences? Was their response a combination of old embodied memories and the new blurred threat of the pandemic – a much more uncertain and ungraspable menace than the current autocratic regime of Egypt – or was it something else? In NYC, in turn, people were forced, over a very short time span, to experience dramatic rhythm alterations in the sonic landscape of NYC, transitioning from a normal soundscape to an abnormal one during the early days of the pandemic and then again with the BLM demonstrations. Were New Yorkers more sonically sensitive than residents of downtown Gothenburg, for example, perhaps because they lived through the epicenter of COVID-19 in March/April 2020 and the memories or experiences of 9/11? Many of my New York friends expressed some version of the following sentiment during the spring of 2020: It is like a new 9/11 every day. But in 2001, at least we could comfort each other.



FIGURE 18.14 Military presence in downtown Cairo (2015)

🔊 SOUND CLIP 18.5 Helicopters in Cairo

🔊 SOUND CLIP 18.6 Helicopters in NYC

🔊 SOUND CLIP 18.7 Cairo curfew and shootings, August 16, 2013



FIGURE 18.15 New York City during COVID-19 pandemic, 2020

5 Concluding Remarks

As scholars, we will never be able to grasp affect in the making; we can only grasp its concrete sensorial outcomes, that is to say, the effects of affect, or in other words, emotions. Furthermore, recognizing the variations in the rhythms and embracing people's embodied political experience is a significant field of examination, given that political actions are expressed and acted out through the body. The pandemic left many citizens around the world disoriented, as it disrupted and reordered relations on all levels, from local to national to global. It was not just a national trauma, but a global experience that affected everyone. In this text, I have included some fragments from various contexts and temporalities, including my own experiences. Yet these dramatic changes in rhythm enable us to see broader patterns of global fragility and uncertainty. The new, porous global body is connected to the present historical moment – a time marked by a transition from neoliberalism to what I term necrocapitalism. In this new regime, increasing numbers of people are rendered superfluous to the functioning of the capitalist system, or are made profitable through their exclusion and the violence enacted upon them. Social death and the state



FIGURE 18.16 New York City highway during COVID-19 pandemic

of exception are increasingly becoming the rule for vast swaths of societies (cf. Mbembe 2019). The transition in rhythm – from a hectic pace perceived as normal, to a slower pace perceived as surreal, punctuated by intense interruptions perceived as abnormal – transforms citizens in ways that have political consequences. The old rhythm may never return. The question is whether this is something to mourn or to celebrate?

All sound clips and photos are mine except photos 2, 13, 15, and sound clips 2, 4, 6. These actors prefer to stay anonymous.

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PART 4

Popular and Material Cultures



Dogs in Multi-religious Societies: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives

Jenny Berglund

Jonas Otterbeck has argued that shifting our attention to the people or phenomena we study can help formulate new questions and research projects. In his research, he has looked at, among other things, popular culture, such as pop music, in relation to Islam (Otterbeck 2021). In this chapter, I will also pick up a popular phenomenon, not music, but instead, dogs. Similar to popular music, this phenomenon has an ambiguous position within religions. There is also an interesting link between Otterbeck's research on popular music and dogs. In Otterbeck's book, *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music* (2021), he acknowledges the importance of Yusuf Islam for the genre, stating that "It is fair to claim that Yusuf Islam has, in many ways, been the inspiration, but also a very important networker, at the heart of the development of the new pop-nashid" (67). Before converting to Islam, Yusuf Islam was known as Cat Stevens, and his very first hit was called "I Love My Dog." Later, in 2017, as Yusuf Islam, he donated this very song to the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) to be used for a video in celebration of National Adopt a Shelter Pet Day (April 30), commenting that "A dog will love you unconditionally, whether you're on top of the world or in the pits" (PETA 2017).

But, you might ask, apart from this anecdotal link between Otterbeck's research and dogs, what does religion have to do with dogs? It is a relevant question, but given the long history of human-dog relations, dogs have been present as long as humans have pondered the origins, meaning, and nature of existence.

Today, having a dog as a pet is so common in Sweden and the Western world that few would question it. Historically, however, the concept of the dog as a pet and close friend stands in stark contrast to its role in many societies and the perspectives on dogs found in many religious scriptures, as exemplified by the following biblical quote:

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those

who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 22:14–15)

It is not difficult to find examples showing how the role of dogs has changed in modern society. Once regarded as mere scavengers and utility animals, dogs have become fashion accessories and/or are often treated as children in families. This shift has raised new questions about their place in relation to religion. In this chapter, I will highlight some examples of how the relationship between dogs and religion has drawn attention in contemporary society. At first glance, events such as dog blessings, rituals, and religious provocations may appear to be modern phenomena shaped by changes in the dog's role and the consequences of globalization. However, I want to show that, while these examples themselves are new, we can better understand them in light of the long history of the relationship between dogs and religion.

In this chapter, I will discuss how dogs are portrayed in the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and highlight explanations for the predominantly negative attitudes found in these texts. I will also present other, more positive religious stories about dogs. Since Otterbeck's research primarily focuses on Islam, particular focus will be given to the dog's ambiguous place within this religion. Finally, I will show how the term “dog” has been, and continues to be, used as an insult.

1 Can You Bring Your Dog to Heaven?

Thomas Aquinas declared as early as the 13th century that animals lack souls. Whether or not one believes dogs have souls, it is evident that more and more people choose to bury their dogs in pet cemeteries, and today, priests sometimes hold pastoral conversations with grieving pet owners. This situation echoes the question posed in Hasse Andersson's 1982 song “Änglahund” (“Angel Dog”): “Får man ta hunden med sej in i himlen?” [Can you bring your dog with you to heaven?]. While there seems to be no definitive answer to that question, it is clear that many priests today believe that dogs also go to heaven (Forsberg 2011). The demand for pet cemeteries where dog owners can bury their four-legged friends is high (Svanberg 2009, 140–142). Burying one's dog is not a new phenomenon. The aristocracy in Sweden has buried their beloved hunting dogs and horses since the 17th century. At Bollerup Castle, between Ystad and Simrishamn in Skåne, dog graves dating from the late 19th century onwards can be found outside the newer manor house in a part of the garden. Notably, several of the gravestones bear crosses, and the pet cemetery lies

just outside the walls of the castle chapel. It seems unlikely that the priest was unaware of this. What the priest thought about it, however, is unknown. Pet cemeteries in Sweden seem to have emerged somewhat later; for instance, the one on Djurgården in Stockholm developed spontaneously in the late 19th century (Svanberg 2009, 140). Another interesting aspect of animal graves is the tradition of animal grave poetry, which was often dedicated to beloved dogs that had passed away (Möller 2020).

In many parts of the world over the past decade, discussions about the significance of dogs and other companion animals in religion have risen on the agenda. This is perhaps unsurprising – in the United States, for example, there are twice as many households with a pet as with children. While debates about the spiritual abilities of animals have a long history, the focus of the past decade's interest has shifted more toward the animals' own spirituality. This is expressed, among other things, in the fact that priests perform rituals such as blessings and funerals for dogs (Svanberg 2009, 142).

2 Worship Services and Saints

Dog and animal worship services have become more common in Sweden over the past 20 years. Today, the Church of Sweden regularly organizes services where parishioners can bring their pets, and the value of animals is frequently highlighted. In a booklet from Danderyd's parish outside Stockholm titled *Life, humans and animals* [*Livet, människan och djuren*], the value of dogs is brought forward, and animal services are very positively presented. Interestingly enough, the booklet ends with a quote from Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam's song "I Love My Dog," which is mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Throughout history, dogs have been relatively common visitors in Swedish churches. The difference today compared to 100 years ago is that back then, when certain parishioners could bring dogs as warmers, meaning for the sake of humans, while today many argue it is rather for the dog's sake, to receive the priest's blessing, they are welcomed to services on certain occasions. It is also highly possible that globalization and the increased visibility of non-Protestant Christian traditions have contributed to incorporating animals, including dogs, into worship services.

For example, within the Roman Catholic Church, October 4 is celebrated as "World Animal Day" in several parts of the world. On this day, many Catholic churches hold "animal services," where pet owners can bring their animals to church to receive blessings. The reason October 4 is designated as World Animal Day relates to Saint Francis, considered the patron saint of animals and

ecology. Among other things, he wrote “The Canticle of the Sun,” which has inspired contemporary Christian eco-theology.

Saint Francis lived in the early 13th century in Assisi. He is believed to have considered God’s creation, as manifested in nature, and treated animals with the same respect as humans. Several legends about him describe animals seeking his company and, among other things, that he preached to birds. One of the most popular legends tells how, while staying in the town of Gubbio in Italy, Francis heard about a wolf that had attacked and even eaten people. Those who went out to hunt the wolf never returned. Eventually, no one dared to leave the town. Francis set out to meet the wolf, accompanied by some of the bravest townsfolk. However, they quickly lost courage and returned while Francis continued alone. Suddenly, the wolf jumped out, and Francis made the sign of the cross, causing the wolf to sit down. It is said that Francis addressed the wolf, calling it “Brother Wolf,” and told it he wanted to make peace between the wolf and the people of Gubbio. From that day on, the wolf lived peacefully among the townspeople for two years. It harmed no one and was fed by the townsfolk (Franciscan Media).

3 Dogs in Religious Texts

The Bible contains numerous references to dogs, most of which are negative. Leviticus lists dogs among the animals considered unclean and therefore forbidden for Jews to eat (11:27). The Tanakh (the holy scriptures of Judaism, known to Christians as the Old Testament) also contains several references to dogs, typically as metaphors that allude to the dog’s character and undesirable traits. For example, dead dogs are used to illustrate a person’s insignificance, as in 1 Samuel 24:15, where Goliath says to David, “Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog! A single flea!” Other passages also attest to the often low status of dogs in Judaism. Among the worst things that could happen was to have one’s dead body eaten by dogs. As 1 Kings 14:11 states: “Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat,” a statement repeated later: “Anyone belonging to Baasha who dies in the city, the dogs shall eat” (16:4).

In general, it can be said that Judaism has had a complicated relationship with dogs. On the one hand, one could, and was even encouraged to, keep guard dogs for protection. On the other hand, keeping aggressive dogs in the home was considered inappropriate. In Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical tradition, dogs symbolize demonic forces. The *Zohar*, a central Kabbalistic text,

compares worldly evil to a vicious dog on a long leash. This has changed with the advent of modernization and globalization, and many Jewish families now have dogs. Susan Kahn argues that attitudes toward animals, especially dogs, are a compelling yet underestimated product of the encounter of Jewish life with modernity. Today, despite strong historical antipathy, many Jewish families own dogs (2011, 26).

Negative references to dogs also appear in the New Testament. In Philippians 3:2, Paul cautions: "Beware of those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh." Likewise, in Matthew 7:6, the apostle advises, "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls to pigs; they will trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces." In contrast, several saintly legends feature more positive associations with dogs. Beyond Saint Francis, mentioned above, other saints are connected with dogs. Saint Roch, for example, who lived in the early 14th century and, according to legend, was saved by a dog. During his pilgrimage to Rome, a plague broke out. Saint Roch had healing powers and could heal many people who had fallen ill along his journey. Eventually, however, he fell ill in the middle of a forest but was rescued by a dog, which is why he is often portrayed as a sick man with a dog by his side, and a dog serves as his emblem (Menache 1998, 78).

One might also recall the Saint Bernard dog, named after the hospice run by monks at the Great St. Bernard Pass in the Western Alps, between Switzerland and Italy. According to legend, today's Saint Bernards descend from the large mountain dogs that these monks used to rescue travelers lost or injured in the mountains. A 17th-century drawing depicts one such dog at the hospice, which, along with both the pass and the dog breed, is named after Bernard of Menthon, the monk who founded it in the 11th century (Vassallo 2021).

Another element of Catholic saint worship is Saint Guinefort, whose grave remains a pilgrimage site in the region of Domes, north of the city of Lyon. The saint has a reputation as a healer, and people visit the site with sick and weak children in the hopes of recovery. According to legend, Guinefort was a loyal greyhound killed by its owner sometime in the 13th century. The story goes that the dog was left alone to guard the family's child. A large snake entered the home and threatened the child, leading to a fierce struggle. In the end, the dog managed to kill the snake. When the master, who was said to be a knight in the legend, returned and saw the overturned cradle and the dog's bloody snout, he assumed the worst. In haste, he thrust his sword into the dog but soon realized his fatal mistake: the child was unharmed, and the mutilated snake proved the dog's heroism. The dog was then buried with honors, and local peasants began venerating the dog as a saint and protector of small

children. This saintly legend has been the subject of a detailed study by historian Jean-Claude Schmitt (1979), one of the French historians of mentalities who has helped shed light on medieval religious practices. The saint is celebrated on August 22.

Interestingly, no negative attitudes toward dogs are reflected in the Qur'an. The word "dog" appears only in a single context, and in a relatively positive light – namely, within the 18th surah, called "al-Kahf," or "The Cave." This surah recounts a Muslim version of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus story: a group of men flee their city to avoid being forced into idolatry, take refuge in a cave, and, accompanied by their dog, sleep for 309 years, regularly turned by angels. Upon awakening, they find that the city's inhabitants have become monotheists. The story is generally regarded as proof of God's omnipotence and is sometimes used as an argument that not only the soul but also the body will be resurrected.

You could have thought they were awake, though they were immersed in sleep. We let them turn to the right and to the left, and their dog lay at the entrance with its forelegs outstretched. Had you come upon them suddenly, you would have surely turned and fled in fear. (Al-Kahf, verse 18)

Instead, in the hadiths – accounts detailing what Muhammad and his closest companions said and did – we find statements suggesting that Muhammad disliked dogs. The hadiths are significant in Islam because they illustrate Muhammad's practices, his *Sunnah*, which are considered normative for Muslims worldwide. Several hadiths indicate that Muhammad accepted the presence of dogs when they served a practical purpose for humans:

The Messenger of God said:

Whoever keeps a dog will lose a qirat [a measure] of their reward for good deeds every day, unless the dog is used for guarding property, livestock, or hunting. (Bukhari 54:541)

Among the more negative statements is a hadith reporting that Muhammad said that angels do not enter homes with dogs, and that having a dog as a companion diminishes a person's merits (Fudge 2001, 545). Some hadiths also describe Muhammad encouraging the killing of certain dogs. Each hadith contains, in addition to the story or statement from Muhammad or his companions, a chain of transmission (*isnad*) that shows the individuals who passed down the account from Muhammad's time until the hadith was recorded. If the chain is incomplete or any person in the chain is deemed unreliable, the

hadith is considered weak or uncertain (Waines 2003). There is a hadith attributing to Muhammad the claim that black dogs are demons in dog form, but many consider this to be one of those weak hadiths (El-Fadl 2004). In addition to the aforementioned hadiths, however, there are also those that, at first glance, might be perceived as portraying dogs in a positive light. One example is a hadith that recounts the story of a woman who saved a thirsty dog by lowering her shoe into a well to get water for the dog. As a reward for this good deed, she is said to receive forgiveness for her sins and eternal life in paradise (Bukhari 4:538). However, the story is not typically interpreted to mean that good deeds specifically toward dogs grant eternal life in paradise. Instead, it is understood to emphasize that compassion is a virtue that should extend even to a humble creature such as a dog (Foltz 2006, 130).

4 Why So Despised?

Why is it that dogs, often called humanity's best friends, are portrayed so negatively in religious texts? One common explanation given for these negative attitudes is that dogs have long had low status in the Middle East – the cradle of the Abrahamic religions – due to their association with the spread of rabies. Therefore, it has always been best for humans to keep their distance from them (Foltz, 129).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it has been argued that humanity's tendency to attribute both virtues and vices to dogs gives them a significant role as projection objects. Perin (1981), for example, claims that the ambivalence we observe toward dogs in modern Western society is connected to their symbolic status as idealized providers of love, which evokes memories of a mother's affection. This ambivalence in human relationships with dogs, he suggests, is linked to the revival of unresolved love-hate tensions from childhood, associated with the process of separating from one's family.

In relation to this understanding of human-dog relationships, Serpell (1995) offers an important insight that helps us further comprehend the dog's ambivalent role in the world of religions: in symbolic terms, the domestic dog exists precariously in the no-man's land between the human and non-human worlds. It is an interstitial creature – neither person nor beast – forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high-status animal and low-status person. Consequently, dogs are rarely accepted and appreciated purely for what they are: uniquely varied, carnivorous mammals adapted to a vast range of mutualistic associations with people. Instead, they become creatures of metaphor, simultaneously embodying or representing a strange mixture of admirable

and despicable traits. As a beast that voluntarily allies itself with humans, the dog often seems to lose its right to be regarded as an actual animal. In some traditions, its ambiguous or intermediate status has endowed it with supernatural powers, and the ability to travel as a spiritual messenger or psychopomp between this world and the next (254).

Some anthropologists contend that it is precisely this liminality, as both a human and non-human being, that has contributed to the negative attitudes to dogs expressed in the New Testament, the Jewish *Tanakh*, and the Muslim hadiths (Douglas 1966). That is, the fact that dogs are attributed human qualities makes them particularly important within the three Abrahamic religions. These traditions, which emphasize humanity as being made in the image of God, have used dogs to highlight the contrast between humans and animals. Menache (1997, 25) even argues that priests and religious authorities have undermined the dog's role within these religions because people's emotional bonds with their dogs were seen as obstacles to their connection with God and as weakening their dependence on the clergy. In other words, it is the fact that the dog has lived close to humans, has been ascribed human qualities, and has competed for attention that would otherwise be directed toward God that has led those who authored religious texts to feel compelled to express themselves negatively about dogs (Menache 1997, 25).

In addition to these explanations, another is sometimes mentioned about Islam. When Islam was established in the 7th century and spread to what is now Iran, there was a need to distinguish itself from the dominant Zoroastrianism there, which had a favorable view of dogs (Moazami 2006). Among Zoroastrians, the dog has traditionally held a special status. Zoroastrianism was the state religion in what is now Iran until the 7th century, when the Arab-Islamic conquest took place. Today, it remains a minority religion in Azerbaijan, Iran, India, and Pakistan, as well as in Western Europe. In the Zoroastrians' holy scripture, the *Avesta*, significant attention is given to the dog, an animal considered to combine characteristics from eight types of humans. In the *Avesta*, dogs are categorized into various groups, with the "livestock dog" and the "house dog" being considered the most important, and people are expected to show gratitude toward them. Ahura Mazda, the supreme god, declares, among other things, that "No house can stand firm for me on the earth created by Ahura without my livestock dog and house dog" and that the dog is "self-clad, self-shod, vigilant in guarding, sharp-toothed, sharing human food, and protecting human possessions." According to a Zoroastrian tradition, which is still partially practiced, people are expected to set aside three pieces of food for dogs. Furthermore, the *Avesta* specifies that humans have responsibilities toward dogs similar to those

they have toward fellow humans; for example, a sick dog must be cared for, a pregnant bitch assisted, and puppies looked after (Moazami 2006).

Among today's Zoroastrians, the position of the dog is disputed. Since the mid-19th century, reformist Zoroastrians have criticized rituals involving dogs, leading many to abandon these practices. A possible analysis of this shift in the relationship with dogs is that many Zoroastrians live as persecuted minorities in societies where dogs are viewed as one of the lowest forms of life. In such a religious and political climate, emphasizing the positive significance of dogs could potentially be life-threatening (Moazami 2006).

5 More about the Dog and Islam

While dogs have historically held a prominent place as guard and hunting animals in Muslim societies, they, or at least their saliva, are often regarded as impure (El Fadl 2004). For example, in Sweden, there have been reports of Muslim taxi drivers refusing to transport dogs in their cars, and in the United Kingdom, police are advised to outfit tracking dogs with special shoes when entering the homes of Muslims, if requested (Smith 2008).

The position of dogs in Islam, however, cannot be seen as entirely negative. Dogs are seen possessing qualities desirable in humans, and their significance in Islam can best be described as ambiguous (Berglund 2014). Different schools of Islamic law offer different positions on specific issues. Four of the five established schools of law consider dogs impure,¹ while in the Maliki school, which is predominant in North Africa, it is often argued that everything that comes from nature is pure and inherently good unless proven otherwise. By this principle, dogs are not deemed impure (Bakhtiar 1996; Fudge 2001, 546).

In the other schools of law, dogs being seen as impure means, for example, that contact with dog saliva requires ritual cleaning. For instance, if a dog's saliva comes into contact with a person's skin, the area should be thoroughly washed, and if it lands on a person's clothing, those clothes should be changed immediately (Bakhtiar 1996, 13). These rules are considered important and serious, but have also given rise to humorous anecdotes. One such story is about a man who is late for Friday prayers, rushing to the mosque. He is overtaken by a stray dog that splashes in a puddle, getting the man wet. Since the man

1 The five established schools of law are Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Jafari.

is unsure whether any saliva has gotten on his clothes and doesn't have time to run home to change, he says, "Oh, a goat!" and hurries on (Foltz 2006, 131).

6 Admirable Virtues

Islam has a rich storytelling tradition. The characters and plots in many stories overlap with those found in Judaism and Christianity, such as the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus. In addition, there is a wealth of stories about Muhammad and other figures specific to Islam. Many of these stories derive from the Qur'an but are supplemented with material from hadiths and other sources, such as the *sira* literature (Waines 2003). Among these stories, several demonstrate that the dog – despite often being considered impure – can symbolize virtues desirable in humans. This is illustrated, for example, in a story about King Solomon. According to the Qur'an, Solomon could speak with animals. One day, he summoned all the animals to consult them about whether he should take an elixir of life. All the animals answered his call except for the porcupine, which refused to come. Solomon then sent the noble horse to fetch the porcupine, but it had no effect – the porcupine did not come. Solomon then sent the dog, and this time the porcupine came. Surprised, Solomon asked the porcupine why it came when a simple dog was sent as the messenger, but not when a beautiful horse was sent. The porcupine replied that, although the horse was indeed beautiful, it had a superficial character, whereas the dog's character was loyal (Eastwick 2010).

In the 10th century, Ibn Marzuban, a Muslim scholar who lived near Baghdad, wrote a book with the peculiar title, *The Book of the Superiority of Dogs to Some of Those Who Wear Clothes*, essentially a collection of stories and statements about dogs that appear to serve two purposes: it is both a defense of dogs and a critique of humanity's decadence. In the book, Ibn Marzuban argues against those who claim that dogs are impure by pointing to the relatively positive portrayal of dogs in the surah "al-Kahf" and by highlighting hadiths that present them in a positive light. For example, one hadith mentions that one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives brought a dog on pilgrimage to guard her belongings.

Overall, however, *The Book of the Superiority of Dogs* should be seen more as a commentary on human issues than on dogs, as expressed in the following sentence, where two animals are contrasted: "Hold on to your dog if you can get one, for most people have become swine." Ibn Marzuban believed there was not a single person who lived according to Muslim ideals, arguing that self-love rather than faithfulness to God and His commandments drove people. In the book, the loyalty and sense of duty attributed to dogs are presented

as ideals, with the dog symbolizing virtues to which humans should aspire. Because dogs are naturally loyal, unlike humans, Ibn Marzuban concluded that dogs are superior to humans (1978).

7 Dog as Provocation

In 2007, Swedish artist Lars Vilks sparked a debate by depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a so-called “roundabout dog.” The reactions were intense, and the ensuing debate primarily revolved around freedom of expression. Often, these images were not placed in a historical context – especially, the long-standing history of the use of the term “dog” as an insult. In his chapter in the book *Hunden i Kult och Religion* (The Dog in Cult and Religion; Berglund & Svanberg 2009), Peter Lööv illustrates how dogs have not always been regarded as humanity’s best friend and how the term “dog” has served as an insult against both Jews and Muslims throughout European history. During the Middle Ages, Christians in Europe rarely referred directly to Islam or Muslims. Instead, terms like “Moors,” “Saracens,” and “Turks” were used. “Saracens” referred primarily to Arabs, and “Turks” to Muslims in general. In German-speaking parts of Europe, tales circulated about the man-eating “dog-Turk” (Gardell 2010, 61; Lööv 2009, 160). In Spain, even long after the Christian “reconquest” of the country at the end of the 15th century, the term “Moorish dogs” remained common, as a direct counterpart to “Marranos” Spanish for “swine”), a label for Jewish converts to Christianity, while Muslim converts were called “perros moros” (Moorish dogs). These terms reflected the widespread perception that Jewish or Muslim converts could never truly be trusted (Lööv 2009, 160). These insults are also related to “maroons,” derived from the Spanish word “cimarón,” which was used to describe wild dogs that plagued towns and villages during the Middle Ages (Menache 1997). Through his discussion on dogs, Lööv clearly shows that “the roots of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are deeply intertwined” (2009, 161).

Another notable example perceived as a provocation, though not intended as such, came from the Swedish royal family in the mid-1970s. It became internationally known that the Swedish king had a Labrador named Ali – a name shared by the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Strong reactions, including from Pakistan, followed. The king, who had no intention of offending anyone, promptly changed the dog’s name to Charlie, after which the protests subsided (Mårtensson 2000).

A more recent example comes from 2017, when the U.S. military distributed leaflets in Afghanistan as part of its propaganda campaign against the Taliban. One leaflet depicted a lion chasing a dog holding a Taliban flag. This

sparked outrage among many Afghans since the imagery was interpreted as deeply offensive, both culturally and religiously, further complicating the relationship between foreign forces and local communities. The incident was thus quickly followed by an apology from the U.S. military, and Major General James Linder released a statement that said “the design of the leaflets mistakenly contained an image highly offensive to both Muslims and the religion of Islam” (Moore 2017).

8 Dogs as Companions

In many Muslim countries, owning a dog as a pet has long been considered strange. The idea that the acceptance of dogs is tied to their utility is confirmed by a recently issued fatwa (a legal opinion on Islamic law) from the Muslim Council in the United Kingdom concerning guide dogs. This fatwa states that it is permissible for guide dogs to accompany their owners to the mosque and to wait outside the prayer hall during prayer. The ruling is justified because a guide dog serves a vital, practical function, much like hunting dogs fulfil an important practical role for hunters (The Guardian 2008). The issue of guide dogs does not yet appear to have arisen at Swedish mosques, but if it does, it will likely be resolved in a similar manner.

Despite the dog’s value being strongly tied to its role as a working animal, more and more Muslims are keeping dogs as pets even in Muslim-majority countries, which is often seen as a sign of Western influence. According to a study from Kuwait, attitudes toward keeping dogs as pets are changing, a shift likely inspired by exposure to images and films of dogs circulating on the internet and satellite TV, thereby influencing how people relate to dogs (Al-Fayez et al. 2003; Morrow 2024). Another way to understand this change, alongside the emergence of new media, is to consider the impact of 20th-century Muslim reform movements, which have questioned the traditional authority of religious scholars and legal schools to varying degrees.

9 Discussion

The ambiguity surrounding dogs can be understood on multiple levels. First, it is evident in the distinction between dogs as working animals and as pets. The function of dogs as working animals seems self-evident, as they have always served as hunting companions, livestock guardians, and watchdogs. As pets, however, their role has been, and still is, questioned in many contexts – whether

due to concerns about the spread of disease, competition for attention that, according to religious authorities, should be directed toward God, their depiction in religious texts, or a combination of these factors.

Dogs appear to possess qualities desirable to humans, such as loyalty, but at the same time, they can suddenly become untamed wild animals, like humans (with or without rabies). This ambivalence may have contributed to the wide range of attitudes toward dogs in the religious world.

Among Muslims, attitudes toward pet dogs highlight broader tensions between the Muslim world and the West. As noted in this chapter, there are signs that attitudes toward dogs as pets are changing within certain Muslim traditions. The idea of the dog as “man’s best friend” and allowing dogs to live under the same roof as the family is becoming increasingly common.

One way to understand this change is to consider the potential that social media provides for spreading alternative images of dogs. Various platforms can disseminate positive portrayals of dogs to all parts of the world. It is not only visual content that is spreading, but also interpretations that legitimize dogs as pets. Since interpretations of religions are no longer tied to specific places, but exist in parallel globally, individuals have new opportunities to adopt “positive” valuations of dogs that exist within their traditions.

Whether these changes are to be primarily understood as an increased influence from the West or as a natural step in the ongoing discussion about how religious sources should be interpreted, and who has the authority to interpret them, one thing is clear: the place of the dog in Islam cannot be easily explained, has never been straightforward, and remains shrouded in ambiguity.

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Finding the Ritual Language in Contemporary Swedish Market Society

Anne-Christine Hornborg

Rituals, understood as formalized acts, are central components in both social structuring and the life of the individual, but have nevertheless often been neglected in favor of textual studies and the interpretation of faiths and doctrines. This chapter aims to discuss ritual language by situating it within the neoliberal market society of contemporary Sweden, and how the use of therapeutic and individualistic practices in a highly secularized society creates new, individual-centered performances designed to attract modern man, including selling them on the market to individuals and workplaces.

1 To Define or Not Define Ritual

The concept of ritual has engaged numerous researchers and inspired a plethora of definitions.¹ An early pioneer in the study of ritual performance was Victor Turner, who characterized rituals as “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical (or non-empirical) beings or powers” (1967, 19). Thus, Turner embedded the ritual in a transcendental world – a belief in mystical beings or forces.

But if ritual is defined as a religious act, how do we classify other formalized actions in modern society – a football game, for example? It quickly becomes clear that the game contains a number of characteristics that are usually attributed to a ritual: it is rule-based, takes place during a certain time and in a certain marked place, it includes special costumes, and there are ritual objects (football, whistle, flags), ritual leaders (football referee), and special

1 In this article, for the sake of simplicity, I have consistently used the term ritual (with the exception of rite to play with words and allude to “right”), although Grimes (2006) has distinguished between the concepts ritual and rite. Writes Grimes (163, n.32): “Rite: sequences of action rendered special by virtue of their condensation [...] Ritual: the general idea of actions characterized by a certain ‘family’ of qualities”. One might say that rite is “the doing” and ritual is the “study of this doing”.

songs. The football team Liverpool, which has long used the song “You’ll never walk alone” as a cheerleading song,² exemplifies this “ritual language” in the secular football performance. However, the structuralist and anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss insisted that there is a difference between sporting events and rituals:

Games [...] end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. At the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it conjoins for it brings about a union (one might even say a communion in this context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 45)

The examples above illustrate the challenge of defining rituals – what is a ritual, and where do we start? For his approach, the social anthropologist Roy Rappaport did not confine formalized actions to a religious sphere but highlighted the formalization itself, defining rituals as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (1999, 24). From this perspective, a football match can be defined as a ritual, since it operates according to formalized actions that the performers themselves do not create. Rappaport describes rituals as basic social acts (1999, 137). If the participants *accept* their participation in a ritual, there are specific rules to follow that have social consequences for both society and the individual once the event is over, even if the participants don’t believe in the ritual’s ontology. If you are married in church and say yes to your spouse, you get married even if you don’t believe in God or even have feelings for your partner. In this way, rituals are a safe language to follow, since their rules have been clearly defined by society and guide what follows after. But Rappaport also notes that some of these formalized actions can be anchored in what he labels “Ultimate Sacred Postulates” (1999, 263), which give extra weight to certain actions, which – in contrast to other formalized actions that are only attributed to or anchored in the human world – become more difficult to question, since they are embedded in a sacred world.

Many other researchers, however, have consistently refrained from defining what they mean by ritual. Two leading ritual researchers, Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell, exemplify this stance. Grimes prefers to talk about “family resemblances” (2014) while Bell is interested in the ritual language itself – i.e.,

2 Dempsey 2013.

in how actions are formalized, or in ritualization (1997). From this perspective, a ritual must be analyzed in its specific context to be understood, while ritualization can be seen as a strategic way of acting. In this ritualization process, tradition is reproduced, but can also be reinterpreted and negotiated in new directions.

Rituals have also been divided into different genres, such as liturgical (Rappaport 1999, 167) and individual-centered (or performance-centered, Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 8). Liturgical rituals are understood to have a safe language, which guarantees what is promised, regardless of the individual's intentions, as long as the ritual is accepted by the participants, performed correctly, and is officiated by authorized leaders. In individual-centered rituals, the focus is more on the experience, or feeling, of change for the individual, and the question "has the ritual had the right effect for me?" becomes more relevant. Thus, there is a risk that the ritual may fail to achieve its purpose since its result depends on the individual's experience. Since these individual-centered performances have expanded in contemporary society, I will discuss them below by using examples from today's performances and then focusing more on Sweden.

2 How Do We Capture the Ritual Language?

To capture this ritual language, we should shift our focus from what the ritual expresses or materializes, and look to (or for) the ritual *language* itself. Literary and textual studies employ concepts such as allusion, metaphor, parallelism, oxymoron, and intertextuality. Some of these concepts can also be adapted for studies of ritual language; intertextuality, for example, can be transformed into interrituality for analyses of how new ritual acts are woven together with older, established ritual acts, thus creating a new ritual that is perceived as traditional (Hornborg 2017). However, rituals cannot – or should not – be described solely as "texts" – we need to consider how we can study gestures, musical experiences, voice manipulation, and bodies that sensually feel each other (Csordas 1993), and how we can capture this when writing a "dry," academic text. Before delving into the Swedish context, let's consider a type of performance that uses a specific ritual language to stage ritual performances that fit well with contemporary society and give the individual participant a personal and embodied feeling of transformation, as an introduction to the overall theme of this chapter. These performances have also become a billion-dollar industry for their sellers.

I'm thinking here of the mass gathering events organized by the supercoach Tony Robbins. In my example (viewable in the YouTube clip linked below), he uses his performance as a "wake-up call" in a secular setting in front of a large audience, introducing his program "Unleash the Power Within."³ Robbins calls himself a peak performer and bolsters his legitimacy by making references to world leaders he has met (e.g., the Dalai Lama, Bill Clinton, and Princess Diana). Different participants also testify about the transformations they've experienced with Robbins. Here, the ritual is not embedded in a transcendental world, but in a hidden inner potential that the individual possesses and that can be found and redeemed through Robbins' performances. Looking at his performances, we can see how Robbins uses a ritual language in his body movements – e.g., he makes victory signs – which are reinforced by other factors, like the bright light that shines on and illuminates his white shirt and the music that reinforces his messages. In constructing his performance, Robbins uses four ritual acts. The first is *The Firewalk Experience*, where participants must learn that anything is possible – even walking on glowing coals. The second act is *The Power of Momentum*, when Robbins shows that the tools for change must be found. The third act is *Breakthrough and Transform*, where the change takes place. In the final act, *The Power of Pure Energy* is said to flow through the individual, promising a happy and successful life in the future. After these four acts, Robbins sprays the audience with water (using a water gun) and thus "baptizes" them into their new life. At the end of the performance, we can see how a stuttering man, Rechaud (first presented in black and white), tells us he has suffered from stuttering all his life, but has now been transformed and become "the real" Rechaud; i.e., his interior self was not a stutterer, and this inner potential has been released from his stuttering prison by following Robbins' instructions (to mark the change, Rechaud is now shown in color).

Many would label Robbins' practices as health practices or as methods for finding the individual's "true self." But his performances include strictly formalized practices, which are used as strategic means to both satisfy the participants and to successfully sell this performance successfully on a market. That is, they include or utilize a ritual language, and of course, to buy expensive tickets to join the events.

3 Tony Robbins UPW Sydney 2017.

3 Rituals for the Modern Man

In highly individualized societies, contemporary ritualized practices like Robbins' mass meetings often need to find a ritual language to attract individuals and be successful as courses sold on a market – or, to engage in a bit of wordplay: the “rite” must be the “right” thing to do for “the modern man,” if it is to have any chance to succeed. That is, if the ritual does not appeal to the individual, participation is likely to be perceived as meaningless, and the investment a waste of money. But who is “the modern man”?

In 2004, while renovating an old house on my farm, I found a 1931 issue of the magazine *Husmodern* in a wall, where it had been stuffed to help insulate against cold winds. I flipped through it distractedly for a while, until I saw a headline: “Människa, varför har Ni valt detta yrke?” (“Man, why have you chosen this profession?,” my transl.; see also Hornborg 2006, 110). The article was an interview-based survey on two fundamental questions that a Swedish state church priest, G. Lennarth, sent out about why people attended or did not attend church services. He wondered why “The priests preach, but their churches are empty. Complaints are heard all over the country, but no one seems to have a cure for this failure. What is the cause?” The article felt familiar – or at least not that strange – even though it was written more than 90 years ago. One of the answers Lennarth got gave this explanation:

Why does the Church and its practitioners maintain the old casual tone of their sermons? No modern young person can be moved and intrigued in front of a person who stands on a pulpit and reads out his sermon without soul and spirit, without nuances and shifts in his voice. I have attended many services just to study that matter, and as sad as it sounds, I must tell you that 75 of the priests do not feel what they are talking about. More than once, I have felt like rushing to the pulpit, grabbing them by the collar, and saying: “Man, why have you chosen this profession? As you stand here preaching only in one tone, there is no intelligent man who believes you. Have you never been in love, felt love for a human? Does the voice not then get nuances, shifts, and fervor without becoming unctuous? This is how you should feel when you talk about the greatest and most beautiful being in life, God!” (*Husmodern* 1931, 16–17; my translation)

This quote suggests that, even as early as the 1930s, there was an increased demand for liturgical rituals to attract individuals, to replace what was framed as empty church practices. The supercoach mentioned above, Robbins, has obviously found a way to become something like the “new priest” the article from 1931 was calling for. An interest in this phenomenon inspired me to dig

deeper and try to capture this change in Sweden, which I did in my book, *Coaching och lekmannaterapi – En modern väckelse?* (“Coaching and Lay Therapy: A Modern Revival?,” 2012). But what does this modern project, that fosters individuality and abandons the thought of a “traditionally homogeneous village community,” refer to? Individuals exist in village communities just as they do everywhere, but mass media in urban society, with the help of practitioners and looking for the unique inner potential, produce and perform an individual whose “unique” persona must be streamlined into a neoliberal persona to fit in contemporary society, but still be marketed as if it were truly and uniquely unique. This is not to say that modernity is absent from village life, which is also connected to and part of modern society, television, mass media, and the internet.

The turn towards the individual in the here and now can also be found in the music embedded in many contemporary rituals. During my youth, in the 1970s, I would often hear the song “Jag har hört om en stad ovan molnen,” with Swedish lyrics by Lydia Lithell, or “I have heard of a city up yonder” in English, performed at funerals, a practice that seems less common today:

I have heard of a city up yonder.
Far beyond our earth's dwelling so dreary.
I have heard of its shores bright and cheery,
Just imagine – one day I'll be there.

Hallelujah my heart wants to shout it!
Hallelujah – I'm off to that city!
Through the road becomes tiring and gritty,
I press on to my heavenly home!

I have heard of a land without sickness,
Without tears, without fighting or sorrow.
And where no-one's afraid of tomorrow,
Just imagine – one day I'll be there!

Hallelujah – rejoicing and cheerful!
Hallelujah – all doubt will be over!
And my journey no longer be fearful;
Very soon I'll be home with my Lord!

I have heard of the shiny white garments,
And the crowns with their gemstones so brilliant,

I have heard of those heavenly millions,
Just imagine – one day I'll be there!

Hallelujah – my spirit rejoices!
I feel pulled from the earth towards heaven!
I can hear a great choir of voices;
Soon I'll join with them praising my Lord!
Soon I'll join with them praising my Lord!⁴

The promise of the “shores bright and cheery” and “far beyond our earth's dwelling so dreary” does not seem to appeal to “modern man.” Contemporary funeral rituals are seemingly in need of a new language for their liturgical performances. The text above can be compared with a more modern song from the Swedish movie *Såsom i Himlen* (*As in Heaven*, 2004), where the depressed Gabriella sings her liberation from the hardships of everyday life in a church choir, in *Gabriellas sång* (*Gabriella's Song*; Musicforthepeople 2008):

It is now that my life is mine, I've got this short time on earth
And my longing has brought me here, All I lacked and all I gained

And yet it's the way that I chose, My trust was far beyond words
That has shown me a little bit, Of the heaven I've never found

I want to feel I'm alive, All my living days, I will live as I desire
I want to feel I'm alive, Knowing I was good enough

I have never lost who I was, I have only left it sleeping
Maybe I never had a choice, Just the will to stay alive

All I want is to be happy being who I am, To be strong and to be free
To see day arise from night, I am here and my life is only mine
And the heaven I thought was there, I'll discover it there somewhere

I want to feel that I've lived my life.⁵

As a measure of the song's popularity, it can be mentioned that “Gabriella's song” remained on the Swedish popular song chart for 68 weeks. Today, it is

⁴ The music is a Russian folk song. See Rodda 2015.

⁵ <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/elsie-gabriellas-song-lyrics.html>.

also commonly used as a funeral song. The idea of “coming home,” it would seem, has taken a different meaning, no longer being about moving above the earthly clouds and joining the “city up yonder” and finally finding peace, to focusing instead on finding peace in the individual’s here-and-now. Thus, it is increasingly suggested that the deceased should have found “heavenly peace” in this life, which offers a type of consolation to grieving relatives and friends. The goal is not “pie in the sky when you die,” but finding and partaking in ritualized practices that will allow one “to feel that I’ve lived my life,” fully and in this life. Other music choices can also point indexically to the deceased, as was the case when popular Swedish dance music was played at a funeral I attended for a man who often listened to this kind of music while driving his truck along the Swedish roads. This was how his children remembered him.

4 Rituals outside the Context of Church and Traditional Medical Science

How are today’s rituals designed and performed to fulfill Gabriella’s desire for modern man to feel like he or she is fulfilling their life here and now? In “I have heard of a city,” the lyrics are clearly anchored in a transcendental religious world. But where in “Gabriella’s song” can we find an “Ultimate Sacred Postulate,” to use Rappaport’s concept? When I examined new rituals in Sweden in the early 2000s, two clear traces emerged: rituals were either anchored in a “spiritual sphere” (“I am spiritual but not religious”) or abandoned the idea of a transcendental world in favor of a more science-like or scientific-sounding, popular psychological language that spoke of people’s inner potential, true selves, or authentic selves instead of a soul (Hornborg 2012, 64–78).

New formalized practices – or rituals – in Sweden can also gain legitimacy through the representation or construction of their practitioners or promoters as ritual leaders. Titles such as “certified,” “accredited,” or “authorized” therapist or coach are used for this purpose (the titles legitimized psychologist or psychotherapist are protected under Swedish law and require a university degree, and can thus not be used for this kind of legitimization). Likewise, companies were given names suggestive of other, established social institutions, like the *Swedish Institute for Grief Processing* or the *Health Academy*. The *Swedish Institute for Grief Processing*, for example, sells three-day courses that will supposedly free the bereaved from their grief, a practice that one of my immigrant students thought of as a very strange way to defeat sorrow.⁶ He said that if a

6 <https://www.sorg.se/kurser/sorgbearbetning-workshop/>.

loved one died, some of his relatives or friends stayed until the bereaved person felt better; when I said that this can take a long time, his answer was: yes, as long as it takes!

In addition to scientific-sounding titles, the credibility of the marketed activities was further strengthened by anchoring them in religious traditions (often Asian, rarely Abrahamic religions), references to science ("research says"), or in the leaders' personal experiences. In his studies of the New Age phenomenon, Olav Hammar has highlighted the significant role of science in contemporary society and how references to science are particularly important for legitimizing new practices. Since this use of science rarely had a solid basis in these movements, Hammar uses the term "science-like" to describe them, which he defines as a way of "adopting selected parts of the external characteristics of science without absorbing – or perhaps even understanding – its meaning content" (my transl. Hammar 2004, 242; see also Hornborg 2012, 32–34). Another very prominent feature of these practices is also, as noted, the reference to personal experience (Hornborg 2012, 83–86). New ritual leaders emphasize that they do not hide themselves behind a "professional" mask, as they claim that psychotherapists/psychoanalysts from established medical schools do, or treat their participants as "clients," but instead freely share their personal experiences in their dialogues and actions. Or as one company put it: "Who wants to take a diving certificate with someone who has not dived?"⁷

Another characteristic of modern ritual language is its promise of speedy outcomes. Blockages will be unlocked, and the participant will be released from illness, stress, and shortcomings both at home and at work, in a matter of hours. There is a strong emphasis on the claim that an individual's creativity will flourish with the help of the new methods, while "just being ordinary" is seen as a prison to be redeemed from. This focus on the individual has shifted the emphasis of rituals from liturgical forms, where the performative effect is active regardless of the individual's inner thoughts and faith, to more individual-centered practices where the performative effect cannot be fully guaranteed. If a liturgical ritual is performed correctly by an authorized officiant, and if the participants accept and participate, then it will work as the ritual promises, as said earlier; two people get married even if they do not want to or even have strong feelings for each other. But we can observe a ritual paradigm shift in modern society (cf. Bell 1997, 189–90), where traditional liturgical rituals are giving way to individual-centered rituals. The most important ritual mission is, increasingly, whether the performance has created a transformation and feeling within the individual. Doctrines and ethical

7 My translation from www.sorg.se/print.asp?u&uid=7; see also Hornborg 2012.

teachings are toned down to instead highlight the processes the individual must undergo to transform and fully realize themselves. Reality television or personal, therapeutic conversations on talk shows allow narrators to share their own life stories, contributing to a therapeutic climate that is spreading in society and opening up for lay people to offer relief and insights through a new design of individual-centered rituals (Johansson 2006; 2008). Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, social media influencing, and blogs also allow individuals to perform themselves in specific languages. The individual no longer sees themselves as part of a larger divine plan but focuses on personal experiences and feeling authentic and meaningful in the present. In a sense, what we are seeing is a sacralization of the inner self, trained in the new practices to fully blossom (Hornborg 2012, 99–100).

The framing of individual-centered rituals is also more open than the liturgical ones. Since the effect is not generated automatically, as it is thought to be in liturgical rituals, the end is left open so that the ritual can be reworked and open for a dialogical exchange with the ritual leader about its effect (Hornborg 2021, 402–18). Illness stories are often used as a narrative element in these rituals. The ritual leader's personal life story and healing experience are often used as a guiding path for the participant to reflect on their own suffering. These healing stories have a ritual language that may be compared with conversion stories with strong missionary messages: there is salvation if you follow the path set before you, a message that can arouse a desire to help others in turn – or to start selling courses in this path (Illouz 2008; Winroth 2004).

These new rituals also transfer structural problems, such as unemployment or burnout, to the individual level (e.g., job coaching). Rasmus Willig has labeled this as “Society's U-turn” (2013), where structural problems are framed as individual issues. Instead of criticizing workplace problems, such as cuts and profit motives, these issues are turned against the individual, who becomes stressed and burned out, and is offered new, formalized practices as a way to salvation (Willig 2013). Individuals who become preoccupied with the formalized practices of their own healing or self-development are easier for the market system to handle and even discipline than strong pressure groups that criticize the system and demand structural changes that might create a more humane society.

These new individual-centered rituals thus fit into contemporary Swedish society. Courses highlight “inner human capital” and allow various layman therapy/coaching companies to gain shares in a market where self-development, health, or success become “products” demanded by the individual or by workplaces. If the right product is purchased, the individual's inner “potential” can be remodeled and given the desired qualities. Thus, the new rituals have

become a thriving billion-dollar industry. They should be analyzed in this context and in relation to how they are generated, even if they are presented as universal operational models that can help people find their inner potential and true self.

Would the practitioners of these formalized practices call them rituals? If the term “rituals” is understood to refer to religious performances, they would probably hesitate to label these new formalized performances as stress-management training or personality-development as rituals and instead talk about them as courses, using labels such as self-development training. Moreover, most Swedish workplaces are conceived of as secular or as operating in a secular spirit, and thus as not supposed to offer courses that might be perceived as religious to employees. Language about realizing an “inner potential” or finding an immanent, enchanted inner world does not give the same connotations as talk about a religious transcendental world does, which might be another reason to resist the “ritual” label.

There has also been an occasionally intense debate in Sweden about whether secular events, such as school graduations, can legitimately take place in churches. In its wake, some questioned whether it is permissible (and why it was permitted) to introduce Asian traditions such as yoga into the classroom, since yoga might be classified as a religious ritual. Thus, in 2012, one group reported a school in Stockholm where yoga had been practiced as part of the curriculum to the Swedish School Inspectorate, arguing that yoga should be viewed as a religious ritual and therefore not be allowed in a secular classroom (Bonnevier et al. 2012). The provider of the courses – Skolyoga (“School Yoga”), opposed the classification of yoga as a “religious” practice and spoke of it either as a spiritual practice or as a technique. The School Inspectorate stated that Skolyoga’s way of performing yoga was not a religious practice but a technique that focused on the pupils’ health and well-being and could therefore be considered suitable for a classroom.⁸ To return to my earlier wordplay, this might then be understood as an example of the rite doing “the right thing,” and thus being a practice suitable to a contemporary, secular society like Sweden.

5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has aimed to show a glimpse of a new ritual language found in contemporary Swedish society. It has explored how the context, here a highly secularized and neoliberal market society, creates new individual-centered

⁸ See also http://www.skolyoga.se/uploads/9/0/8/2/9082645/41-2012-2569_beslut.pdf.

rituals to attract modern man, including building a market to successfully sell these practices as courses to both individuals and workplaces. "Doing the rite thing," in this context, means turning rituals into "right" therapeutic and individualistic practices. This both reflects and reinforces society's structural expectations and demands for individuals to be successful and creative. Consequently, individuals find new formalized ways to embed themselves in practices that both reflect contemporary society and to perceive those practices as "natural" to be a part of.

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The Haunted Landscape of Loss: Popular Culture and Politics in Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England*

Ive Brissman

1 Introduction – *A Field in England* and the Eerie Landscape Culture

Ben Wheatley's film *A Field in England* (2013) invites audiences to journey back to England during the Civil War. The drama unfolds in a field, where a tilting horizon suggests a world in turmoil, in the wake of being turned upside down. While set in a historical setting, the movie explores a distinctly contemporary theme: living through times of crisis. The story takes place in a specific time and place: a field, somewhere in England's West Country, in the year 1648, a significant year marking the end of the religious war that devastated Europe and the signing of the Westphalian peace settlement, often regarded as the birth of modern Europe (Shakman Hurd 2008). In Britain, however, the Civil War and English Revolution continued, and the aftermath of the Reformation marked a turbulent period in England's political history, creating fertile ground for the emergence of new religious movements (Berens 1961, 13). The protagonists end up in the field after a battle, where intrigue ensues as they search for



FIGURE 21.1 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

lost alchemist documents, dig for treasure, and experience psychedelic folk horror. The field becomes a stage for a power struggle, blurring the boundaries between politics and popular culture. The drama mediates an image of England as a land defined by contested ownership, heritage, political and religious strife, folklore, and magic. Commentators have described it as a “psychedelic historical drama, interpolating elements of folk horror and shot with an attention to landscape and natural lighting” (Bonner 2013), and as a “head spinning trip into the far corners of the English Psyche” (Leigh 2013).

The scholar of English literature Robert Macfarlane describes the film as an example of “the new eerie,” a tendency in contemporary British works by artists, musicians, novelists, and filmmakers that nourishes a fascination with landscapes, unease, and displacement (Macfarlane 2015). This eeriness arises from landscapes haunted by their pasts, darkened by contemporary ecological concerns, and visited by ghosts from an uncontrollable future (Macfarlane 2015). In this chapter, I discuss how the film mediates history and incorporates references to contemporary popular culture. My aim in exploring these cultural references – such as paganism, alchemy, folk horror, and psychedelia – is not to interpret the drama, but to demonstrate how these elements help audiences to orient themselves within a historical period.

2 Engaging with the Past

Re-enactments inspired director Ben Wheatley to create a historical film (Colegate 2013). Working with Amy Jumps’ script, he wants the audience to feel as if they have been “parachuted” into the seventeenth century; by leaving everything unexplained, the viewers must discover things for themselves (Wheatly 2013).

I think that is the idea that you are going to be transported somewhere in context. The main character is not a modern person in the past who explains everything as an exposition, as they do in a lot of movies. (Wheatley 2013)

Leaving out exposition contributes to an authentic experience because, as Wheatley (2013) notes, “this is something that the persons in the movie know, so why would they talk about it?” The audience is thus “dropped” in a particular place, time, and chain of events. According to Jonathan Stubbs, historical films mediate the past by combining “a degree of period *mise en scène* with a narrative that describes the past” (2009, 14–19). He defines historical cinema as films that engage with history and construct a relationship to the past. Both production

teams and audiences participate in this process, as do the cultural contexts in which they operate and the discourses that they generate (Stubbs 2009, 19). Mattias Frey argues that the past may be depicted in a way that aligns with the viewer's perception of historical reality. Films can bring history to life if they evoke a sense of authenticity; as Frey argues, "[a]uthenticity signifies a realistic historical experience, an effective suspension of temporal-spatial disbelief" (2018, 1). Cinematic history can stimulate such a suspension of tempo-spatial disbelief. Robert Burgoyne emphasizes "the concept of reenactment, the act of imaginative re-creation that allows the spectator to imagine that they are 'witnessing again' the events of the past" (Burgoyne 2008, 43–46). Wheatley's parachute perspective supports this idea; the viewer is not simply a witness or a spectator but must participate, akin to a time traveler, to make sense of the experience.

Memories and imagination connect time to places and landscapes, and in a sense make it possible to go back in time. Time travel may be seen as a fantasy or an imaginary journey. However, some archaeologists understand "time travel" as referring to the experimental dimension of understanding and engaging with the past as "an embodied experience and a social practice in the present that brings to life a past or future reality" (Holtorf 2017, 1). Time travel goes beyond nostalgia, reaching back to a time and place one has not experienced. The concept of "anemoia" refers to a longing for a time and place one has never experienced, highlighting that memory and imagination are not entirely distinct systems (De Brigard 2018, 10). The past and the present are interconnected. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that the modernist view of the future has been replaced by timelines that constrain our understanding of both the past and future (Bauman 2017, 6). The effects of this shift are visible, palpable, and felt throughout society, shaping new worldviews that suggest and foster new life strategies.

The road to future looks uncannily as a trail of corruption and degeneration. Perhaps the road back to the past, won't miss a change of turning into a trial of cleansing from the damage committed by the futures, whenever they turned into present. (Bauman 2017, 6)

Bauman's concept of "retrotopia" describes a return to the past, based on the insight that, to draw a map of the present and orient toward the future, the past must be part of the picture as a reference point (Bauman 2017, 8–9). Similarly, the philosopher Jacques Derrida proposes that the past, as historical hauntings, does not simply follow a chronological sequence of dated presents, but instead appears suddenly, in ghostly forms, throughout European history



FIGURE 21.2 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

(Derrida 1994, 3). Thus, history is never entirely left behind; it continues to contribute to how we make sense of ourselves and our times. In this sense, we are not going back in time; we simply tune in to an ever-present past. With this perspective, I will now drop the reader into the field, but before presenting the storyline, I need to issue a spoiler alert.

3 Entering the Field

The opening scene takes place on the edge of a field. Whitehead hides among the vegetation as his master, the alchemist, angrily calls for him. Terrified of the punishment that awaits him, Whitehead remains hidden in the bushes. By chance, a stranger rescues him, but Whitehead soon finds himself serving a new master, O'Neil. Three foot soldiers – deserters – searching for an ale house, also come under O'Neil's command. The field serves as the backdrop for their collective drama; none of them end up here by choice, but as a consequence of the ongoing war. Despite the field's open expanse, it feels like an enclosure, offering no way out of the situation. They are trapped in a situation known as displacement, where refugees find themselves with nowhere to escape (Nixon 2011). Stranded amid the ruins of war, they remain in a landscape of loss.

The men are caught up in a subtle and brutal interplay of power, subordination, oppression, domination, rebellion, and freedom. The self-styled master and the other four must find their roles. Will they obey their master, or revolt? The story shifts between two principal scenes: “The tent scene” and “The trip scene” (or “The possession scene”). In the tent scene, the soldiers are tasked with digging for the treasure. Whitehead, drawn into a twisted power struggle,

is summoned by O'Neil to his tent with the words, "Do not concern yourself with bravery now. It is official; you are *my* prisoner." What happens inside the tent is hidden from our view, but the screams and groans let us imagine the painful struggle that goes on inside. Outside the tent, another struggle plays out: one soldier guards the tent, while another, who cannot stand the gruesome cries, tries in vain to help Whitehead. Finally, Whitehead stumbles out from the tent, his body tightly bound and led by O'Neil on a leash. Seemingly brainwashed, he sports a bizarre smile, as if touched by some weird religious revelation. The foot-soldiers fall on their knees at the sight.

The "trip scene" is a stark contrast to the violence and submission of the "tent scene." While the tent scene is hidden, the trip scene unfolds in the open field, beyond the protagonists' control, influenced by forces such as magic, pagan power, and psychedelic ecstasy. Nature itself, aka the field, shapes the narrative as, suddenly, the field explodes with rings of mushrooms, growing with unpredictable force. Wheatley draws on folklore descriptions of rings of magical mushrooms and warnings about the danger of being dragged into their realm because, in the power circle, you enter a different conception of time, similar to travel in time (Wheatley 2013). In contemporary popular culture, mushrooms are widely recognized for their hallucinogenic properties, and in the film, their appearance feeds a rebellious spirit. As a strong wind rises, forces unknown propel the characters forward. The trip scene utilizes stroboscope editing and split-screen imagery, with visuals divided like a Rorschach ("inkblot") test. Wheatley aims here to push the audience to their limits, seeking to create an experience reminiscent not only of a psychedelic mushroom trip but also of the horrors of war (Wheatley 2013). Whitehead collapses, raging at his master, who insists no escape from the field is possible:

Then I shall become it. I will consume all the ill fortune that you are said to unleash. I shall chew up all the selfish scheming and ill intention that men like you have forced upon men like me.

In the dreamlike, nightmarish vision, it is not only the horrors of war that are awakening. The devil inherent in any revolt comes alive as Whitehead dons the costume of his former master and so becomes him – becomes the devil. The slightly tilted horizon, which has been seen throughout the movie, and indicating a world on the edge, finally flips, turning the world upside down. The broken halves of a black circle become whole, completely covering the sun, as Whitehead cries out to O'Neil: "You must cease or we may be blasting off an ill planet." The apocalyptic fear of the world's end becomes real.



FIGURE 21.3 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

Something is happening beyond human control; the mushrooms appear as a *deus ex machina*, upsetting the power balance of the mundane world. Unpredictable pagan magic comes into play; in folklore, rings of mushrooms open gateways to a magical realm. Today, the hallucinogenic power of mushrooms is filled with pop culture references. Since the 1960s, they have been valued by the counterculture for their intoxicating, mind-altering qualities. The pagan forces involved in the film are not merely human; magic enters the scene, challenging the established power relations by evoking rebellion, ecstatic visions, and horror. The men are not the only ones present in the field; throughout the drama, their actions are contrasted with shifts in perspective toward the more-than-human world.

Here, the wind rustling the grass, insects, herbs, and even a drop of blood on a blade of grass are brought to the forefront. In a contrasting light, as if in a black-and-white sunset, the field is seen through a spider's web. Nature is not a peaceful *other* that exists apart from human conflict, power, or violence. Historian Annette Bullen notes that the field becomes a character when it is literarily performed, as seen in the cast list, which credits Sara Deed as the Voice of the Field (2013). Although the countryside appears bright and clear, it is also harsh and unforgiving; green but deeply unpleasant. The protagonists are aliens in this environment, stranded in the middle of nowhere. The foot soldier Friend says, "I fuckin' hate the countryside," though he later admits, "I have never had so many friends as I have in this field." Whitehead remarks that the "treasure is here between us, is it not, friend?" The value of friendship stands in contrast to the brutality of force. Bullen notes:

Although they do not fight for or believe in a bigger cause, it is their eventual friendship coupled with the drive to survive which becomes the motivation for the two survivors to fight and ultimately defeat O'Neil. Whitehead does not kill O'Neil to achieve political freedom or out of religious zeal, he kills him to preserve his own life and avenge his friend's death. (Bullen 2013)



FIGURE 21.4 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

O'Neil is driven by both the pursuit of wealth and a desire to instill fear, declaring that "the world is turned upside down, and so's our pockets." The other characters are motivated by a wish to escape the war and remain hidden, with only Whitehead's character displaying a semblance of loyalty to his master. Still, Bullen finds them to be not entirely unsympathetic. The counterpoint to the brute force is the value of friendship (Jeske 2022).

4 The Historical Context – a Field of Power and Struggle

Retrotopias establish the past as a crucial reference point for mapping the present and orienting ourselves toward the future. One such reference point, according to Bauman (2017, 9), is the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Hobbes, who lived during the English Civil War, describes in his *Leviathan* (published in 1651) "a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man" when "men live without any other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal" (Hobbes 1651, 78). Under such conditions, there is neither "culture of the earth" nor "knowledge of the earth; no account of time, no arts; no letter, no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (78). O'Neil's statement, "[t]he world is turned upside down and so is our pockets," reflects the experience of living in poor and nasty times. Another reference is the slogan "the world turned upside down," coined by Gerrard Winstanley (1609–1676), a political thinker who demanded heaven on Earth (Hill 1991; Berens 1961). Based on the religious doctrine that every man is equal to God, Winstanley argued for this equality to be implemented in righteous laws of the land, which inspired land reform movements, the Diggers, and the Levellers, who viewed land as a common treasure for all (Berens 1961, 233). This radical sense of equality was mirrored in the Quaker movement, also

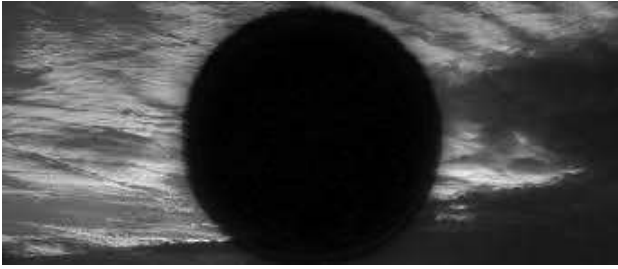


FIGURE 21.5 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

known as “the friends” because adherents addressed each other as friends, not “sir” or “mister,” as seen in the film. Around this time, Hobbes and John Locke formulated the philosophy of the social contract as a foundation of society and politics. In this historical context, notions of punishment, violence, power, subordination, as well as freedom and equality, all came up for debate. Politics and earthly masters were not the only sources of control; religion, too, offered its masters and punishments. Friend draws his insight: “I think I figured out what God is punishing us for; everything!” – perhaps inspired by a dark Puritan theology. Historian Christopher Hill (1991) describes such ideas as efforts by various common people’s groups to impose their own solutions to the problems of their time. Bullen notes that, although *A Field in England* does not advocate for some communal equality to solve society’s ills, it “perhaps posits the notion that the solution is found within our own individuality and the bonds and responsibilities which we have to each other” (2013). Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* gives further perspectives:

A field in England actually draws on a tradition that sees the English revolution as a period of visionary radicalism and insurrection, though this is here converted with cynicism and despair. All the digging and ranting is with something other than utopia in view. (Bradshaw 2013)

It is notable that Wheatley and Jump chose not to set their story during the celebrated golden age of the Elizabethan era. They avoid the escapism of costume drama and do not attempt to depict a nostalgic past or a lost golden age before the advent of modernity. Instead, the English Civil War serves as their backdrop – an age of political and religious turmoil, with England on the cusp of modernity. Next, I will explore a focal point – a knot – where the complex entanglements of religion, politics, and popular culture become apparent. Here, we find the common themes of power, masters, rebellion, and counter-powers beyond control.

5 Masters of English Magic and Alchemy

As seen, Whitehead escapes his master, the alchemist, only to fall under the spell of a new master, O'Neil, who is eager to find the treasure described in the alchemist's document. To O'Neil, the treasure is gold and worldly riches. Alchemy and magic are at the heart of this power struggle, and entering the ring of mushrooms – where magic reigns – becomes an act of rebellion against O'Neil's authority. Over centuries, England has acquired “the most varied, most extraordinary magical history of all countries of the earth” (Carr-Gomm and Hey 2012, 6). During the English Renaissance, magic flourished as courts and noblemen employed magicians like John Dee (1527–1608/9), at the Elizabethan court (Carr-Gomm and Hey 2012, 252–96). While this forms the historical backdrop for the screenplay, it remains true even in the modern era that “more people practice magic in England than at any other time in her history” (Carr-Gomm and Hey 2012, 6). According to historian Alex Owen, the magician remains an archetype, a powerful signifier of an all-knowing, all-powerful diviner of universal secrets: the magician is a master.

When that Master can also offer the prospect of enchantment in a disenchanted language of the secularised self, we have at hand the formula for the creation of a modern magician of mythic proportions. [...] The boundary between the enchanted and the disenchanted worlds are not secure, and we habitually unknowingly engage in magical ways of thinking. (Owen 2004, 236)

Magic serves as a counter-power, overthrowing the reign of the master. The world is not only turned upside down; the psychedelic apocalypse calls out for the blasting of an ill planet. The black sun is an alchemical symbol; the blackness at the initial stage of the alchemical process is the state of Nigredo, a state of horror and apocalypse when “the world becomes a place of reeking decay” haunted by the *terra damnata* revealing “the terrors of hell and the suffering of the purgatory” (Fabricius 1986, 102). However, the true aim of the process – the alchemist's gold – is not the worldly wealth that O'Neil hopes to gain. Rather, according to psychoanalyst Marlan Stanton, the alchemist's gold is a process of the psyche: “Typically, blackness is said to dissolve, and then ‘the devil’ no longer has autonomous existence but rejoins the profound unity of the psyche” (Stanton 2005, 10–11). Thus, “the devil” becomes integral to the process, but who is the devil in this plot? Bullen spots him among the characters, describing Whitehead as the film's moral compass (who finds “pages easier to turn than people”). Without him, the film would offer only a bleak and depressing portrayal of ignorance and selfishness. “If Whitehead is a force for eventual ‘good’

(though I hesitate to use such clichés) then O'Neil is the Devil" (Bullen 2013). The alchemy of the trip scene draws the devil out from hiding; the next riddle to explore combines folklore, psychedelia, and paganism.

6 Contemporary Popular Culture – a Field of Psychedelia and Pagan Powers

In *A Field in England*, the consumption of psychedelic mushrooms acts as a catalyst for overthrowing the reign of the domineering master. Psychedelia has been part of pop culture since the countercultural movement of the 1960s. LSD was initially used as a treatment for soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder during World War II. In the hippie culture of the 1960s, it became known as a mind-expanding, peace-promoting substance. Aldous Huxley opened *The Doors of Perception* to Heaven and hell and argued that "[t]he mind is its own place, and the places inhabited by the insane and the exceptionally gifted are so different from where the ordinary men and women live" (Huxley 1954, 13). Historian of religion Christopher Partridge claims that for Huxley there are two forms of consciousness and two realities, "one of which, the 'Old World,' inhibits an understanding of the occulted, transcendent 'Other World'" (Partridge 2018, 14).

Psychoactive substances are able to expose technologies of domination. In so doing, they neutralize or at least weaken hegemonic social forces and thereby open up new ways for individuals 'to understand themselves. (Partridge 2018, 11)

Psychedelic states are frequently interpreted as moments of redemptive illumination. The knowledge gained – psychedelic gnosis – is ineffable, leaving a lasting sense of profound meaning. Intoxication by magic mushrooms is distinctive in the film's "trip scene," where the consumption of the hallucinogenic substances fuels a rebellious spirit. The neologism "entheogen" to describe "psychoactive sacraments" that play a distinctive part in the formation of mythologies and religions (Ruck and Hoffman 2013). In early English religion, folklore and Pagan symbols such as the green man can be found, also in Christian churches (Brown 2016, 10–15). Historian of religions Andy Letcher argues that the use of magic mushrooms is "intertwined with and inseparable from the social, cultural, scientific and technological changes that have occurred since the industrial revolution, the forces that have wrought the Western world" (Letcher 2006, 4). The inclusion of the word "shroomers" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates how magic mushrooms have become a part of popular and counterculture (Letcher 2006, 4). References to psychedelic mushrooms



FIGURE 21.6 Black-and-white still from *A Field in England* (2013)

evoke pagan spirituality and pagan symbolism. Marginal and wild places, located away from the urban realm, are attractive symbols (Harvey 2012, 268), and features of pagan culture and folklore are incorporated into artwork and popular culture. Partridge describes “pagan sentiments” and “paganization” as distinctive parts of contemporary alternative spiritualities, found outside institutional religion and entwined with popular culture and urban myths (Partridge 2005, 2). Popular culture is a key element in shaping the way we think about the world; as part of the broader “occulture,” it contributes to the ongoing re-enchantment of the West. Occulture is not esoterism, i.e., hidden, exclusive for the initiated few or concerned with a Gnostic privilege; rather, it is open, part of everyday life, and embedded in a culture, constantly in flux and evolving, and mediated in popular culture. Transmission through popular culture does not diminish its significance or trivialize it (Partridge 2005, 1–4). For anyone dropped in the field in England, popular culture, occulture, alternative spiritualities, and pagan sentiments are intertwined, closely linking history and contemporary politics, religious movements, psychedelia, and pagan folk horror. One central theme in the film is the contrast between power relations and friendship. In the opening scene, Whitehead is rescued from his master’s punishment, only to become subordinated to another, until he finds the magical means to overthrow his oppressor. The psychedelic experience thus becomes a technology that “has the power to induce a transcendence of the hegemonic forces of domination” (Partridge 2018, 11).

7 Retrotopian Entanglements of the Past and the Present

In this chapter, I have discussed how popular culture mediates history and how it offers a way to engage in the past. While pop culture or counterculture is often viewed as a distinctly modern phenomenon that emerged in

the 1960s (Roszak 1969), history plays a significant role in it. Ken Goffman argues that counterculture has always existed; even in antiquity, myths reflected a “cutting-edge” culture. For counterculturalists, “myths are as important [...] as historical facts, and perhaps more poignant” (Goffman 2004, 3). The experience of living on the edge or at the end of time recurs throughout history. For historical films, the feeling of authenticity is not just a realistic experience but also an “effective suspension of temporal-spatial disbelief” (Frey 2018, 1), mediating sentiments that are recognizable to the contemporary viewer.

The director and the author of the script deliberately set their film in 1648, raising the question: why is this year of interest in 2013? Despite the centuries that have passed, I argue that there are parallels that can enhance our understanding. The English Civil War is a point of reference, a year before the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Today, that period is seen by many as characterized by visionary radicalism and insurrection; it was the birth of modern Britain. The mid-17th century was a time of social unrest following the Elizabethan era, a period often celebrated as a golden age in British history, during which William Shakespeare was at the height of his career. Although the year 1648 is different from 2013, I still think it is possible to find resemblances in shared sentiments of living in times of crisis.

In 2013, Britain confronted its record of past glory, not only as formerly an empire where the sun never set, but also burdened by post-colonial guilt. Post-Thatcherism and the 2008 economic crisis created stark economic realities. The prosperity of the Labour governments in the 1990s, with Tony Blair and “Cool Britannia,” in the 1990s was over, and in 2010, the Tories returned to power. A critical discourse followed Britain’s involvement with the US in the “war on terror,” sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, where British lives were lost. Further political unrest arose with the lead-up to the EU/Brexit referendum, the rise of UKIP, and the growing Scottish independence movement. British identity and the meaning of “Englishness” came under scrutiny. In 2010, the dark siren of the British Isles, PJ Harvey, released the album *Let England Shake*. Giving voice to the spirit of the time, she chanted: “Let England shake, weighted down with silent dead.” The author Paul Kingsnorth explored the contested notions of “England” or “Englishness” in “England’s Uncertain Future” in *The Guardian* (2015). The political establishment at Westminster, desperate to keep the United Kingdom united, promoted “Britishness” as a cohesive identity – especially in relation to the new multicultural, global society, and alongside Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

In contrast, “English identity was caricatured as either nostalgic or nasty” (Kingsnorth 2015). Yet, in folk music, food, fiction, and TV drama, “there is a tentative sense of a renewed cultural Englishness” (Kingsnorth 2015),

resonating with a fascination for the *English* eerie and “the skull beneath the skin of the countryside” (Macfarlane 2015) as a cultural and political response to contemporary crises and fears. Once celebrated as “the green and pleasant land,” critical discourse today is digging up the bones of English identity (Brissman 2021, 124–31). The English countryside is neither peaceful nor beautiful but “a green and deeply unpleasant land” (Macfarlane 2015). In *A Field in England*, the search for the treasure results in “unspeakable violence in a rural setting” (Wheatley, quoted in Macfarlane 2015). Thus, the English landscape is defined as much by *eeriness* as by Englishness. From a contemporary urban perspective, it is a marginal place, evoking uncanny feelings and haunted by its inescapable history. Still, such places exert a certain kind of ambivalent attraction.¹ For some, they become spirited places (Cornish 2020). “The sense of eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human” (Fisher 2017). These weird encounters prompt the question: what happened to produce these ruins, this disappearance? This goes beyond the Freudian notion of the uncanny as aesthetic (Freud 1911) and pushes into the domain of ethics, where the horror lies in the deed itself, not its appearance, and in the encounter with unknown forces and losses (Brissman 2021, 124–31). Derrida considers these hauntings fundamental to Europe’s existence (Derrida 1994, 5). These hauntings are not bound to any particular date; they come from any time, past or future. Facing them is perhaps inescapable, for ghosts and shadows are part of the movement of history itself.

8 Conclusions

A Field in England is an example of how popular culture mediates history, offering a way to engage with the past. While popular culture may be a modern phenomenon, historical sentiments are ingrained in it. This evocative narrative illustrates the entanglement of religion, politics, and popular culture, revealing common themes of power, masters, rebellion, and counter-powers beyond control, which remain as central today as they were in the 17th century. By evoking sentiments such as the eerie and the uncanny, Wheatley’s quest challenges the viewer to journey into the past and confront the horrors of the haunted landscape we share. The experience is both familiar and strange. To return to Wheatley’s parachute metaphor, I say that pop cultural references work as a parachute that allows a soft landing when dropped in the historical

1 I have written on Dartmoor in Devon UK as one such place. Brissman 2021, 221–69, 290–300.

landscape. The retrotopian perspective offers direction, demonstrating that history forms a point of reference and must be taken into consideration to understand the present. Popular culture provides a shared reference point anchored in historical awareness, serving as a tool that connects past and present in both directions.

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All images are from Rooks Film.

The Wristwatch and Religion: the Semiotics of Timekeeping, Tradition, and Technology

Anders Ackfeldt and Andreas Johansson Weber

1 “Research Should Be Fun, Otherwise You Are Doing It Wrong”¹

Professor Jonas Otterbeck’s oft-repeated phrase, “Research should be fun, otherwise you are doing it wrong,” shared during supervision or casual conversations, has become an inspiring informal motto for us. It has encouraged us to explore what some might perceive as unconventional connections, from the interplay between hip-hop culture and Islam (Ackfeldt 2025) to the religious motifs found in Yakuza tattoos (Johansson 2019). For us, Jonas’ words serve as a powerful reminder of the essential role that curiosity and creativity play in making any academic adventure both meaningful and engaging – a perspective that can sometimes be forgotten in the daily grind of academia.

We wrote this chapter with inspiration from Otterbeck’s motto and his work on the intersections of religion, art, music, and consumption (see, for example, Otterbeck 2021a; 2024). Here, we examine the semiotics of wristwatches in religious contexts, exploring how these timekeeping devices convey faith, tradition, and identity. By delving into this connection – a topic close to our hearts – we hope to contribute, in one way or another, to the broader conversation about how material culture mediates different perceptions of the sacred. In his article, “Finding the object of study: Islamic studies in practice,” Otterbeck discusses semiotic resources, symbols, and signs that convey meaning, which is particularly valuable for understanding how religions like Islam are constructed and interpreted. In the context of understanding watches and religion, this approach highlights that both are shaped by power dynamics and the control over meaning. Just as timekeeping systems regulate daily life and symbolize order, religious symbols and language regulate beliefs and behavior (Otterbeck 2021b).

1 Portions of this article were previously published in Swedish on www.eqotime.com (and online as part of a three-article series by the authors titled “Tid, Tro och Teknologi”).

2 Ancient Rhythms and Early Clocks – the Origins of Timekeeping and the Wristwatch

The human need to understand and structure time has been fundamental since the dawn of civilization. Early humans likely observed celestial patterns, such as the movements of the sun and moon, to comprehend and manage their daily rhythms. Archaeologist Alexander Marshack suggests that timekeeping dates back approximately 42,000 years, citing the Lebombo Bone discovered near the South Africa-Eswatini border. Featuring 29 notches, the artifact may represent an ancient lunar calendar, reflecting early humans' attempts to measure and structure time (Marshack 1972).² Regardless of its specific purpose, the Lebombo Bone underscores humanity's enduring curiosity about the patterns governing their environment.

As knowledge of celestial movements deepened, tools such as sundials and astronomical structures emerged. The origins of sundials remain unclear, as they appeared independently in various cultures. Stonehenge, dating back to 3,000 BCE in England, aligns with the sun during solstices, indicating its use as a timekeeping tool. Similarly, at the Taosi site in ancient China (c.2,300 BCE), painted sticks were used to observe shadows and measure time. These instruments not only tracked the passing hours but also played critical social roles. Often located in central areas of towns, they provided a shared sense of time, enabling organized farming, trade, and governance (Struthers 2023, 12).

In River Valley Civilizations like Mesopotamia and Egypt, some of the earliest sundials connected timekeeping with religious practices. In ancient Egypt, Amon-Re, the sun god, symbolized life, light, and cosmic order. Sundials tracked his daily journey across the sky, aligning human activities and religious ceremonies with the divine rhythms of creation and eternity by observing the sun's shadows. Egyptians connected their existence to the sacred cycles of renewal and order (Hosny 2020).

Timekeeping underwent significant evolution in medieval Europe, where mechanical clocks emerged in the 13th and 14th centuries. According to the Swedish historian Lennart Lundmark (1993), there are two explanations for why the development of watches occurred during these centuries. On one hand, there was the need to understand astronomical phenomena; on the other, monasteries needed to keep track of times for prayers (1993, 26). However, both

2 While Marshack's interpretation of the Lebombo Bone as an ancient lunar calendar is intriguing, it remains a subject of scholarly debate. Critics argue that the notches could represent something other than a structured calendar, such as tally marks for counting or symbolic representations unrelated to timekeeping (see, for example, Robinson 1992).

of these devices are often housed in churches and rely on weights and gears to measure time and astronomical events. The exact moment of the birth of the mechanical clock is shrouded in the fog of history. However, one hypothesis suggests that the mechanical clock was originally designed to regulate monastic prayers (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996).

In the Ottoman Empire, timekeeping was closely tied to Islamic traditions. “Islamic time” was based on the sun’s movements and the daily prayer schedule. While mechanical clocks initially symbolized luxury and were used privately, clock towers became prominent in the 19th century as symbols of modernization and authority (Uluengin 2010, 18). One of the first public Ottoman clock towers was built in the city of Safranbolu between 1794 and 1797. This clock was built by Grand Vizier İzzet Mehmed Pasha (1743–1812), marking a significant development in Ottoman architecture (Hadrovic 2024, 795).

By the 18th century, the watch industry was in full bloom, and mass production of pocket watches was widespread (Lundmark 1993, 102). While these early timekeeping devices are captivating, the focus for this chapter is the wristwatch – a relatively modern invention with immense cultural significance. The origins of wristwatches can be traced back to the Calvinist reforms of 16th-century Geneva. Due to religious restrictions on ornate jewelry, local jewelers shifted their attention to the practical craft of watchmaking (Struthers 2023, 48). The Swiss watch industry grew into a global standard of excellence. Religious institutions laid the groundwork for the watch industry, but it was wartime necessity that popularized the wristwatch. Soldiers found it easier to coordinate trench departures with wristwatches, leading to further technological development (Kern 2003, 8–9). The global wristwatch market was valued at \$73.1 billion in 2023, and it continues to grow, driven by luxury brands and the rise of smartwatches (Global Market Insights 2023).

As seen in this brief history, religion has long influenced the evolution of timekeeping, embedding sacred rhythms into devices from ancient sundials to modern wristwatches. These timekeeping devices express humanity’s deep connection to the passage of time, seamlessly intertwined with religious contemplation on the eternal cycle of life.

3 The Semiotics of Wristwatches and Wristwatches as Mediators of the Sacred

Douglas Freake’s article, “The Semiotics of Wristwatches” (1994), provides a crisp exploration of the symbolic meaning embedded in these seemingly mundane objects. Freake draws upon the work of Roland Barthes, who, in his

book *Mythologies* (1975), examined seemingly ordinary objects like steak and chips to reveal their hidden symbolic meanings. Freake agrees with Barthes that even objects with useful functions, like wristwatches, can – and should – be subject to semiotic analysis. He argues that “objects that have a self-evident practical function (like timekeeping) tend to be protected from symbolic or semiotic analysis by their very usefulness” (Freake 1994, 67). Freake believes that this very practicality can camouflage deeper symbolic meanings related to societal power dynamics and the commodification of time.

While Freake focuses on wristwatches, particularly within the workforce and advertising, his insights provide a springboard for exploring their significance in religious contexts as well. Freake highlights how advertising manipulates these meanings to create desire and sell an image of individuality. This observation raises questions about how religious institutions and/or authorities might similarly utilize wristwatches to convey messages about, for example, faith, discipline, and identity.

To further develop this argument, we find that Bruno Latour’s concept of *mediators* becomes useful. The concept of *mediators* refers to entities – human or non-human – that actively transform, translate, distort, or modify the meaning or force of what they mediate. Latour puts a *mediator* in direct opposition to an *intermediary*:

Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. No matter how complicated an intermediary is, it may, for all practical purposes, count for just one – or even for nothing at all because it can be easily forgotten. No matter how apparently simple a mediator may look, it may become complex; it may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role. (Latour 2005, 39)

To put it simply: an intermediary transmits information without change; inputs predict outputs. A mediator transforms, translates, and modifies, producing unpredictable, context-dependent outcomes, altering meanings and roles dynamically. For example, the input function of a wristwatch (e.g., keeping time) does not necessarily predict its output in this context. The wristwatch’s significance shifts, becoming a tool for moral discipline, a marker of faith, or a status symbol within a religious hierarchy. Its role can vary based on the specific religious traditions or the intentions of the leaders promoting its use, demonstrating how a seemingly mundane object transforms into a complex mediator of religious, sacred, and social values.

Building on the above insights from Freake and Latour, we will provide illustrative examples of wristwatches in this context. To explore how these objects

mediate perceptions of time, devotion, and the sacred, we will first present compelling examples of wristwatches designed with religious semiotics and equipped with religious applications. These examples will illustrate how their materiality and functionality communicate faith and practice. Following this, we will examine wristwatches worn by religious authorities, analyzing the contexts in which they are used and the symbolic roles they play. These examples will provide a foundation for understanding the broader semiotic and mediating roles of wristwatches in religious contexts.

4 Faith in Every Tick: the Religious Semiotics and Application of Wrist Watches

As the watch industry has grown, many prominent watchmakers have seized opportunities to develop both designs and techniques tailored to a religious market. As noted, watchmaking has historically been intertwined with religious traditions, making the move toward appealing to a religious audience a natural progression. Many renowned watchmakers have centuries-long histories and long-standing connections to religious institutions. One notable example is the luxury brand Patek Philippe, which has crafted customized



FIGURE 22.1 Patek Philippe, “Papal Purple” (Photo: hodinkee.com)



FIGURE 22.2 Jaeger-LeCoultre, Reverso (Photo: Alekswatches)

timepieces in “Papal Purple” with faceted gold batons for the upper echelons of the Catholic Church (Reardon 2013).

Another early example of watchmakers developing watches for a religious community comes from the 1930s, when Jaeger-LeCoultre launched its Reverso model. Initially, buyers could customize the watch according to their preferences. The watch’s popularity among British polo players in India contributed to its widespread appeal across the Indian subcontinent, which was a British colony at the time. This led to the watch becoming popular among the Indian elite, with images of Maharajas soon adorning wristwatches. Later, Jaeger-LeCoultre took this practice further by designing the backs of the watches with images of Hindu gods. One example of this is a Reverso decorated with a miniature painting of the Hindu deity Krishna, one of the main gods of Indian mythology and a prominent incarnation of the god Vishnu (Mazzardo 2024).



FIGURE 22.3 Patek Philippe, World Time, Mecca edition (Photo: Amsterdam vintagewatches)

More recently, in 2011, Patek Philippe released the World Time, Mecca Edition. The watch was designed for consumers in the Muslim world and features several symbols associated with Islam. The center of the dial is emerald green with a guilloché pattern in the form of twelve thick lines and eight thinner rays radiating from the center, which is intended to imitate the sun's rays. The outer edge of the dial is white with "Mecca" written in green, which harmonizes with the center of the dial. The choice of green is also deliberate, as the Prophet Muhammad is said to have worn a green robe and turban, a detail mentioned in various texts. In the Qur'an, green is also associated with paradise.³ The dial

3 Green ('akhdar') is mentioned six times in the Qur'an where it represents growth, fertility, and heavenly rewards, symbolizing believers' attire and paradise's luxuries. As the Prophet Muhammad's color, it embodies spiritual hope, eternity, and freshness. Its dual symbolism of



FIGURE 22.4 Blancpain, Shakudo (Photo: Blancpain.com)

also features the star and crescent, which are often seen as unofficial symbols of Islam. These symbols are also found on the flags of many Muslim countries. Patek has also been thoughtful in the choice of precious metal, platinum, since, according to some interpretations of Islam, men are prohibited from wearing gold (Amsterdam Vintage Watches, n.d.).

Another example of watchmakers using religious semiotics is Blancpain, which launched a series of watches that utilized the *Shakudo* technique, a unique alloy of gold and copper that results in a distinctive black-blue hue on the dial. The brand presented various dial motifs, including one depicting the Hindu god Ganesha, one of the most worshipped deities in Hinduism, known particularly for being a messenger of wisdom. He is easily recognizable by his elephant head and human body. Blancpain's choice of Ganesha as a motif may have to do with the deity's status as a general symbol of luck and wisdom globally, which has led to its widespread "acceptance," particularly in Euro-American contexts. It is not uncommon for religious semiotics to take on a different meaning in new contexts. The term "neo-spirituality" is sometimes used to describe a spiritual affiliation that moves away from the dogmatic world

life and paradise endures, reflected in Islamic culture in for example flags of many Muslim states (Hirsch 2020, 103ff).

religions. This new form of spirituality is mainly found in Europe and the USA (Hornborg 2015). In this sphere, symbolism and rituals are drawn from several different sources, not least from Hinduism and Buddhism (Blancpain, n.d.).

In the more affordable segments of the watch market, we find what best can be called “religious kitsch watches.” These fascinating watches blend the spiritual and the commercial, where sacred symbols and figures are transformed into mass-produced ornaments or souvenirs that are sold, for example, at religious shrines and other holy sites. It is not uncommon to see religious motifs on everything from lighters to fridge magnets or cheap plastic imitations of religious objects mass-produced in various low-cost Asian countries. This form of kitsch has also found its way into the watch industry, where watch faces can be adorned with everything from religious icons depicting the Baby Jesus and Mary to representations of Buddha, Hindu deities, neo-spiritual symbols, and emblems of Sikhism. While some argue that such items trivialize the deeper meaning of religion, others view them as harmless or even affectionate spiritual reminders. In this context, the watch serves not only as a timekeeper but also a carrier of meaning. “Religious kitsch watches” are undeniably a part of our modern culture, embodying the ongoing relationship between commercialism and spirituality.

Religious complications in watches are relatively uncommon, but they do exist.⁴ Wristwatches may include special functions that display prayer times, especially those designed for the Muslim market, or moon phase indicators that hold cultural and spiritual significance in religions that follow lunar calendars, such as Judaism and Islam. One example of a wristwatch with a Hijri calendar is the Parmigiani Fleurier Tonda Hijri Perpetual Calendar, a watch that will delight anyone interested in religious semiotics.⁵ The wristwatch is based on technology that Parmigiani Fleurier originally developed for a table clock launched in 2011. The inspiration came from a pocket watch with a Hijri calendar. The names and lengths of the months are written in Arabic, and in addition to a Hijri Perpetual Calendar, the watch has a moon phase complication. The aesthetic decoration of the movement is richly intricate. The movement

4 In watchmaking, a complication refers to functions beyond basic timekeeping, such as calendars, chronographs, or moon phases. These features showcase exceptional craftsmanship, reflecting the intricate intersection of horology, artistry, and, at times, devotion.

5 The Islamic lunar calendar, also called the *Hijri*, consists of twelve months of 29 or 30 days – depending on the phase of the moon – and is used to determine the days of Islamic holidays. Unlike the solar calendar used in, for example, Sweden and Europe, the months in the lunar calendar change annually by a difference of –10 to –12 days. As a result, each month always falls in a different season and thus varies from the Gregorian calendar. The Islamic lunar cycle is 30 years. It consists of 19 common years of 354 days and 11 leap years of 355 days.



FIGURE 22.5 Parmigiani Fleurier Tonda Hijri Perpetual Calendar (Photo: ParmigianiFleurier.com)

is decorated with waxing and waning crescents and the Islamic symbol *Rub el-Hizb*, which consists of two overlapping squares with a circle in the middle. These basic geometric shapes form a more complex eight-pointed star, divided into eight equal triangular parts. The *Rub el-Hizb* is used as a tool to facilitate the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an, which is an important part of Muslim religious life. With the help of this geometric figure, the verses of the Qur'an can be divided into quantifiable sections. The symbol is also often used to mark the end of a chapter in Arabic calligraphy. As with most of Parmigiani Fleurier's wristwatches, the watch can be further customized according to personal wishes and preferences (Yusuf 2021).

5 Sacred Style: the Wristwatches of Religious Leaders

Interest in celebrity luxury watches has risen significantly in recent years, a trend that can be partly attributed to social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Specialized accounts have emerged with the express purpose of showcasing exclusive watch brands and models worn by celebrities. These accounts often attract substantial followings, becoming influential forces in the watch industry. As a result, they not only increase the visibility of luxury

timepieces but also contribute to the emergence of a new celebrity culture centered on watches. Notably, the watch choices of religious leaders often spark discussions about ethics, transparency, and trust.

For example, in 2009, an incident involving Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, was photographed alongside Alexander Kolarov, then Russia's Minister of Justice. While the Patriarch appeared to be without a watch, a keen-eyed Russian blogger noticed the reflection of a luxurious Breguet Réveil du Tsar on the table beneath him. It soon emerged that the church had Photoshopped the watch out of the image, but overlooked its reflection. When interviewed, Kirill initially denied owning such a watch and claimed that all photos showing him wearing it were fabricated. However, the Russian Orthodox Church later admitted to editing the images, issuing a public statement on the matter. The watch, valued today at approximately \$20,000, became a powerful symbol of the church's wealth and alleged corruption, prompting widespread criticism (BBC 2012).

Several Russian opposition bloggers voiced their discontent, arguing that Kirill could not truly represent the people or serve as a spiritual leader while displaying such lavishness. This criticism was particularly significant, given the close relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and President Vladimir Putin, which led many in the opposition to scrutinize the church with heightened vigilance (BBC 2012).

Further controversy arose a few years later when the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, Ladoga Varsonofiy, was photographed wearing a Rolex Daytona, valued at the time of writing to approximately \$30,000, while on vacation in Greece. This time, the Russian Orthodox Church offered a more restrained response, stating only that an explanation would be provided upon Varsonofiy's return from vacation (Rothrock 2016).

In India, spiritual leaders are not only associated with traditional rituals and spiritual teachings, but some have also developed an interest in the world of watches. Their penchant for wearing luxury watches often stems from the generosity of their followers. Devotees often see their spiritual gurus as holy role models and therefore want to give them gifts that are as exceptional as they consider their teachings to be. As a result, it is not uncommon to see spiritual leaders wearing watches adorned with precious stones, diamonds, and other luxurious materials, which sometimes raises ethical questions about material indulgence in a spiritual context.

To name a few examples: The late religious guru Osho, or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, owned several luxury watches. The Rolex Day-Date set with alternating rubies and diamonds worn by Osho was sold at an auction for 40,000 Swiss francs. The bracelet alone had about 31 carats of diamonds. Another

guru, Sathya Sai Baba, did not wear watches himself but was said to materialize luxury items, including Rolex watches, out of thin air (Antiquorum Auction Catalog 2015).

Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, has risen to global fame as a celebrated spiritual leader. However, the Dalai Lama is also known for his impressive collection of watches, including a Patek Philippe gifted to him by then-US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His collection also features several Rolex watches, including a gold Day-Date. The Dalai Lama also apparently enjoys repairing mechanical timepieces. In his book *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999), he writes:

I have always enjoyed repairing watches. But I can recall a number of occasions as a boy when, completely losing my patience with those tiny, intricate parts, I picked up the mechanism and smashed it down on the table. Of course, later I felt very sorry and ashamed of my behavior especially when, as on one occasion, I had to return the watch to its owner in a condition worse than it was before. (Dalia Lama 1999, 95f)

Luxury watches have also become a prominent topic of discussion among Muslim religious leaders. For instance, Idris Ahmad, who was the Malaysian government's representative on religious matters, was accused on social media of being more interested in material luxury than spiritual insight, due to the suspicion that he was wearing a Rolex. However, Ahmad quickly came out and cleared up the misunderstanding by showing off his actual watch, a Buruj model, stating that: "For your information, I have been using this Buruj watch for a long time, it helps me know the prayer time and the Qibla direction" (FMT 2021). This watch features special Islamic-related functions, including one that displays prayer times and another that indicates the direction to Mecca (Qibla). His detractors were later forced to apologize on social media.

The wristwatch as a symbol of greed arguably reached its peak with Carlton Funderburke, the founding senior pastor of Church at The Well, in Kansas City, Missouri. During a sermon, he requested a luxury Movado watch from his congregation as a gesture of their appreciation, saying, "Y'all know I asked for one last year. Here it is all the way in August and I still ain't got it," in a widely circulated video recording of his remarks (Universal Life Church 2022). Funderburke later apologized on Facebook, calling his sermon "inexcusable" and not reflective of his feelings toward God's people (Church at the Well 2022).

As the significance of watches has shifted from religious and practical purposes to becoming symbols of economic status, it is not surprising that Pope Francis, the previous leader of the Catholic Church, chose to wear a Swatch

watch rather than a Patek Philippe or, for that matter, the Rolex Datejust favored by his predecessor, John Paul II. Pope Francis also donated his Swatch to a charity auction, where it sold for \$56,250 – making it the most expensive Swatch watch in history (Wright Auction 2022).

Finally, leaving behind luxury, glitz, and religious elitism, there is one watch that has earned a less glamorous reputation in religious circles: the Casio F-91W, also known as the “terrorist watch.” This mass-produced, inexpensive timepiece has, in recent years, become a symbol of primarily Muslim terrorism. It has been used in time bombs and spotted on the wrists of known terrorist leaders. The watch became so closely associated with bomb makers in the Middle East that CIA agents in Iraq and Syria testified that the watch was one of the items they looked for when trying to identify bomb makers linked to terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It has been established that the watch plays a role in bomb making, and F-91Ws have been found in unexploded bombs and seized in raids on bomb factories. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that this watch model was used in al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Several members of ISIS and al-Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden – perhaps the world’s most famous terrorist, and the leader of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda until his death in 2011 – have been seen wearing the watch. This firmly established the F-91W’s association with terrorism, a connection that seems likely to endure. Bin Laden’s choice of this watch can be interpreted as a deliberate rejection of what is perceived as Western luxury and extravagance (Watches of Espionage 2022).

6 Conclusion – Timeless Connections

This exposé of wristwatches in religious contexts reveals a captivating interplay between material culture and the sacred. Wristwatches, far from mere timekeepers, embody layered meanings that connect individuals to broader cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic narratives. Douglas Freake’s semiotic insights highlight how these objects transcend utility, embedding symbolic meanings often camouflaged by their practical use.

Through their designs, materials, and applications, watches transcend their functional purpose, mediating values like piety, identity, and status. Whether as luxury artifacts imbued with religious semiotics, like Patek Philippe’s Mecca Edition, or as mass-produced “religious kitsch” items accessible to the broader public, wristwatches amplify human values and reflect cultural narratives. Freake’s perspective helps frame how these objects, through their aesthetic and

symbolic uses, convey layered meanings that align with spiritual, cultural, or economic frameworks. This perspective reinforces the idea that wristwatches, as cultural artifacts, serve as dynamic connections between the material and the sacred.

Moreover, Latour's concept of mediators suggests that certain objects do more than merely *transmit* meaning; they actively transform and reinterpret it. Wristwatches, through their design and functionality, can play a significant role in shaping religious experiences and expressions.

For instance, watches designed to serve religious functions, such as those with prayer time indicators or Hijri calendars, make daily rituals more accessible and seamlessly integrated into modern life. They connect technology with tradition, facilitating devotion in a contemporary context. Likewise, watches adorned with religious symbols or designs, such as Blancpain's Ganesha-themed dials, serve as visible markers of faith, allowing wearers to express their religious identity in ways that align with modern and even fashionable aesthetics.

Furthermore, the democratization of religious symbols through kitsch watches transforms sacred motifs into accessible consumer products, broadening their appeal and reshaping how they are valued. Conversely, luxury watches decorated with religious semiotics or worn by religious leaders can provoke criticism and ethical dilemmas. Their use by spiritual figures may challenge or clash with traditional values of humility and asceticism, leading to accusations of hypocrisy or materialism. Such controversies can erode trust in religious leaders and institutions, as seen in instances where luxury watches have become symbols of excess and privilege rather than devotion.

Wristwatches function as active mediators, transforming, translating, and modifying faith, identity, and tradition within a continuously evolving cultural and technological landscape. This role is far from new; throughout history, timekeeping devices have mediated the relationship between the sacred and the practical. Ancient tools like the Lebombo Bone, sundials aligning religious rituals with celestial patterns, and medieval clocks designed to regulate monastic prayers exemplify how timekeeping has consistently integrated sacred rhythms with technological advancements. These devices have not only measured time but also transformed cultural and spiritual perceptions, reflecting humanity's enduring need to connect the material with the metaphysical.

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Johan Cato is Senior Lecturer in Islamic studies at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University.

Martin Lund is Senior Lecturer in religious studies at Malmö University and unsalaried Associate Professor in history of religions at Lund University.

Erica Li Lundqvist is Senior Lecturer in religious studies at Malmö University.



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