The Long View

Quarterly Magazine

Volume 4, Issue 3 - July 2022 / Dhul Hijjah 1443 ISSN 2632-3168 £5 where sold

What Futures?

Muslims at the Crisis and Crossroads of Culture and Society

Yahya Birt
The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Convert Leaders in the West and the New Ethno-Nationalism

Ian Almond
Starry, Spangled Stranglehold: Understanding the West's Cultural Grip

João Silva Jordão
Building Theoretical Foundations for a Modern Islamic City in the Urban Age

Nazmina Dhanji
The Untranslatability of the Quran, with Examples Drawn from Surah al-Fatiha

Contents:

3 **Yahya Birt**
The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Convert Leaders in the West and the New Ethno-Nationalism

7 **Ian Almond**
Starry, Spangled Stranglehold: Understanding the West's Cultural Grip

9 **João Silva Jordão**
Building Theoretical Foundations for a Modern Islamic City in the Urban Age

14 **Nazmina Dhanji**
The Untranslatability of the Quran, with Examples Drawn from Surah al-Fatiha

The Long View
Quarterly Magazine

Editors:
Faisal Bodi and
Arzu Merali

The Long View is a project and publication of Islamic Human Rights Commission (a limited company no 04716690).

W http://www.ihrc.org.uk/thelongview/
E info@ihrc.org
Tel +44 20 8904 4222

All views are the authors' own and do not reflect IHRC's views or beliefs.

Cover illustration, 'The Maslimah Clark Dolls' by St. Parastoo © artist and IHRC

In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

The nativist pushback against the two-decade old orthodoxy of multiculturalism has yielded a discourse inimical to the fight for equality of Muslims in the West. Manifested in openly Islamophobic calls for state discrimination against Muslims by the likes of the Henry Jackson Society or the apparently benign guiding hand of a sympathetic 'liberal' left leading us, especially our women, to integration, the discourse is now entrenched and the daily battle against it an endless drain on meagre Muslim community resources. The last thing Muslims need is for leading thinkers in their midst to contribute, albeit inadvertently, to a narrative that perpetuates and even accentuates the "problem Muslim" narrative.

Yet, according to ***Yahya Birt***, this is exactly what white scholars like Abdal Hakim Murad and Hamza Yusuf are guilty of in advocating a place for Islam in the West that concedes too much ground to majoritarian cultural expression. Their apparent preference is for a *gorafied* Muslim (to use Anglo-Urdu street slang), totally denuded of his inherited cultural mores and re-clothed in all the ways of his "host" society. It appears that in their view, Muslims of non-native origin have alienated their western hosts by clinging to their own nativist ethnocentricism. However, while there may be truth to this, according to Birt, the solution does not lie in propounding a rival ethnocentricism. There is no deculturated Islam: there is only an endless process of deculturation and re-culturation. Islam is a universal faith that includes within it all cultures, and furthermore that cultural difference is part of the Divine plan. "Therefore, when "white" converts re-culture Islam as in their own terms, which is their right as members of a universal faith, they can only do so authentically if it is also anti-racist and builds solidarity with racialised Muslims," says Birt.

The predominance of white cultural expression is a theme taken up by ***Professor Ian Almond*** in our second article. As an infant, Almond says he dreamed of escaping his dreary British childhood and relocating to California or New York or Chicago where Hollywood projected that magical things and events of tremendous significance occurred. Little was he to know then that much of the influence of the west was exercised through television and cinema by genre, a phenomenon that persists to this day. Through colonialism - at its peak in 1914, 85 percent of the planet was governed by European or European-settler countries - western powers installed and cultivated their own ethics and values creating a ready audience for their cultural productions. "The 'aura' surrounding Shakespeare or Paris or the Statue of Liberty is a consequence of centuries of effective and systematic self-mythologising", not any cultural or civilisational supremacy, argues Almond. There is little prospect of this Eurocentrism weakening so long as control over the majority of the world's economic resources remains concentrated in the West - imperialism's most abiding legacy.

Economic and political inequality also manifests itself in the urban landscape through the design of our towns and cities. About half of the world's population currently lives in cities, a figure that is estimated to rise to 70% by 2050. As they expand, resolving urban conflicts, poverty, inequality, segregation and suffering is increasingly becoming a key challenge for planners and policymakers. But this cannot be achieved by simply tinkering with the built environment, according to ***João Silva Jordão***. The solutions to urban problems are both political and architectural "and it is only through reforming the political processes that permeate the city and in particular its planning and management instruments that a fairer city can be achieved." This requires the inclusion of all its inhabitants in decision making, giving them a degree of influence over the processes and hence the environments that shape their lives. In the Muslim world the problem is compounded by the adoption of architectural philosophies that are now widely considered as having failed in the western world. Jordão emphasises the need to conceptualise "The Islamic city", a place where the values and concepts of Islam are imbued in the very fabric of the city and through which the very essence of the philosophy of Islam takes physical urban form as well as becoming the prime arena in which the ideal Islamic society can develop.

Inequality is a theme indirectly addressed in the final article of this issue. The Quran claims to be the final revelation and directed at all people irrespective of culture and ethnicity. Yet it is written in Arabic, a language that is not native to the majority of people on the plant giving rise to an obvious question: How can a book that claims to be universal retain its claims to equality if it is written in a language that is alien to most readers? The problem of understanding the Qur'an is one that has undoubtedly confronted all non-Arabic and indeed Arabic readers of the Holy Qur'an at some point. Many commendable attempts have been made to translate it into numerous languages but all face the seemingly insurmountable problem of conveying the precise meaning of a scripture whose divine origin makes it the highest expression of eloquence. Using Surah al-Fatiha, ***Nazmina Dhanji*** demonstrates some lexical, syntactic and semantic problems that arise with translating certain words and verses. In doing so, she enriches our understanding of the opening chapter of the Holy Book, and surmises that the need to open our minds, and reconnect with our innate understandings of our creation and createdness, is in fact the process that the Qur'an demands. There can be no one reliable translation of the Qur'an in this scenario, but there can and should be a process of divesting ourselves of the limited understanding of language and culture combined. This sounds like a message we can reapply across the board. We hope this issue is a small part of that process.

Join the conversation by emailing us on **info@ihrc.org**, tweeting **@ihrc** or find us on Facebook. We now also record podcasts and videos called The Long View Conversations looking into the deeper issues raised by multiple essays with some of our authors. You can find these at **www.ihrc.org.uk/video-multimedia/** We are now also recording some of our essays so you can listen to them on the go. Find them in the same section.

The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Convert Leaders in the West and the New Ethno-Nationalism

Yahya Birt argues that dangerous undercurrents of white nativism have found their way into Islamic thinking. Recognising and disaggregating these ideas from our work is vital to maintaining the divinely commanded duty to challenge inequality and establish justice.

Euro-America is going through a wave of populism that is pandering to ideas around Western superiority and white ethno-nationalism. Muslims have been defined as both the internal and external enemies of this project. They can only attempt to get on board if they assimilate culturally and ideologically to it, although this will not guarantee their immunity from its harms. In economic terms, neoliberalism still dominates Euro-America, as the left has not developed a coherent post-Keynesian economics nor embraced the radical possibilities of a deeply Green alternative. Instead, the left is working at the intersections of a post-white-male-dominated world but it is a transactional and secular vision and the Muslim place within it is precarious and unsettled.

Muslims of the West – and the rest of the Umma – have to survive this tribal Western retrenchment, but I would argue for cautious optimism, namely that we still have some room to do more than just survive it. We can articulate an alternative vision in which we thrive, even if that seems far from obvious at the moment. Presently, there is a series of manoeuvres to avoid being crushed by one or other of these political forces. Under this dual left–right pressure, most political and even cultural moves Muslims in the West make are placatory and reactionary in nature.

Under these conditions, white converts to Islam act as lightning rods in the debate on white ethno-nationalism, assimilation, and the perilous place of Muslims in the West. The challenge, as Esra Özyürek puts it, is *not* to predicate the inclusion of Islam in Europe through white conversion on the exclusion of racialised Muslims. In simpler terms, conversion should not be built on racialising assumptions about "cultural Islam" and finding "pristine" deculturated Islam. There is no deculturated Islam: there is only an endless process of deculturation and re-culturation. To resist the ethnicisation or racialisation of Islam, all Muslims, converts or those brought up in the faith, should acknowledge that it is a universal faith that includes within it all cultures, and furthermore that cultural difference is part of the Divine plan and a means by which we recognise each other's humanity (Quran 49:13). Therefore, when "white" converts re-culture Islam as in their own terms, which is their right as members of a universal faith, they can only do so authentically if it is also anti-racist and builds solidarity with racialised Muslims. It is essential to add that there are similar misunderstandings at play in the second and third generations of the post-war Muslim communities that settled in the West, as the same false arguments about divorcing Islam from culture are similarly left unexamined.

As an exercise in self-examination (*muhasaba*), we white converts should consider why we are not immune to this placatory ethos among Western Muslims, but let me stress we are far from alone in making such supplicatory moves. It is right and appropriate in my view to think critically about how leading white converts approach white ethno-nationalism culturally and politically. I shall focus on two such figures, Hamza Yusuf (b.1958) and Abdal Hakim Murad (b.1960), both of whom have been my teachers and mentors during my own time spent within the neo-traditionalist movement since the early 1990s. Although, in the West, this movement presents itself as an immaculate recapitulation of late Sunni Islam in theology, law, and mysticism with all of Western modernity somehow magically extracted from it, a more reflective internal assessment is the need of the hour. It is more accurate to see it as most profoundly shaped by the Syrian ulama's restatement of Sunnism in the face of neo-Salafi critique, mostly notably in the work of Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti (1929 2013), but also by their ethos of survivalist political quietism with their co-option under the Baathist police state. Neo-traditionalism's other hallmark is its indebtedness to the Guénonian critique of Western modernity, which I shall touch on further below. While acknowledging my own positioning as a critical insider within neo-traditionalism and fellow "white" convert to Islam, higher Islamic ethics still allows me the scope to disagree openly on matters of general public concern, even with these teachers to whom I am personally indebted and have learnt and continue to learn much from. It is because of this very proximity that I feel personally impelled to sketch out a space for radical politics with a strong anti-racist commitment within neo-traditionalist circles and indeed beyond them in this moment of re-energised white supremacy.

My reading of the American Sheikh Hamza Yusuf's approach is that he sought to build alliances with the smaller non-Islamophobic part of the Evangelical coalition on the basis of shared "family values" between Islam and Christianity, which later facilitated an introduction into Republican circles. Trump's election and openly anti-Muslim policies (among other things) made that awkward, but nonetheless he went on to accept an advisory role on a Trump administration quango, the Commission on Unalienable Rights (2017 21), which was an attempt to roll back the contemporary conception of human rights to their eighteenth-century acceptation when the US Constitution was written, with a greater emphasis on religious rights (the latter is certainly under threat in some respects). The Director of Human Rights Watch called the Commission's interim draft a "frontal assault on international human rights law" in 2020. The Commission was only advisory but clearly the intent was there to extend America's culture wars into constitutional law.

So there was active political engagement with the Republicans, subsumed under a rhetoric that advocates for Muslim political quietism both in the West and in the Muslim majority world. In essence, it posits that the *Umma* should subcontract its political interests to the ulama in alliance with the state. Thus, quietism for the Muslim masses obscures the activism of its advocates. In this case, it works as ideological cover for active partnership with government on behalf of one's own institutions and networks to the detriment of other Muslim institutions and networks castigated as dangerous or deviant or both. This justification of self-interested activism to protect the ulama's institutions as quietism necessitated picking up and using the con-

temporary Republican lexicon about "the left", "wokery", "cultural Marxism", etc., i.e. getting involved in America's culture wars while claiming to rise above them.

The approach of Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad, based in the UK, is somewhat different. He focuses on cultural rather than open or crypto-political engagement with the new right. For years, he has openly criticised the political drift in Europe towards open Islamophobia. This dates from his experience of Serbian nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s. No European Muslim of our generation has forgotten the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 and many appreciate the early lead Murad took in highlighting the dangers of growing Serbian nationalism. However, more recently, he has undertaken a cultural engagement with the nativist right in Europe on the basis of *da'wa* through private dialogue with some of its leading figures, which only became public knowledge around 2019. This engagement has affected his interlocutors, most notably the Dutchman Joram Van Klaveren (b.1979), the former MP in Geert Wilders' right populist Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid – PVV), who converted to Islam in 2018, and whose post-conversion stance on immigration and refugee policy has been muddled. But, arguably, it has also affected Abdal Hakim Murad's own presentational language in his recent scholarship. In *Travelling Home*, he concedes rather too easily an untrammelled right to majoritarian indigenous cultural expression with insufficient consideration of what this means for minority cultural rights (among other minority rights). And this means that the non-white Muslim immigrant is criticised for not assimilating, for worshipping in "race temples", and for deservedly losing his children to faithlessness due to his original worldly motives for migrating to Europe (pp. 49 51, 63, 69 91, 125, 209). Others have commented more extensively on this hostile take on the Muslim migrant, but what really puzzles me is that it works against the practical institution-building he has undertaken, which is based on cross-ethnic and pan-Sunni partnerships, most notably at the Cambridge Muslim College. This polemic sits starkly at odds with its ostensible ethos.

By contrast, Abdal Hakim Murad shows compassion for an imagined Syrian refugee whom he names Ishmael, washed up on England's shores:

This damp but hopeful figure, who has fled the hecatombs of a Middle East shattered by foreign invasion, climate change, and the endemic civic corruption that has recently triggered the explosion that destroyed Beirut, stands boldly, far seeing, and sinless upon Dover Beach.

The future of Islam in the West won't be indigenous in a purist sense, but resolutely "Three Tone", or brown, black, and white

Yet curiously, this refugee is culturally empty and there is no sustained engagement with what actual politics are needed to help the refugees dying in the Channel or the Mediterranean. Instead, the Muradian refugee is a culturally denuded and empty signifier who acts as both foil and antidote to European infertility, unbelief, and decadence (pp.6 7, 45 6). But, if we care about anti-racism, refugee rights, and oppose xenophobia and Islamophobia, then of more immediate moral urgency is to build coalitions on tackling these issues, most obviously with "the Left".

By contrast, "the Right", which derives its political energy from stoking Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism, puts Muslims "of colour" squarely in its crosshairs. Winning a few white converts from the nativist right in Europe, or America for that matter, who have no stake or standing in local Muslim communities and their legitimate priorities is a detour ending in a cul-de-sac. It undermines the necessary coalition-building that is needed to form a strong anti-racist politics. It is not being *tanfiri*, or holding a propensity to repel non-Muslims from Islam as Murad dubs it, to say so (pp.119 141). More importantly, even in Makkah, the early call to monotheism was never divorced from ethics nor was the Qurayshi tribal sense of superiority ever indulged. Therefore, anti-racism should remain at the heart of the call to Islam in Europe – it is not for us to invite European nativism in by the back door, misconstruing the rationale of *da'wa* to do so, which has notoriously been abused as a catch-all rationale by Muslims in the West.

The future of Islam in the West won't be indigenous in a purist sense, but resolutely "Three Tone", or brown, black, and white, a term coined by the British grassroots *dā'ī*, Salih Welbourne. Three-Tone Islam is a play upon the Two-Tone Movement, the late twentieth-century popular British subculture in which black and white working-class youth created their own indigenous hybrid movement reflected in music, fashion, and anti-racism activism in the 1970s and 1980s. It goes beyond a public argument to faith in action, to envision a space in which black, brown, and white British Muslims come together in fellowship and service, breaking down barriers of race, culture, and class. Three-Tone Islam is an opening gambit that embodies the Quranic process of mutual understanding and recognition through difference (*ta'arruf*) rather than some seamless end product. It recognises that (i) forms of Western indigeneity can be multicultural and open to change; (ii) that conversion itself is Three-Tone; and (iii) that Three-Tone itself points to a wider superdiversity.

Three-Tone Islam must develop a post-secular anti-racism 2.0 too, which is informed by a wider, deeper story of religious chauvinism and race-making, namely, how the antecedents of anti-black or phenotypical racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamopho-

Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit (CIK)

This project has produced documentation targeted at policy makers, lawmakers, academics and activists in order to tackle Islamophobia.

IHRC alongside 5 academic partners across Europe was part of the Counter-Islamophobia Toolkit team that looked at narratives and counternarratives to Islamophobia in 8 European countries: the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Czech Republic, Hungary and Greece.

Find out more at www.ihrc.org.uk/islamophobia

bia are found in medieval Christendom's Curse of Ham, the Blood Libel, and the Ishmaelite Saracen. In other words, the story of race-making needs to expand beyond early modern colonialism, Transatlantic chattel slavery, phrenology, and eugenics to include this earlier history.

It is in the light of the above that the cultural exchange between Jordan Peterson and Hamza Yusuf released in May 2022 should be understood. The pious hope is that Sheikh Hamza will have charmed Peterson so he becomes less Islamophobic and leaves aside the Ayaan Hirsi Alis, Douglas Murrays, Richard Dawkins' et al for Islamophile Christianity or even Zaytuna's quietist state-adjacent Islam. This downplays Peterson's role as an aider and abetter of neoconservative and the old-guard libertarian Whiggish tendencies of the new populism. That is his base: compare Peterson's ease on his podcast with Douglas Murray four weeks earlier compared with this latest exchange with Yusuf, where he offers no challenge to Murray's thesis that the West is being destroyed by an unholy alliance of Muslims and the Left. We should also pay attention to what costs this engagement comes at over others, and how that sends shockwaves through the Western Muslim communities. Whose vital interests are being sacrificed by such engagements? One doesn't have to look far to find out the answer, for the criticisms have been loud and clear.

In the salient clip from the Peterson–Yusuf exchange (from 10.47), Peterson asks Yusuf about privilege being challenged without qualifying it, presenting it as an abstract concept. Such challenges invoke a post-Christian sense of individual responsibility and guilt (based on original sin) that Peterson says non-Christian traditions lack, and they ignore the irreducible fact of individualism and the uneven distribution of talents and resources. Yusuf doesn't come back at Peterson on original sin to introduce him to the concept of *fitra* (the human being's primordial or natural state of innocence at birth). Instead, Yusuf says that privilege is a trial to be borne by those who don't have it, who, if they are believers, cultivate the faith to practise patience with tribulations. Those who don't bear with it are, by default, desacralised leftists and Marxists, either in spirit or in actuality.

Now if that doesn't strike any Western Muslim as an absurd capitulation and hugely simplified binary then it is hard to see how a serious conversation can be had. The elephant in the room is that injustices can be experienced as tribulations too, but the Sunna is not only just to bear with them patiently in silence and hate them in our hearts. That is the lowest rank of faith. To speak out or to act in the world to change them does not make us all Marxisant Muslims. The collapse of any space for principled Muslim activism between silent capitulation to injustice and accommodation and deals with the government of the day is obvious.

> **"The Sunna is not only just to bear with tribulations patiently in silence and hate them in our hearts...To speak out or act in the world to change them does not make us all Marxist Muslims"**

A precursor to Peterson as a radical right interlocutor for Yusuf was the late British Conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton (1944 2020). Yusuf treated Scruton like a venerable master in their conversation from 2018, capitulating to his neo-Orientalist, "West-is-Best" discourse even when Scruton talked openly about the collapse of Islamic civilisation and its various deficits in modernity. British Muslims remember well Scruton's long campaign in the 1980s against multiculturalism and anti-racism, his defence of Ray Honeyford in 1984 for his argument against recognising minority cultures in schools (in this instance, of Bradford's Pakistani Muslims) or of Enoch Powell's case that the children of Muslim migrants could only be disloyal to Britain, his attack on Islamophobia as a made-up propaganda word invented by the Muslim Brotherhood, or his advocacy of a Muslim threat to Europe that his friend, the quasi-fascist Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, later took up. Neither Yusuf nor his American Muslim colleagues at the Zaytuna College took him up publicly on any part of this record.

Let me end with four avenues of creative possibility that lie in front of us (there are many more, but these will do for the time being). We need to get back to basics to be truly creative. What's the end goal of our engagement as Muslim minorities in the West? This allows us to refresh and refocus our deliberations when our discussion gets bogged down with modalities of engagement and the relatively minor challenges of democratic alternation, which is chastening when compared to the authoritarianism, tyranny, and state collapse that our compatriots in faith are facing in the Muslim majority world.

The first is a reformed deliberative democracy that seeks to outmanoeuvre and overturn the oligarchic buyout of political parties and the electoral cycle and vulnerability of elected representatives to powerful lobbies. That can only be achieved by overturning oligarchic control of the media, obviously not through public ownership but regulated so that the media looks and sounds more like the society it speaks to.

The second is to push for peaceable politics that can handle deep pluralism and superdiversity, or what precolonial orders like the Ottomans dealt with so successfully that converges interestingly with what John Gray calls a *modus vivendi* liberalism and Chandran Kukathas calls "the liberal archipelago" that makes no claim to police various forms of the good life and protects associational life from state interference. In other words, peaceful coexistence and deep pluralism can only

British Muslims' Expectations of the Government (BMEG)

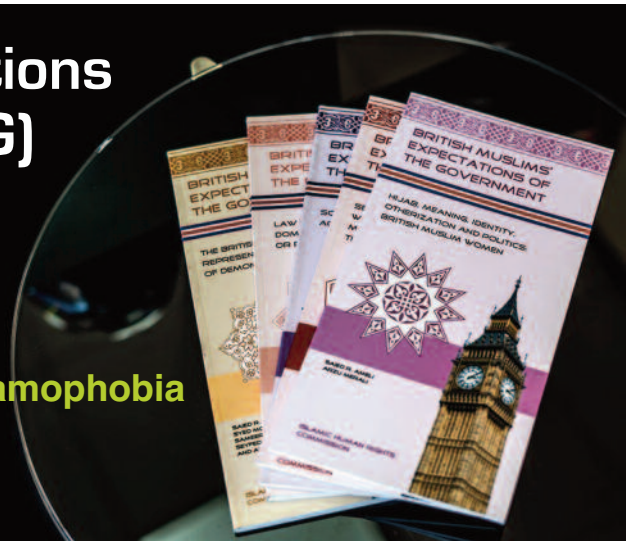
Volume 1 | Volume 2 | Volume 3 | Volume 4 | Volume 5 | Volume 6

Based on extensive UK wide survey work, this project presented Muslim demands and expectations to the UK government with a view to encouraging good policy and counteracting the rising tide of societal and institutional Islamophobia.

Launched at the House of Lords in 2004, find out more about this landmark project at:

www.ihrc.org.uk/islamophobia

Find reports and videos on Citizenship, Discrimination, Schools, Hijab, Law and Media.



emerge in a new post-nationalist politics; if we want to diffuse identity politics we have to take on its biggest form today, which is nationalism. It seems like all of us need that, not just the Muslims, if we want to develop a planetary politics, as articulated by Achille Mbembe, and not to degrade further into warring tribes fighting over diminishing resources.

The third is to develop a new anti-racism that is not secular but provides a dignified space for Muslims and Islamophobia. While a lot of work has been done on the religious roots of Islamophobia, racism, and antisemitism in Christendom, this has yet to translate into informed self-understanding of an anti-racist movement 2.0 that is more than just inclusive and that embraces Muslim distinctiveness and agency. Another is post-nationalist politics, but where are the neo-traditionalist convert leaders on that? Why the insistence on riding the tiger of white nationalism, riffing off the same move that Julius Evola (1898 1974), Italy's most influential post-war fascist thinker, made away from the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886 1951), that "traditionalism" can be saved or best served by an alliance with ethno-nationalism, either culturally or politically or both? From Evola and the Russian supremacist Alexander Dugin (b.1962), there is a straight line of influence to Steven Bannon, the American Alt-Right and their capture of the Trump Administration. So neo-traditionalism, which leans heavily on Guénon's critique of modernity, shows itself prone to finding safe harbour with Western ethno-nationalisms. But what is that but a myopic act of self-harm?

During the high noon of European colonialism, similar questions of political loyalties dogged converts of the day too. But even back then, different choices were available. Consider the nearly forgotten earlier figures of Ivan "Abd al-Hadi" Aguéli (1869 1917) and Lord "Al-Faruq" Headley (1855 1935). A noted Swedish painter, Aguéli moved in avant-garde circles in Paris and became an anarchist. In 1900, he fired a revolver to stop the introduction of Spanish bullfighting (where the animal is killed at the end) into France, a direct action that proved successful. Converting in around 1900, he was initiated into Sufism in Egypt during or shortly after 1902 and established a branch of the Shadhili order in Paris in 1910. After his conversion, he married his faith with his radical politics, writing against imperialism and coining the term, "Islamophobia" in 1904 to analyse the "enemies of Islam". Roland George Allanson-Winn, an Anglo-Irish peer, remained a stolid Empire loyalist after his conversion in 1913. His campaign to preserve British India, where he had worked in Kashmir as an imperial civil engineer in the 1890s, was forceful compared with his tepid involvement in protesting the break-up of the Ottoman domains after the First World War. The neo-traditionalists note but seem to pass over the implications of Aguéli's radicalism to focus on his role in Rene Guenon's initiation into Sufism, which over time led to the development of a distinctive Western-Islamicate theosophy of Perennialism, predicated on the essential validity of all religions, with its own syncretic order, the Maryamiyya, which descended into chaos. But I would argue it is the marriage of principled radical politics and mysticism in Aguéli that is worth reflecting on today, rather than rehashing Headley's unreflective loyalism through a twenty-first-century makeover.

Attempting to ride the tiger of white ethno-nationalism, convert neo-traditionalists, or any others who try to do the same, fixate on nostalgia for a pre-secular West, bypassing its colonial legacy and racial violence

The fourth is that we seek to build a dignified presence for Muslims of the West in which we don't merely survive but thrive. In concrete terms, such dignity is predicated for me on (i) the protection of religious liberties and right to difference (ii) economic, social and political equity, and (iii) recognition of our religious and cultural distinctiveness. But what is this agenda called today by the political establishment? It is called extremism and Islamism. It used to be called multiculturalism but that has been strangled first by securitisation and now by populism.

But attempting to ride the tiger of white ethno-nationalism, convert neo-traditionalists, or any others who try to do the same, fixate on nostalgia for a pre-secular West, bypassing its colonial legacy and racial violence. To do so is to betray the possibilities that Muslims of the West can articulate and defend a three-tone community that is committed to anti-racism and cosmopolitan inclusion of the diverse communities that constitute its lived reality.

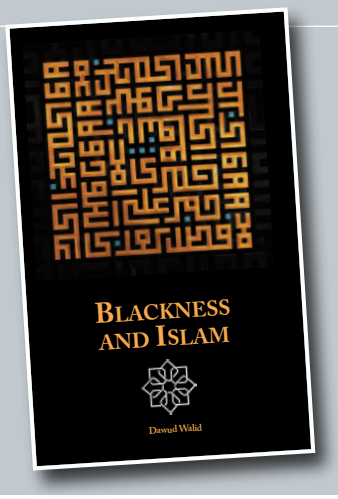
Yahya Birt
is a research director at the Ayaan Institute in London, and is a community historian who has taught at the University of Leeds. He has published over a dozen peer-reviewed articles on Islam in Britain and co-edited *British Secularism and Religion* (2016), *Islam in Victorian Liverpool* (2021) and *The Collected Poems of Abdullah Quilliam* (2021). In 2022, he published his first poetry collection, *Pandemic Pilgrimage*. He lives in West Yorkshire with his family and cat. He likes walking and being grumpy about the state of the world. He can be reached on Twitter @ybirt.

From Algorithm

Blackness and Islam

By Imam Dawud Walid

Buy it from shop.ihrc.org



"Imam Dawud Walid's life's work – in his previous publications, in the present volume and over the decade that I have known him – commends him as a soldier against satanic racism and especially its most perfect historical expression: white supremacy. This volume, by framing a religious response to what must be understood as a satanic spiritual attack, should be widely read and taught."

Dr. Rudolph Bilal Ware - Associate Professor of West Africa, Islamic Knowledge & Spirituality, African Diaspora at the University of California – Santa Barbara

Starry, Spangled Stranglehold: Understanding the West's Cultural Grip

The "West", as it is called, is only ten percent of the planet. But culturally, it dominates the world. Understanding why and how is critical to breaking its grip argues **Professor Ian Almond.**

When I was five years old, the school teacher in my Yorkshire infant school made our class paint two dozen flags from different countries of the world. Everyone painted a different flag onto a huge piece of card, and attached it to the end of a bamboo stick. I remember, even at that early age, being magnetically attracted to the flag of the United States. Its stars and stripes mesmerised my infant mind. As I grew older, throughout my childhood, this didn't change. I watched American films and TV shows with my friends, listened to American music, mimicked American accents. I dreamed of escaping my dreary British childhood and relocating to California or New York or Chicago – these were places where magical things happened, where events of tremendous significance occurred. Everywhere else was just periphery.

I start with this memory because, to some degree, it offers a mini-version of how the world today still seems to work. In today's global culture, a dozen or so countries – including European nations as well as the US – have landscapes we can safely call 'universal'. They are the backdrops Hollywood films play out against, the landscapes we see in commercials or TV shows. Few people can even begin to imagine what a film set in Ecuador, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh or the Philippines would look like. Writers and directors from these places, if they are to produce an internationally successful piece of art, cannot assume any kind of knowledge on the part of their audiences. Their books and films, if they are to reach an outside audience, generally have to adopt one of two strategies. Either weave anthropological explanations into the fabric of their plots, in a way a novel set in London or Los Angeles would never have to do; or choose a template which will be immediately understandable to a foreign reader/viewer (dictatorship/refugee/famine for Africa, drugs for Latin America, caste/poverty for South Asia, fanaticism/women's rights for the Middle East and so on).

> **The influence of the West exercises itself, particularly in television and cinema, not through language as many had previously feared, but primarily through genre**

In the academic field I work in – "World Literature" – this situation has been a point of debate for some time now. "World Literature" is a term heavily weighted in the direction of Western literature. The countries we would conventionally consider to be "Western" – Europe and North America - make up around eight hundred million people, barely ten percent of the planet. The "non-West", often conceived of as some kind of minority or token ethnicity, is Africa, Latin America, South and East Asia… the overwhelming majority of this world. And yet the "West" dominates the literary scene. Two thirds of anthologies of World literature, even today, are taken up by Western writers. Three quarters of all Nobel prize winners for Literature have been either European or American (a non-Western woman of colour has yet to win the prize in its hundred-year history). A few years ago, *The Guardian* published a list of the "hundred greatest novels of all time" – with five, I repeat five, non-Western novels making the cut. The number of texts, literary and non-literary, translated from other languages into English is dwarfed by the number of texts from English translated into other languages. The influence of the West exercises itself, particularly in television and cinema, not through language as many had previously feared, but primarily through genre. Superhero films, horror, Westerns, crime noir, sit-coms – even before the Netflix-isation of the planet's television culture, this process of homogenisation was already underway. Although there is an obvious argument to be made for the post-war influence of certain non-Western cultures –

PALESTINE APPEAL
Islamic Human Rights Commission
www.ihrc.org.uk
25 YEARS STANDING WITH THE OPPRESSED

Gaza is still feeling the effects of Israel's military offensive in May last year and with a fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic spreading through the population, healthcare services are facing immense challenges

Please donate generously

You can donate by visiting our website
https://donations.ihrc.org.uk/Gaza-Emergency-Appeal
or call 020 8904 4222

Japan and South Korea – and for the growing presence of China and India, the dominance of the West continues to abide.

Colonialism has a central part to play in this. At its peak in 1914, 85 percent of the planet was governed by European or European-settler countries. Educational programmes – such as those of the French in the Maghrib, the British in India, Spanish and then subsequently American influences in central - and Latin American countries – worked hard to alienate local people from their own contexts, verse them in the culture of their colonisers and mythologise Western frameworks. The 'universality' of Western culture therefore has less to do with its intrinsic quality, and more to do with the successful installation and cultivation of Western values in the colonial territories they dominated for two hundred years. The 'aura' surrounding Shakespeare or Paris or the Statue of Liberty is a consequence of centuries of effective and systematic self-mythologising. The West, in other words, has been smart: even once it was physically ejected from the territories it tried to control, it made sure its cultural memory would live on in the minds of its educated population.

However, nothing is ever this simple. Of course there are complexities to add to this picture – counter-currents which move in tension with, or even against, prevailing Western trends. Turkey, for example, has a powerful and growing television industry which, although it has yet to make inroads into the West, is securing its status as a soft power in South Asian and Middle Eastern markets. Chinese sci-fi bestsellers such as Cixin Liu's *Three Body Problem* are beginning to reach Western audiences; over the past ten years, South Korean TV and cinema has begun to appear regularly on Western screens – be they laptop- or cinema-screens. In the post-war period, Latin American 'magical realism' (writers such as Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez) has been one of the few formative, abiding non-Western cultural influences on the fiction of the West. And yet all of this offers little consolation for the vast majority of the planet's 192 nations. African cinema is barely recognised outside its own domestic markets; the obstacles a south-east Asian or Indonesian novel has to overcome to acquire the same degree of visibility as an American or European novel are often insuperable.

Is this situation ever going to change? Will Eurocentrisms, for example, be replaced one day with Sinocentrisms? It seems unlikely anytime soon. British soft power, for example, has been able to piggyback American economic and military power, inserting its niche influence into a significant segment of American film and television production. Even the first crop of Mexican Netflix successes – shows like *Club de Cuervos* and *Ingobernable* – have the same American producer advising them. And although it is exciting to witness the explosion in quality, independent regional cinema in India these past five years, as one extraordinary film after another gets made in Marathi, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil, it remains doubtful whether these films can ever hope to get the same platform and access to global audiences as Hollywood, even with the innovation of game-changing streaming services like Mubi.

The 'universality' of Western culture therefore has less to do with its intrinsic quality, and more to do with the successful installation and cultivation of Western values in the colonial territories they dominated for two hundred years

In many ways, the economic aspect in all of this is the crux of the problem. As long as the planet's resources and capital remain so unequally distributed, it is difficult to see how a more culturally decentered world can emerge. Once again, a colonially-rigged economic system – where 'peripheral' and 'semi-peripheral' countries remain constantly indebted to 'core' economies – appears to form the basis for which cultures we feel important, and which cultures we know nothing about at all. Postcolonial scholars call this the 'rollback' – the concerted effort by the US and Europe, in the wake of the Second World War, to confront the wave of newly-independent Third World countries in the 1940s, 50s and 60s by constructing (through institutions like the IMF and the World Trade Organisation) a set of economic relationships which would keep developing countries forever trapped in a situation of dependency upon their former colonisers. The global currency system, in particular, exacerbates these inequities, ensuring that a day's work in London will keep you comfortable for a month in Nepal or Bangladesh – and that you will have to work for a month in these countries to afford even one night in London or New York. It is the imperial legacy par excellence (the only African currency worth anything on the global market, surprise surprise, is the South African Rand) and offers perhaps the most striking example of how neo-colonial our world still is. Little wonder that cultural exports from non-Western countries have such a struggle on the world market, when this is already the case economically.

At the very least, a long-overdue revision of the planet's history is needed, and the place of each region within that history. Even a consciousness of how we got, historically, to where we are would be a start. Until these material inequities are addressed, however, it looks like Hollywood, Harry Potter and HBO are going to be with us for some time yet.

Professor Ian Almond
teaches literature at Georgetown University Qatar. His most recent book is *World Literature Decentered: Beyond the 'West' Through Turkey, Mexico and Bengal* (Routledge, 2022).

US BOOKS - NOW ON OFFER

The New Colonialism: the US Model of Human Rights

With contributions from: Saied R. Ameli, Ramon Grosfoguel, Mary K. Ryan, Saeed A. Khan, Sandew Hira, Tasneem Chopra, Rajeesh Kumar, Laurens de Rooij and Sohail Daulatzai.

Available from shop.ihrc.org and amazon.co.uk.

Contact shop@ihrc.org for more details and trade orders.

Building Theoretical Foundations for a Modern Islamic City in the Urban Age

Muslim states and city planners need to rediscover and reimagine the principles of city planning, and reject the internalised models now permeating the world, argues **João Silva Jordão.**

Urbanism at its apex explores the interaction between the built environment and the social environment, building the foundations for building more functional, prosperous and just cities. It also studies conflicts regarding power, wealth and space and how these dynamics in turn affect the urban fabric, and more precisely how these conflicts condition and are themselves shaped by the cities we live in. The city represents increased physical movement, rapid change, the intertwining of different human interests and the need for the many to share confined spaces. The word *urbanity* simultaneously denotes that which relates to the urban environment as well as describing *civic behaviour*. In Greek, the city is the *Polis*, the etymological source of the word *politics*, and its Latin equivalent, *Civitas*, denotes citizenship. Abstracting political science from urbanism, which is to say, limiting urbanism to the study of the built environment, is equivalent to reducing the study of the city to its physical form without addressing its immaterial factors as well as its complex social and economic dimensions. In the same way that 'war is too important to be left to the generals', urbanism is too multi-disciplinary to be left exclusively to architects. It is not by chance that one of the academics most cited by contemporary urban planners is a geographer whose work revolves around economics and sociology, David Harvey.

Therefore, the word "city" and the academic discipline that studies it, "urbanism", does not only refer to the built environment- the city is a nexus of visible and invisible dynamics and its reality is made up of everything in between. Increasingly, *human life takes place in the theatre that is the urban stage*, and the problems that affect urban life grow as the city expands and becomes more complex. About half of the world's population lives in cities, and this rate is estimated to rise to 70% by 2050. Solutions to urban problems cannot be limited to transforming the built environment. The key to resolving urban conflicts, poverty, inequality, segregation and suffering is at once imminently architectural as well as political, and it is only through reforming the political processes that permeate the city and in particular its planning and management instruments that a fairer city can be achieved. It is in this sense that the concept of the "Right to the City" emerges as a central analytical approach - because the right to the city considers access to material and social goods, and at the same time, considers the degree of influence that inhabitants have on the urban decision-making processes that affect their lives. The "Right to the City" is equivalent to the right to political inclusion, though tailored to the specificities of the urban context.

In this sense David Harvey (1973: 97-98) argues that our understanding of social justice "must expand to consider conflicts over the location of power and authority to make decisions, the distribution of influence, the granting of bylaws, the institutions built to regulate and control activities... We are looking, to put it briefly, for a specification of a fair distribution, through fair processes".

With this in mind, urbanism naturally emerges as one of the most central disciplines of the 21st century, largely as a result of fast-paced urbanisation. At the heart of the urban issue are the difficulties related to the adaptation of human life to the city, the need to develop governance methods that can guarantee civil rights and reduce socioeconomic inequality, as well as the challenges related to the proliferation of slums, lack of key infrastructure and the growth of poverty and exclusion. The pandemic has severely aggravated these issues, in particular in the so-called "developing economies". Urbanism is therefore inevitably political and multidisciplinary- it is not, and indeed cannot be politically neutral because it involves ethical issues such as the struggle over access to political power and the struggle between contradictory and opposing interests.

Modernist Urbanism and its Highly Ambiguous Legacy

We must have the discernment to distinguish someone who can be considered pioneer from someone whose work and legacy is effectively positive and canonical. This differentiation must indeed be made when it comes to the pioneers of Modernist architecture and urbanism- as groundbreaking as their work was, some of the elements of their thought and practice need to be not only criticised, but at times fully questioned and even rejected.

Modern urban planning is riddled with foundational mistakes and often produces grave planning errors that then take a huge amount of time, effort and money to correct. Many of these errors are largely due to the traditions defended and practised by Niemeyer and Le Corbusier, among other Modernist architects of course. We must not let the cult of personality that has formed around Niemeyer and Le Corbusier prevent us from critically evaluating their works and the overall legacy of the Modernist movement.

It is fair to say that Modernist architecture and urbanism has left an ambiguous legacy. Our assessment of architectural and urban models must necessarily transcend the theoretical plane, because it is precisely through urban and territorial planning that societies put their ideology into practice. *It is through territorial planning that social planning materialises*. It is through spatial planning that social relations are solidified. It is through them that social theory is imprinted into the territory. The implementation of the project marks the transition between the realm of the hypothetical and the realm of the real. In this sense, aesthetic considerations must be complemented and even subordinated by economic, social and political realities.

The quality of a project cannot be evaluated taking only into account a subjective appreciation of its aesthetic or theoretical value- it has to be based, above all, on the analysis of its real effect on society. This may seem like a given, but it really isn't. The debate over what kind of city we want to live in must also revolve around the evaluation of the instruments we use to build said city. And while the Modernist movement does have considerations over aesthetics and basic concepts of functionality at its core, it can be found wanting in its ability to deal with the more complex socio-economic and political dimensions that pertain to the urban environment.

The Modernist movement is often

criticised, sometimes seriously, sometimes satirically, because of its apparent obsession with concrete. This critique is not just a treatise on which building material is most conducive to building harmonious cities. Criticising the obsession with concrete is also to criticise the tendency that developed from the 1950's to ignore the urban lessons of the past, to neglect other types of construction materials, leaving the historic centres to rot in favour of the construction of suburban housing, which more often than not are endless fields of tower blocks with little to no access to basic services, without architectural diversity and with little to none of the aesthetic diversity which is essential for humans to establish points of reference and build a real rapport with the built environment that surrounds them. These inorganic cities, like the satellites of Cairo or the city of Brasilia itself, which is the embodiment of Niemeyer's work and philosophy, are two of the great urban failures of the 20th century and demonstrate this urban planning method taken to the extreme.

The construction of urban nuclei that orbited around the church or mosque, the square and the market gave way to non-nuclei that do not orbit around anything in particular. The human scale is lost, and if there is a discernible new centre, it is the roads and highways that accommodate cars, which are now essential to get from A to B, as the humungous scale that everything is built to diminishes the role of the pedestrian, which is to say, disempowers humans from living functional lives unless they are constantly aided by the power of the machine. Curved streets with straight buildings suddenly gave way to straight streets with repetitive buildings. The large housing towers proliferate and take over the horizon and the periphery of cities, and at times even take over urban centres too. Under the old pretext used by Haussmann, who rebuilt Paris and fathered its immense boulevards, and who claimed to have redesigned Paris in the name of promoting healthiness and 'urban order', a novel strain of ghettos was born in the modern age. Under these circumstances the city loses its urbanity, and in doing so effectively becomes less of a city as such, instead becoming a disconnected mosaic of buildings that do not interact rationally with each other. In the modern city the housing tower block reigns supreme. Modernist architecture is inhumane because that's what it always sought to be. Aesthetic becomes an end and not a means, the building becomes something that human life must adapt to instead of the building adapting to human life.

On paper many Modernist projects look truly functional, rational and visually appealing. But in reality, they often produce ghettos, solidify social stratification and spatial segregation, debasing the city and towering over its inhabitants in a dystopian-like fashion.

Modernist architecture promotes fast construction and the use of cheap materials. However, in an attempt to fill the housing shortages evident in the post-World War II world, many Western cities produced neighbourhoods filled with "affordable housing" that would later come to dominate the landscape itself. The construction of cheap, inhumane and disjointed buildings was a response to a temporary problem the disastrous results of which are very much long-term. Perhaps one of the lessons to be learnt here is that building incrementally, but better, is preferable to building poorer quality in bigger quantities.

Classical urbanism promoted incremental, thoughtful urban development, where the initial design can and should be modified as a result of the knowledge acquired during the building process itself. In contrast, the Modernist tradition favours rigid planning and an intransigent building process. The terrain is adapted to match the project, rather than adapting the project to the terrain.

But the critique of the Modernist tradition cannot be limited to an assessment of the typology of buildings or their articulation with each other. We need to evaluate and reform the planning instruments themselves in all their complexity, benefiting participatory planning over "enlightened" technocracy, favouring organic and incremental development over uncompromising and intransigent bulldozing. After all, as David Harvey reminds us, "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."

In a rapidly urbanising world where more than half of the world's population already resides in urban centres, the question of what kind of city do we want is equivalent to the question of what kind of society we want. Furthermore, the type of city that we have and will have is in turn shaped by architectural and urban traditions, as well as the instruments of planning and territorial planning, instruments that must be flexible and in constant dialogue with the communities whose lives they affect.

Rejecting the Unislamic and Wholly Detestable Malthusianism Narrative

A surprising amount of urban planning policies are now geared towards retrograde, anti-growth Malthusian policies under the guise of "sustainable development". Agenda 21 initiatives are at the vanguard of this (though it by no means encompasses the breadth of these policies), such is their scope and such is their pervasive presence in virtually all walks of modern life.

The basic definition of the concept of sustainability revolves around the practices that drive economic development, as illustrated by the following definition: "Sustainable development is development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). The United Nations argues that sustainability has to be understood with its three mutually interconnected and complementary pillars; economic development, social development and environmental protection (United Nations, 2005).

Far from being an exclusively contemporary theme, the concept of sustainability, particularly in its aspect related to human demography, already occupied a central place in the culture and beliefs of ancient civilisations. The Babylonian myth of Atrahasis portrayed a measure implemented by the "deities" to reduce the noise produced by humanity, an excessive noise produced by there being too many people, through the imposition of prohibitions on human reproduction and specifically by placing limits on the reproductive rights of women of lower classes (Leick[1] , 2001: 82-83). The need for infertile women, or women whose babies are stolen by demons, is also mentioned as an important factor for ecological balance (Leick[2], 2011: 183). We therefore note the existence of a myth where the demographic dimension of humanity affects the way it interacts with its environment, in this case represented by greater noise, an effect which then results in the imposition of measures of demographic containment by figures with authority, in this case, the "deities".

One of the most contemporary pioneers of the concern for environmental sustainability was Thomas Robert Malthus, whose theory of overpopulation would guide generations of ecological thinkers. Malthus' theories are gaining greater prominence in the 21st century because of the demographic growth that technological advances have allowed, together with increased tensions around natural resources and the worsening of political and social conflicts. Malthus' infamous declaration, that, "The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth in producing subsistence for man, that premature death will have to in one form or another visit the human race" (Malthus, 1798, pp 44) generated an intense debate about demography and its economic consequences, which in turn fostered the emergence of various political paradigms. In particular, his thesis came to define a whole discourse of institutions that specialise in economic and social development. Malthus' concerns about the sustainability of human population growth quickly gained political traction (Lahart, Barta and Batson, 2008). In the contemporary world, Neo-Malthusian alarmism has become pervasive throughout the right and left political spectrum.

One exponent of such concerns was Julian Huxley (1947), the first director of UN-

ESCO and a founding member of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), who argued that "The lowest strata are reproducing too fast. Therefore... they must not have too easy access to relief or hospital treatment lest the removal of the last check on natural selection should make it too easy for children to be produced or to survive; long unemployment should be a ground for sterilisation". Huxley's open advocacy for sterilisation as well as conditioned access to hospital care as a means of demographic containment is by today's standards nothing short of appalling.

Concerns over overpopulation have also had a profound influence on eugenics, a pseudo-scientific trend pioneered by one Francis Galton whose official aims were to improve the human race through control of reproduction and genetic manipulation. This scientific trend in turn profoundly influenced Nazi euthanasia and genocide policies as well as the philosophy of international organizations such as UNESCO. As Huxley (1946, pp 21) mentions: "Thus even though it is quite true that any radical eugenic policy will be for many years politically and psychologically impossible, it will be important for Unesco to see that the eugenic problem is examined with the greatest care, and that the public mind is informed of the issues at stake so that much that now is unthinkable may at least become thinkable".

The Club of Rome's 1972 report "Limits to Growth" restored the centrality of the Malthusian paradigm using the argument that population growth is exponential while technological advances and the increase in the capacity to respond to the population's needs is linear. In this context, not only is economic development considered a major factor; human agency as a whole is framed in the question of sustainability, as mentioned by King and Schneider (1993, pp 115)[9]: "In searching for a new enemy to unite us, we came up with the idea that pollution, the threat of global warming, water shortages, famine and the like would fit the bill. In their totality and in their interactions these phenomena do constitute a common threat which demands the solidarity of all peoples. But in designating them as the enemy, we fall into the trap about which we have already warned, namely mistaking symptoms for causes. All these dangers are caused by human intervention and it is only through changed attitudes and behaviour that they can be overcome. The real enemy, then, is humanity itself". This concept adds a strategic dimension to the issue of sustainability, stipulating that social cohesion must emanate from the common perception that ecological sustainability can only be established through a battle against ourselves, this battle being an attempt to reform and moderate human agency whilst seeing humanity as a whole as its own biggest enemy.

The identification of a common enemy is often used as a means to galvanise a certain group, solidifying its identity and rallying it towards a certain set of actions. This concept, however, indicates that only through the identification of the self as the enemy, both individually and collectively, can a common contemporary political purpose be found. On the one hand, this concept represents the adaptation of existential questions from the individual forum to a collective scale by means of the debate over sustainability and ecology. In this sense, the debate pertaining to ecology gained a near-metaphysical dimension by proposing that the individual must find purpose by identifying himself as the enemy, echoing Cicero when he said that "man is his own worst enemy". However, the extent to which this concept can be used by pernicious political agents should be quite obvious as it can be used to legitimise oppressive and unjust policies that will ultimately benefit those who drive them.

One can therefore designate many of the Club of Rome concepts as neo-Malthusian. However, one of the variables that has changed drastically since Malthus' time, a change that he could not have foreseen, was the technological advances that, contrary to Malthus' vision, evolved not in a linear way, but in an exponential way, in such a way that it will have increased the "earth's carrying capacity", that is, to increase our planet's capacity to house more and more inhabitants. As mentioned by Simon and Kahn, cited by Aligica (2009, pp 75):

> "Our conclusions are reassuring, though not grounds for complacency. Global problems due to physical conditions (as distinguished from those caused by institutional and political conditions) are always possible, but are likely to be less pressing in the future than in the past. Environmental, resource, and population stresses are diminishing, and with the passage of time will have less influence than now upon the quality of human life on our planet. Because of increases in knowledge, the earth's "carrying capacity" has been increasing throughout the decades and centuries and millennia to such an extent that the term "carrying capacity" has by now no useful meaning. These trends strongly suggest a progressive improvement and enrichment of the earth's natural resource base, and of mankind's lot on earth."

Constructing an Islamic Pro-Urbanism and Rejecting Anarcho-Primitivist Anti-Urbanism

Another bane of modern urbanism is an unholy alliance between the more sections of the sustainable development movement and regressive anarcho-primitivists. Together these forces make for a particular blend of anti-urbanism which sees cities as being inherently negative, and specifically, as being counter to human nature, soul-crushing, inherently oppressive, inevitably dirty and perhaps the most erroneous of all ubiquitous anti-urban concepts- *that the city and the urban model as a whole is unecological*. All these concepts are quite easy

to pick apart, however insofar as what concerns the main objective of this piece- which is to build the philosophical axes along which we can build modern Islamic cities, it is interesting to note, as I have done previously (Silva Jordão[4], 2018, pp.155), that some of the anti-urban visions that permeate modern popular culture actually come from ancient texts such as The Holy Bible:

> "One must also note the latent religious connotations often found in works that espouse anti-urbanism, which are plentiful. On several occasions The Holy Bible depicts cities as cesspools of sin and damnation. In our collective subconscious, all cities can be deemed to be replicas of "Babylon the Great, the Mother of the Abominations of the Earth". As is pointed out by Crook (1997, 3):
>
> > Cities, like human beings, do not get a very good press in the Bible. Their origins were in sin, rebellion and violence, and they continued in this vein. They were concentrations of oppression, corruption and bloodshed, as well as paganism and immorality.
>
> "Though many have pointed out that it would be simplistic and even incorrect to say that the Bible only portrays cities negatively (see for example Jacobson, 1994 and Stockwell, 2015), it would be fair to say that some of the negative connotations attached to cities within the Bible have evolved and been recycled in popular culture throughout the ages."

The relationship between cities and religions and the religious experience is much more nuanced, however, as I also mention (Silva Jordão[5], 2018, pp. 156):

> "Though as we can see, not only would it be unjust to say that cities are necessarily soul-crushing and anti-spiritual, we can go further and say that cities are inherently spiritual. As Stockwell mentions:
>
> > Ancient cities were by definition religious and theological. Almost all of them had holy places, ziggurats, temples, or sacred shrines in the central places of the city. (2015, 10)
>
> "To say that the city is primarily a religious phenomenon will surprise even the most seasoned urbanists. However, it was the capacity of the primordial building, *the temple of Eridu*, which some claim was the first city in the history of humankind, to attract visitors and then to make people want to live near it, that ultimately resulted in the formation the first recognisable city centre (Leick[6], 2001). This temple produced the phenomenon which drew members of agrarian societies to a single place: thus, the gravitational power of places of cult preceded demographic density, and the need for density preceded the building of infrastructures which could then accommodate it. In the primordial city, *the temple is the first and central building*, and other structures are merely its accessories."

Towards a Modern (but not Modernist) Islamic City

Is it not fascinating that Islam, often seen as a religion of and for Arab Bedouins of the desert, carries within its very foundational text, The Glorious Quran, a beautiful chapter that imbues The City with an obviously positive connotation in a chapter that is called, literally, "The City", (Surat Al Balad, 90)? This chapter is often interpreted as an ode to the very Holy City of Mecca, though it can also be seen as being a concise summary of the core Islamic principles along with an ode to the very concept of the urban itself. This chapter says (using the Sahee International[7] translation, and removing the often counter-productive addendums):

> "I swear by this city
> And you, are free of restriction in this city
> And the father and that which was born,
> We have certainly created man into hardship.
> Does he think that never will anyone overcome him?
> He says, "I have spent wealth in abundance."
> Does he think that no one has seen him?
> Have We not made for him two eyes?
> And a tongue and two lips?
> And have shown him the two ways?
> But he has not broken through the difficult pass.
> And what can make you know what the difficult pass?
> It is the freeing of a slave
> Or feeding on a day of severe hunger
> An orphan of near relationship
> Or a needy person in misery
> And then being among those who believed and advised one another to patience and advised one another to compassion.
> Those are the companions of the right.
> But they who disbelieved in Our signs - those are the companions of the left.
> Over them will be fire closed in."

So what would an Islamic City be like?

Firstly, the modern Islamic City should be forward-looking. Though this may seem like a minor point, it is not.

Secondly, the Islamic city must of course be, well, Islamic. Though this may seem obvious in theory, in practice, it means that we must strive to imbue the values and concepts of Islam into the very fabric of the City.

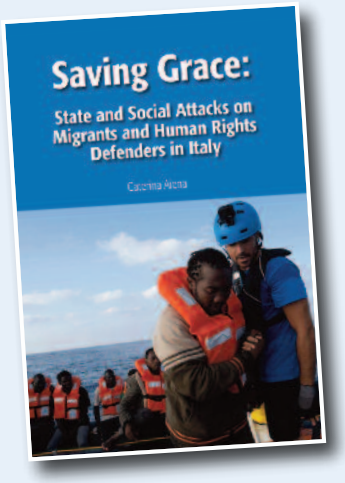
Thirdly, it is very important to make the distinction between the kind of cities that we have had at present and historically in Islamic civilisations, as well as the cities in which Muslims are or become the majority and a vision of what an urban planning practice that is actually Islamic is or would be. Although our considerations regarding the Islamic City cannot be fully divorced from considerations regarding what Muslims have done in the way of urbanism in

IHRC PUBLICATION

Saving Grace: State and Social Attacks on Migrants and Human Rights Defenders in Italy

By Caterina Aiena

Download the report for free www.ihrc.org.uk



Watch a UN side panel event about the report on IHRCTv

https://youtu.be/TE3KAk3lgPQ

the past and present, we must go further and be more ambitious, and really think of the Islamic City as the vehicle through which the very essence of the philosophy of Islam takes physical, urban form as well as the prime arena for the ideal Islamic society to live in. The Islamic City must therefore be an embodiment of Islam itself.

One of the largest issues with urban development in the Islamic world is that it is adopting, albeit with a decades-long delay, some Modernist practices which are being either scrapped or limited in the Western World from whence they came and where they were first pioneered. While the West is adopting New Urbanism, characterised by more varied fractal-like urban zoning that allows for closer access to different uses and activities, restriction of vehicles in favour of more walkable neighbourhoods along with increasing participatory policies and democratic instruments, even if these are still of a somewhat limited scope, the fast-paced urbanisation seen throughout the Islamic world is still mostly driven by ultra-centralised planning and Modernist approaches to zoning and building scale. Though the need for key-infrastructure development, which more often than not has to be driven by a technocratic, centralised approach, cannot be overlooked, perhaps a more balanced approach would not only prove more successful in the medium to long term, it would also go a long way in preserving some of the positive aspects that we still find in Islamic cities, particularly in the historic city centres of old cities throughout the Islamic world. To bulldoze these historic city centres in favour of Modernist planning and brutalist architecture would be killing the goose that lays the golden egg, much like Le Corbusier's lunatic plan to bulldoze central Paris in favour of Modernist mega-blocks, a plan that thankfully did not go ahead, of course. In this context, the old city-centres, the so-called Medinas that we so often find, characterised by crescent-shaped, narrow streets, relatively limited verticalisation and the proximity to commerce is a ubiquitous richness that we still have- and must preserve at all costs- throughout the Islamic urban world.

Another worrying trend is the concept of building cities virtually from scratch. Though some examples, such as Dubai's incredible rise from a nearly deserted place to world-class megacity, cannot and should not be completely dismissed, it is also important to note that building cities from scratch carries both urbanistic and economic risks. Saudi Arabia's plan for a brand-new megacity, NEOM, is perhaps the best example of an urban-planning approach that favours building anew rather than fixing what is already there. This approach might very well be feasible for Saudi Arabia, which has a relatively low population and urban population density, along with incredible financial power- however, the majority of the Islamic world would do best to take its limited financial resources and invest it in incrementally improving its already existing urban landscapes. This is particularly true in large cities and megacities across the Islamic world which are in dire need of key infrastructure development such as base public utilities, schools, hospitals and water treatment, provision and sewage systems. Improving areas that are already inhabited can be tricky, especially in highly-dense urban centres, however it is still much more efficient than having to build everything from scratch.

It is not only quite clear that building brand new cities from the ground up is obviously much more expensive, but we can also see that existing projects of the sort have something other than the citizen's welfare in view, such as is the case in Egypt's plan for a brand-new capital city. It is often much more a case of using public money for the comfort of its ruling class which prefers to be housed far away from the general population. Given that Cairo is also one of the world's most congested and problematic megacities and taking account of the general state of the current capital's infrastructure, this new investment has to be seen as nothing other than a detestable concoction of urbanistic negligence and perverse political expedience. It is interesting to note that Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, is also building a new capital, albeit using the rationale that its current capital, Jakarta, is literally sinking, while Pakistan did the exact same thing by moving its capital from Karachi to the newly built capital city of Islamabad.

In conclusion, perhaps the most imminent priority when it comes to urban planning and urban policies within the Islamic world is to make sure that limited financial resources are used to improve and build upon existing densely urban areas that are in dire need of infrastructure and development. Furthermore, accommodating large populations should be seen as a duty rather than as a burden while rejecting the anti-natalist and Malthusian intrusions that have become central to the concepts and policies of supranational organisations should be seen as an ethical imperative. Lastly, Islamic urban development should learn from the mistakes of Western urban development, such as the overly centralised and rigid Modernist planning, rather than replicating them at a time when the West itself seems to be moving on from them.

Editorial Note

Some sections of this piece have been inspired or translated from my own original work in my Portuguese-speaking-Blog, Casa das Aranhas, (Silva Jordão, 2012 and Silva Jordão, 2013), while some concept have been adapted from my own academic piece called "Beyond Self-Hating Urbanism…", (Silva Jordão[8], 2018) and the piece is extensively quoted on account of its relative uniqueness and relevance for the theme of this particular article.

João Silva Jordão
is a Muslim convert, political activist and PhD candidate in urbanism. He has a particular interest in trying to analyse modern problems using the timeless paradigm that is Islam. In his activism he takes a particular interest in studying mechanisms that allow for the generation of more just cities and develops mechanisms for the incremental verticalisation of city centres.

The Untranslatability of the Quran, with Examples Drawn from Surah al-Fatiha

The inimitability of the Holy Quran is a canonical belief of Muslims. So how do translators get across the precise meaning of the Arabic text? With great difficulty, says **Nazmina Dhanji.**

For Muslims, the Quran is the word of Allah verbatim in Arabic - the language that He chose to reveal it in. It contains varying types of speech, including devotions, liturgical passages, narrative stories, admonishments and instructions that are expressed in both literal and figurative styles. Being a text at the highest degree of eloquence, the Quran as a whole poses a serious challenge for translators and linguists alike, as it employs many stylistic, linguistic and rhetorical features, and literary devices such as metaphor, assonance, epithet, irony, repetition, polysemy, metonymy, simile, synonymy and homonymy.

Even for non-Muslim Arabs, the Quran is the book that best represents the Arabic language, because the whole Arabic grammar is based on it, and in order to see its impressive stylistic devices, both orthographically and phonologically, and to feel their effects, it is necessary to understand the Arabic language. For a reader who does not do so, the translator can only transfer the essence of the Quran's message into the target language, but not imitate the original's stylistic particularities.

It goes without saying that since Arabic is not English, this entails that the Arabic Quran is *not* its English translation. Accordingly, expressions such as translation of the "meaning(s) of the Quran" and "translating the untranslatable" are commonly used in writings on Quran translation. Each expression in its own way implies that rendering the Quran into a foreign language with sufficient accuracy is accompanied by many linguistic problems, as no two languages are identical either in the meaning given to the corresponding symbols or in the ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences. Lexical, syntactic and semantic problems arise when translating the meaning of the Holy Quran into English.

Translators often mention the lack of 'equivalence' or the absence of the equivalent of some Islamic terms, compelling the translator to convey them in a communicative manner. The untranslatability of texts, then, is a natural consequence of differences between languages on a linguistic level - their morphology, structure and grammar are often so diverse that the possibility of equivalence on these levels is virtually impossible. Untranslatability is also a consequence of the differences in time between the appearance of the original text and the later translation, and this may be why many translations go out of date just as our readings of a certain text can go out of date. In any case, the remit of this article is not to delve into translation theory and the elusive quest for 'equivalence' between languages, a topic that has been hotly debated in the field of translation for decades.

What this article does hope to do, however, is to demonstrate some lexical, syntactic and semantic problems that arise with examples of words and verses from Surah al-Fatiha - the Opening chapter of the Quran, and one that is at the tip of our tongues at least 10 times a day, as we recite it in every canonical prayer, and whose translation or meanings we are already well-acquainted with. We will be going through the Surah chronologically, highlighting 4-5 essential subtleties from it (highlighted below) specifically relating to God and His Attributes that end up getting lost in translation, unless we have knowledge of the Arabic language. I aim to demonstrate how English translations simply cannot capture the nuances that come from the *root*[1] meanings of these words. This is by no means a *tafsīr* or exegesis of the Surah, which by itself would fill a few hundred pages.

For the purpose of this article, I'll be drawing on three of the most popular translations used in academic studies, namely M. A. S Abdel Haleem's *The Quran: A New Translation*, Ali Quli Qarai's *Phrase-by-Phrase Translation of the Quran*, and Pickthall's *Meaning of the Glorious Quran*. The aim here is neither to compare the translations to each other nor to critique the esteemed translators' choices of words, but simply to showcase through a deeper delve into the Arabic roots of these words and phrases how - despite the skill and linguistic prowess of the translators - English translations simply cannot capture their essence; and consequently how this may impact our acts of worship in turn, and how essential it is to read and understand the text directly in Arabic.

بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ ﴿١﴾

In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful

الْحَمْدُ لِلّٰهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِيْنَ ﴿٢﴾

All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds

الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ ﴿٣﴾

the All-beneficent, the All-merciful

مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّيْنِ ﴿٤﴾

Master of the Day of Retribution

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِيْنُ ﴿٥﴾

You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn for help

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيْمَ ﴿٦﴾

Guide us on the straight path

صِرَاطَ الَّذِيْنَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوْبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّيْنَ ﴿٧﴾

the path of those whom You have blessed — such as have not incurred Your wrath, nor are astray

(Ali Quli Qarai's translation)

al-ḥamd الْحَمْدُ

All three translators have translated this opening word as *Praise* or *All praise*, a word that falls short of conveying the complete meaning of the word *ḥamd* which is actually a combination of both praise and gratitude. When one recites this phrase, s/he is both praising God and thanking Him at the same time, expressing their gratitude for all their blessings and all that is good in their lives, as well as praising and approving of God's plans for them, even if they are not in line with their own.

Having said that, certain scholars of language and exegesis have also held the

SUPPORT THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

Islamic Human Rights Commission

This year is IHRC's 25th Anniversary. This organisation has grown through the generous donations of its supporters without whom, we could not have survived.

As the world continues to face trauma and oppression, join us in the struggle for justice.

1. Remember us this year with your du'a

2. Support us financially – a small monthly contribution is as valuable as a generous one-off donation.

If you wish to donate solely to IHRC's charitable work, please go to our website:

donations.ihrc.org.uk.

Otherwise please fill in this form.

May Allah s.w.t. reward all your efforts in this world and the next. Ameen.

Supporters of IHRC get free copies of IHRC reports (those paying concessionary rates get a selection) and reduced rates on other items. Concessionary supporters are encouraged to donate £5 a month. Without this type of regular support – however small, IHRC would not be able to operate.

Title: _____

First Name: _____

_____

_____

Address:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Post Code: _____

Telephone: _____

Fax: _____

E-mail:

_____

Contacting you by e-mail or fax may save IHRC money. If you would prefer not to be contacted this way please tick here ❑

STANDING ORDER BANKERS FORM

Name(s) of the account holder(s)

_____

_____

_____

Account number:

_____

Address: _____

_____

_____

____

To: The Manager
(name and address of your bank)

_____

_____

Sort Code: _____

Please pay (tick choice):

❑ £8 / month (students/ unwaged)
❑ £15 / month
❑ £25 / month
❑ £40 / month
❑ £60 / month
❑ Other (please specify) £

_____

Please state amount in words

_____

_____

_____

To the credit of **Islamic Human Rights Commission Ltd.** a/c no: 06759807, Sort Code [12-24-81] at: Bank of Scotland, 600 Gorgie Road, Edinburgh, EH11 3XP,

Upon receipt of this order and subsequently the same amount on this first day of each month until further notice, debit my / our account.

Signature(s):

_____

_____

_____

Date: _____

Please return this form to us at: Islamic Human Rights Commission PO Box 598, Wembley, HA9 7XH, United Kingdom.

Islamic Human Rights Commission is a not for profit company. IHRC is a company limited by guarantee. Company No: 04716690

ONE OFF DONATION FORM

Please find enclosed a donation of £_____

❑ Zakat ❑ Sadaqah

❑ I would like a receipt

Name: _____

_____

Address: _____

_____

_____

_____

Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

Please make all cheques payable to Islamic Human Rights Commission

opinion that praise and thanks are two sides of the same coin and hold the meaning of gratitude such as al-Tabari, whereas others differentiated between the two and further qualified them based on the types of favours for which one would express *ḥamd* to Him, or whether the *ḥamd* was verbally expressed or felt in the heart, or whether *ḥamd* was for God's intrinsic attributes or His bestowal of favours, etc. In spite of the hair-splitting, none of the scholars throughout the ages have excluded gratitude and thanks from the primary definition of the word *ḥamd*. The bottom line, therefore, is that the word 'praise' in English simply does not express or bring to mind the gratitude and appreciation that the Arabic word *ḥamd* naturally encompasses within it, and which should flow out of us towards our Creator as we 'praise' Him.

Allah الله

Allah is the common Arabic word for God. In the English language, the word generally refers to God in Islam - the same God worshipped by all three Abrahamic faiths and other monotheistic faiths. The word is largely thought to be derived by contraction from *al-ilāh*, which means "The God", and is linguistically related to the Aramaic words Elah and (Alâhâ) and the Hebrew word El (Elohim) for God. When it comes to the etymology of the word Allah, this too has been discussed extensively by classical Arab philologists. Some believed that the root of Allah was *la-ya-ha*: *to be lofty, high*; others traced it back to *wa-la-ha*: *to be infatuated or lose one's mind*. The majority of scholars held the opinion that it came from *a-la-ha*, which itself encompassed various meanings: *to worship; to be bewildered, perplexed; to give protection*, meaning that the derivative Allah included all of these meanings too: a being that perplexes and bewilders the senses, whilst being worthy of worship and offering protection. All of these roots combined offer us the precise definition of 'God' to help us form a much better idea and comprehension of the One who cannot be conceptualised. The word 'God' in English, unfortunately, does not do much to evoke these same feelings of bewilderment before a Being so perfect and so worthy of worship and seeking refuge in, as it is often glossed over and its lofty meaning forgotten through common usage.

A point worth mentioning here is the pronoun *huwa* often used by Allah to refer to Himself in the Quran, and translated as 'He'. Why is the masculine pronoun *huwa* used to refer to a God who transcends any human attribute, including gender? Whilst our discussions around the two words *ḥamd* and *Allah* pertained to their philology and etymology, the discussion around gender is rooted in Arabic grammar, or rather, grammar in general.

Modern linguists distinguish between *natural gender* and *grammatical gender*. *Natural gender* is determined by physiology: an animal with a male sex organ is naturally masculine, and an animal with a female sex organ is naturally feminine. *Grammatical gender,* however, is determined by language convention, not physiology. To clearly understand the distinction between natural and grammatical gender, one must examine languages like French, Spanish or Arabic, where nouns are always grammatically masculine or feminine, even when they don't have a natural gender.

To a Muslim who is grounded in the transcendent tawhid of Islam, ascribing biological gender to God is unimaginable heresy.

Maison (French for "house"), for example, is grammatically feminine, hence one refers to it with the same pronoun that one uses for "Charlotte" or "Layla", i.e., *elle* (French for "she"). *Bayt* (Arabic for "house"), however, is grammatically masculine, so one refers to it with the same pronoun that one uses for "Adam" or "Muhammad", i.e., *huwa* (Arabic for "he").

The distinction between natural and grammatical gender is vague in English because words are only grammatically masculine or feminine *if* they are correspondingly naturally masculine or feminine[2]. When a word doesn't have a natural gender - like "house" - it is grammatically neutral and one refers to it with the neuter pronoun, "it", not the masculine pronoun "he", nor the feminine pronoun "she".

The presence of the neuter gender in English and its absence in Arabic (or French) causes linguistic mismatch. A consequence of this mismatch is that in English, if one uses the masculine or feminine pronoun to refer to something that is without natural gender, one is representing the thing as a person, usually for powerful rhetorical effect. This rhetorical device is called *personification*, and is often used by poets to personify virtues or vices, or love and death.

Languages like Arabic, however, have no neuter gender, so 'it' doesn't actually exist in Arabic. Such masculine or feminine pronominal references carry no connotations of humanness. The femininity of *naar* (Arabic for "fire") or the masculinity of *maa'* (Arabic for "water") is grammatical gender, based purely on language convention. It is normal and expected, in other words, to refer to *naar* with *hiya* (Arabic for "she"), and to *maa'* with *huwa* (Arabic for "he") without any suggestions of humanness.

The Quran, therefore, refers to Allah using the masculine pronoun *huwa* because the word "Allah" is *grammatically* masculine, not because Allah is *naturally* masculine (Allah be our refuge from saying that!). In English, using "He" for something without natural gender connotes personification, but not in Arabic. There is no implied anthropomorphism whatsoever.

To affirm a natural gender for Allah, Most High, blatantly contradicts the clear Quranic verse, "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him." (Quran, 42:11) This can be confusing for people unacquainted with languages that have grammatical gender as well as non-Muslims, not only because purely grammatical masculinity is alien to the English mind, but also because no religion besides Islam affirms divine transcendence with such emphasis.

Christians, for example, imagine that the Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) himself was God (Allah be our refuge!) and that he was also a man. Polytheism, too, anthropomorphises its gods. Idols everywhere inevitably assume human or animal form, and humans and animals are both biologically gendered. With the exception of Islam, every religion that believes in a personal god anthropomorphises its deities to some extent. Absolute divine transcendence requires *tawhid* (pure divine unity). To a Muslim who is grounded in the transcendent *tawhid* of Islam, ascribing biological gender to God is unimaginable heresy. Allah does refer to Himself in the Quran using the masculine pronoun *huwa*, but this is in the context of an uncompromising Quranic transcendence. He says, "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him." (42:11) In this context, the masculinity of *huwa* with respect to Allah is a purely grammatical masculinity without even a hint of anthropomorphism.

The question arises here: If *huwa* here implies no anthropomorphism, then neither would *hiya*. Why, then, choose *huwa* over *hiya*? By convention of the Arabic language, grammatical masculinity is the default, and grammatical femininity is the exception. Since most words are grammatically masculine, the expected grammatical gender of the word Allah is masculinity. There are further very interesting discussions around this issue elaborated by Abd al-Hakim Murad in his article *Islam, Irigaray and the Retrieval of Gender*, where he explains how certain rhetorical connotations of femininity are also used to describe Allah, Most High.

Get the full IHRC Bookshop & Gallery experience online at shop.ihrc.org

All our titles and most artwork available to buy from our virtual shop.
Remember any profits raised go to charitable causes.

What are you waiting for?

We have everything from decolonial theory to children's picture books.

shop.ihrc.org **@ihrcbookshop**

WE SHIP WORLDWIDE

rabb رَبٌّ

All three English translations of the Quran have *rabb al-ālamīn* down as 'Lord of the Worlds', and *rabb* translated largely as Lord, and this is true for the majority of other translations too, sometimes alternated with Master. Whilst the root of the word *rabb*: *ra-ba-ba* does have the sense of ownership and mastership from which the word 'Lord' is derived, it is certainly not the only meaning of the word *rabb*, which encompasses many other meanings by virtue of its multifaceted root.

The original root *ra-ba-ba* is defined as: *to own, to be a master; to have authority over something; to control; to raise, bring up (a child); to foster, nurture, look after; to guide and set straight.* Already we can see that there is much more to the meaning of *rabb* than can be expressed by a single word in English, and that the word Lord certainly doesn't conjure up to the imagination.

However, there is a lot more to this root and many other 'doubled roots' like e.g. where the last two radicals are the same, in this case: *ba-ba*. Philologists such as Raghib al-Isfahani grouped these three-consonant doubled roots together with similar roots whose last radical ended in a weak letter (either *wa or ya*), stating that the latter root was a subset of the former, and reflected similar meanings that overlapped. In this case he grouped *ra-ba-wa* as a subset of the original root *ra-ba-ba*, and held that their meanings very closely overlapped. When we look at the definition of *ra-ba-wa*, we find: *to raise, to bring up, to educate, to nurture, to nourish, to teach, to cultivate, to make something grow to maturity, to bring to fruition.* We can see the overlap, and now fully understand that our *rabb* who we call upon in this Surah several times a day is not just 'Lord of the Worlds', but also The One who has authority over everyone in them, who can do as He pleases for their benefit, who nourishes them, cherishes them, looks after them, raises them to fruition. Understanding *rabb* from its original Arabic automatically endears us to Allah and makes us yearn for His special care and nurturing, and to reach out to Him sincerely and with humility.

al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm : الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

Common translations of this phrase are: Most Beneficent, Most Merciful; Most Kind, Most Merciful; All-Beneficent, All-Merciful; All-Compassionate, All-Merciful, and Abdel Haleem's 'Lord of Mercy, Giver of Mercy'. They both come from the root *ra-ḥi-ma* in Arabic, meaning primarily: *to be merciful, to spare, to let off, to have compassion, to save from suffering*. Whilst they are both included in the ninety-nine most beautiful Names of God, the adjective *raḥmān* is exclusively for God, whereas the name *raḥīm* can equally be used to describe merciful humans. They are both considered to be hyperbolic or intensive forms of the simple active participle *rāḥim*: one who is merciful, which is why they are often translated using phrases prefixed by 'All' like All-Merciful.

Traditional Quranic exegesis ascribes to God a 'general mercy' and a 'specific mercy' and often the words *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* are explained in these terms; that is, that the first name refers to the fact that God is merciful to all of creation without distinction, and that the second name refers to His mercy which will be shown on the Day of Judgment specifically to those who believe in Him. The use of the word 'beneficent' and often, as in many other translations, 'compassionate' for *raḥmān* seems to be etymologically unjustifiable since the word beneficent comes from the Latin 'bene facere', to 'do good', which is more akin to the word *muḥsin* in Arabic, whilst compassionate comes also from a Latin root 'compatior' meaning to 'suffer with'. The English connotation of mercy invariably connotes a mercy that follows wrongdoing, akin to forgiveness and letting off the hook, whereas the Arabic *ra-ḥi-ma* is quite different.

Going back to the root meaning of *ra-ḥi-ma* to help us understand the Arabic concept of 'mercy' better, we find very close connotations with the word *raḥim* 'womb' also from the same root: the womb that nurtures a seed and makes it grow from the realm of mere possibility, nurturing it to its full capacity without any assistance or input from the fetus itself. Bearing this in mind allows to understand the nature of Allah's Mercy being an initiating mercy that originates our creation, that nurtures us every step of the way, that allows us to breathe without any volition or control on our part, that keeps our heart beating without any effort, that nurtures us from a state of insignificant possibility to great humans with limitless potential.

These two terms, then, exhibit a high degree of untranslatability and the subtlety of their meanings can only be conveyed very approximately, both in conveying the accuracy of their root meaning as well as their individual distinct connotation. Even scholars of Arabic, both ancient and modern, disagree as to the precise meanings of the two terms and whether they both express hyperbole. Other scholars have contended that though having the same base meaning, they both denote various shades of meaning where *raḥman* by virtue of its sound pattern *fa'lān* signifies regeneration and revival, whereas the form of *raḥim*, on the sound pattern *fa'īl*, indicates consistency and unchangeability. The Quran, therefore, uses both these adjectives to assert that Allah's attribute of mercy is ever regenerated yet unchangeable. The problem lies in the semantic denotations of regeneration and consistency which simply cannot be captured in translation through a single word.

master, owner مَالِكُ

Our final word in this article is also a Name of Allah, *Mālik yawm al-dīn*: Master of the Day of Recompense. Here it's worth noting that this word was recited in two different ways from the very beginning of revelation: *mālik* (with a long *aa* sound) and *malik* (with a short *a* sound), and they both have different meanings: *mālik* = owner, possessor, whilst *malik* = king, sovereign - both pertaining to God.

The Prophet Muhammad (S) himself taught a handful of specific verses in multiple ways that often accommodated for minor differences in dialect and pronunciation, and which are known as 'variant' or 'multiple readings' in the field of Quranic Studies. According to Azami, one reason behind this phenomenon was the divergence of accents and dialects in Arabia and the need to accommodate them. A second reason, which seems much more plausible especially since the Prophet (S)'s actions were all divinely guided, was to better illuminate the various shades of meaning within a particular verse by supplying two wordings, each one sanctioned by Allah.

This particular example of multiple readings in Surah al-Fātiḥa - again impossible to capture with a single English word - shows us that Allah is both the King and the Sovereign who governs the Day of Recompense, as well as its controller and owner. He is not merely a Creator or a First Cause who created then distanced Himself away from His creatures, but is very much invested in their growth, their wellbeing, their journey and their final destination.

When we understand even just this handful of words representing Allah's divine attributes from Surah al-Fātiḥa properly, through their original Arabic roots, they can transform our understanding of Allah Himself, endearing Him to us further every time we recite them, and humbling us before Him in the prayer. We learn to appreciate the beauty of these words, their underlying depth, and the progression in them through the structure of the Surah, introducing Allah first as the One deity worthy of worship, offering protection and refuge, Who bewilders us when we try to comprehend Him; to then the Rabb: the nourisher and cherisher, the one who owns us and makes us to grow; to the *Raḥmān* and *Raḥīm*, who consistently nurtures us to take us to our full potential so we can meet Him as the King, the Owner on the Day we shall be recompensed for all that we did.

A translation of the Quran, then, is the work of man, and by necessity flawed; it cannot reproduce the miraculous qualities of

the divinely authored original which is inimitable and, as a whole, untranslatable. Ibn Qutayba traced the roots of this untranslatability to a God-given superiority enjoyed by the Arabic language, particularly its capacity for metaphorical figures of speech. He says: "...no translator is able to put it [the Quran] into any other language, in a manner similar to the translation of the Gospel from Syriac into Ethiopic and Greek, and similar also to the translation of the Torah and Psalms and all God's books into Arabic, for (the languages of) the non-Arabs are not as rich as that of the Arabs in metaphor."

Regardless of one's views on the doctrine of divine word and the superiority of the Arabic language, it is not difficult to uphold the idea that the Arabic Quran cannot be reproduced in another language while maintaining an equivalent effect. Because of the intricate way in which the fabric of the Quran is woven, its integrity and integrality as a unique opus, and the many levels which combine to produce its overall effect, it seems inevitable that there will occur significant losses in translation. Which is why we're encouraged to learn Arabic as a language and understand the Quran directly from the Arabic that God chose to reveal it in, and which He proudly asserts as a fact:

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

Indeed We have sent it down as an Arabic Quran so that you may understand.
(Quran, 12:2)

Nazmina Dhanji
is the founder of Arabiq Online. She is a polyglot, speaking seven languages with Arabic being her favourite. Find some of her books, including translations at the IHRC Bookshop and other platforms.

References:

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. (Trans.) (2004). *The Qur'an. A New Translation*. Oxford:Oxford University Press.

Abdul-Raof, H. (2001). *Qur'an Translation. Discourse, Texture and Exegesis.* Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

Baker, M. (ed.). (1998). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies.* London and New York: Routledge.

Böwering, Gerhard (2002). *Encyclopedia of the Quran*. Brill. Vol. 2, p. 318.

Catford, J. C. (1965). A Linguistic Theory of Translation. *An Essay in Applied Linguistics.* London: Oxford University Press.

Isfahani, Raghib; Safwan Adnan Dawudi (2011). *Mufradat alfaz al-Qur'an*. Damascus: Dar Al-Qalam.

Macdonald D.B. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. Brill. "AIlah", Vol. 3, p. 1093.

Murad, Abdel Hakim. *Islam, Irigaray, and the retrieval of gender.* (http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/gender.htm) [accessed 21st June 2022]

Pickthall, Mohammed Marmaduke. (n.d.). *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an, An Explanatory Translation*. New Delhi: Idara Ishaat-e-Diniyat (P) Ltd.

Pym, Anthony and Turk, Horst. (1998) "Translatability." In: Baker, M. (ed.). (1998). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies.* London and New York: Routledge.pp.274-278.

Quli Qara'i, 'Ali. (Trans.) (2004). *The Qur'an. With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation.* London: ICAS Press

Salman,M.A (2013). *The translatability of euphemism in the Holy Quran*, (unpublished thesis), Jordan University of Science and Technology, , Amman: Jordan (online) [available: https://www.academia.edu/5468395/The_Translability_of_Euphemism_in_the_Holy_Quran]

Shuttleworth, M. and Cowie, M. (1997). *Dictionary of Translation Studies.* Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing

Tabatabai, M.H (n.d.). *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran*. [available at: https://almizan.org/]

Tibawi, A.L. (1962). *Is the Qur'an Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion*. Muslim World.

[1] As is it the case in other Semitic languages such as Hebrew or Aramaic, the Arabic verb consists of a basic root of usually three consonants, eg: k-t-b (to write) and this root can be augmented by suffixes, prefixes, consonants and vowel lengthening to conjugate the verb or to form new lexemes. We can apply up to 12 affixation models to this verb to create words of different word classes, and additional verbs of different forms, which are in turn conjugated to make yet more words. These word-formation processes provide the opportunity to let the language flourish and to create a lot of phonological stylistic devices such as rhymes, assonances or alliterations. Hence once cannot translate the verses literally, because phonological stylistic devices cannot be transferred from the Arabic original into the English text whilst conveying the same meaning. Thus the translator has to decide whether the content or the form is more important and surely the content is more essential than the style. A verse in the Quran can contain as many as 15 rhetorical devices, which evidently cannot all be translated into the target language.

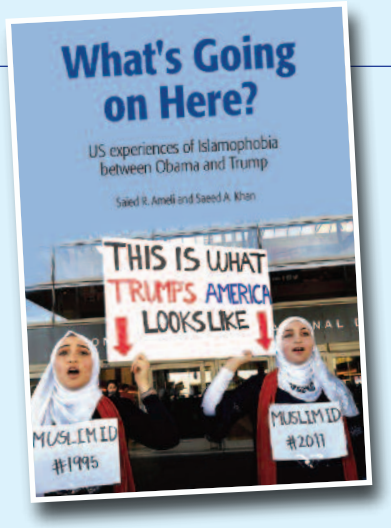
[2] This wasn't always the case. Old English, like Arabic and French, had no neuter gender. As the neuter gender became more common, the use of masculine and feminine pronominal references for things without natural gender increasingly connoted personification. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) comments on the gradual incorporation of the neuter gender over centuries, saying, "It is not easy to say when grammatical gender ceased to be used, this differing according to dialect." The OED then quotes masculine pronominal references to inanimate things from the 13th to the 19th centuries. (The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford University Press, 1971) 1.1269)

ON OFFER

What's Going on Here?

US Experiences of Islamophobia between Obama and Trump

By Saied R. Ameli and Saeed A. Khan

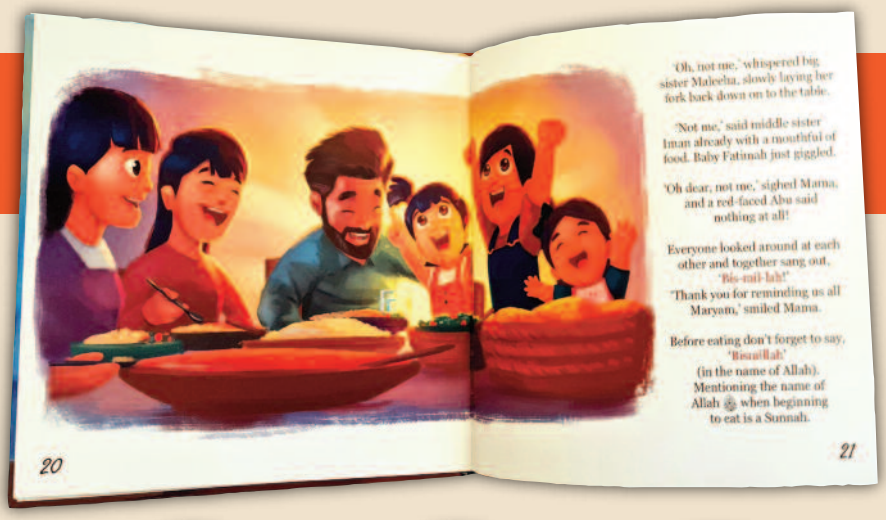


Read the latest research from IHRC, looking at the impact of anti-Muslim hatred in the USA.

Buy the paperback or digital version from the IHRC Bookshop online
shop.ihrc.org

Tales of Mini Maryam

Written by **Kosser Abdul Aziz**
Illustrated by **Taha Abdalla**



What do we say after we have sneezed? • Why do people go on pilgrimage? Can mini Maryam pray with her family? • What do we say before we eat? Curious mini Maryam soon finds out.

Whether playing make believe or running around in the park, whether eating, sneezing or talking to Abu on the phone, Maryam has something unique to say and also something special to learn. Join her on her adventures and learn alongside her the short duas and invocations of everyday Muslim life.

Kosser Abdul Aziz's debut is a collection of six lively short stories capturing the world of three year old mini Maryam.

Reminding children of all ages to make Dua, be wonderful, stay amazed at the world and always seek to understand each day. With fantastic and engaging illustrations by Taha Abdalla.

Suitable for ages 3+

ISSN 26323168
9 772632 316002

The Long View is a project and publication of Islamic Human Rights Commission (a limited company no 04716690).

Web www.ihrc.org.uk
E info@ihrc,org
Tel +44 20 8904 4222

All views are the authors' own and do not reflect IHRC's views or beliefs.

Buy the paperback or digital version from the IHRC Bookshop online shop.ihrc.org or call (in the UK) 020 8904 4222