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CENTRING CLASS IN ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY

A Critical Analysis of British Muslim Praxis Against Economic Exploitation

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Abstract

Capitalist economic structures have caused widespread economic hardship and an ever-increasing divide between rich and poor. In recent years, government austerity policies, the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have exacerbated these dynamics and led to increasing numbers of people not having the means to fulfil their basic needs. Muslims, both in the UK and globally, are disproportionately affected by these realities and find themselves overwhelmingly a part of economically marginalised classes. Islamic knowledge production, however, has failed to address this glaring problem and to consider the theological implications of the material conditions in which the vast majority of Muslims live (and die).

This study uses the theoretical foundation of Islamic Liberation Theology to address these issues. Building on Latin American Liberation Theologies, Black Theologies and the works of Muslim thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Islamic Liberation Theology centres the marginalised and aims to change the material conditions that lead to their oppression. Although it is still a field in its infancy, there has been no systematic attempt to address the issue of class (which reflects a wider omission in theology and the social sciences as a whole) and categories such as gender, race and pluralism have received significantly more attention. This thesis seeks to begin this conversation on class by raising the following primary research question: How do Muslim activists involved in a political praxis against class exploitation interpret Islam as a liberative tool? It also raises several secondary questions: Which Islamic textual sources or figures inspire Muslims in this regard and play a central role in their praxis and worldview? What are the economic goals towards which Muslims should direct their praxis? How do these views differ, if at all, from those views that are generally considered “orthodox” or “mainstream”? How can the praxis of British Muslim activists aid our readings of Islam as an ideology of material and systemic change? What does this study contribute to our understandings of Muslims’ social marginalisation in the UK and to the wider field of Islamic Liberation Theology?

Shifting away from abstracted theological reflection alone, this dissertation employs a praxis-based methodology that centres those that are involved in the struggle against class exploitation. To do so, it uses qualitative research methods, namely, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation, with members of three London-based organisations: Who Is Hussain, Sufra NW London, and Nijjor Manush. Theology is therefore positioned in the dissertation as the “second act”, preceded by active involvement in historical projects for change. The data collection is the first stage of theological reflection and collates activists’ thoughts and describes the influence that Islam has over their class-based activism. This not only re-orientates Islamic Liberation Theology back to its radical roots by highlighting the importance of prioritising material change, but brings the issue of class to the fore, ending a long silence.

Building on the works of revolutionary thinkers such as Paolo Freire, this thesis approaches praxis as a dialectic between action and reflection that is directed towards changing the world – in other words it is both a material and theoretical process. The first section develops the key theoretical and conceptual foundations for the study. It highlights the importance of understanding class in the relational manner developed by Marxists and Liberation Theology’s

emphasis on the oppressed and praxis. It also briefly situates participants by outlining the British context.

The second section moves more directly to answering the research question and argues that activists have built the theoretical and practical foundations for a liberative theology that can combat class exploitation. It starts by outlining their critiques of apolitical and reactionary trends of Islam that uphold the unjust status quo and their profound belief that a liberative alternative to these is possible. Moving specifically to the issue of class and using data from the primary research, the dissertation produces the underpinnings for an alternative theological conceptualisation that centres the principles of establishing justice and struggling against oppression. Coupled with specific verses from the Quran, *hadith* and the example of historical and contemporary religious figures, activists argue that, due to the inherently exploitative nature of classed societies, a liberative Islam must provide dignity to the economically marginalised in the short run, while working towards the eventual goal of abolishing class in its entirety. It is important to first establish these theoretical objectives because they become the criteria through which particular forms of activism and their efficacy are judged. Based on this, activists emphasised the importance of working towards structural change and discovering the ways that they can fulfil the commandment to establish justice within their specific contexts. In contemporary Britain, they acknowledged the importance of actions such as charity to alleviate the worst excesses of capitalism but highlighted that it needed to be combined with revolutionary reforms, which challenge the capitalist structure. It is only by pursuing this systemic change and the goal of abolishing unjust class relations that Islam can be transformed into a tool of economic liberation.

Lay Summary

Capitalist economic structures have caused widespread economic hardship and an ever-increasing divide between rich and poor. In recent years, government austerity policies, the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have exacerbated these dynamics and led to increasing numbers of people not having the means to fulfil their basic needs. Muslims, both in the UK and globally, are disproportionately affected by these realities and find themselves overwhelmingly a part of economically marginalised classes. These material conditions in which the vast majority of Muslims live (and die), however, have rarely been addressed by those that produce Islamic knowledge.

This study uses the theoretical foundation of Islamic Liberation Theology to address these issues. Building on Latin American Liberation Theologies, Black Theologies and the works of Muslim thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Islamic Liberation Theology centres the marginalised and aims to change the material conditions that lead to their oppression. Although it is still a relatively new field, there has been no systematic attempt to address the issue of class (which reflects a wider omission in theology and the social sciences as a whole) and categories such as gender, race and pluralism have received significantly more attention. This thesis seeks to begin this conversation on class by raising the following question: How do Muslim activists involved in a political praxis against class exploitation interpret Islam as a liberative tool? It also raises several secondary questions: Which Islamic textual sources or figures inspire Muslims in this regard and play a central role in their praxis and worldview? What are the economic goals towards which Muslims should direct their praxis? How do these views differ, if at all, from those views that are generally considered "orthodox" or "mainstream"? How can the praxis of British Muslim activists aid our readings of Islam as an ideology of material and systemic change? What does this study contribute to our understandings of Muslims' social marginalisation in the UK and to the wider field of Islamic Liberation Theology?

Unlike theologies that are detached from material reality, this dissertation employs a praxis-based methodology that centres those that are involved in the struggle against class exploitation. To do so, it uses qualitative research methods, namely, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation, with members of three London-based organisations: Who Is Hussain, Sufra NW London, and Nijjor Manush. Theology is therefore positioned in the dissertation as the "second act", preceded by active involvement in the struggle to change the conditions in which people live. The data collection is the first stage of theological reflection and collates activists' thoughts and describes the influence that Islam has over their class-based activism. This not only re-orientates Islamic Liberation Theology back to its radical roots by highlighting the importance of prioritising material change, but brings the issue of class to the fore, ending a long silence.

Building on the works of revolutionary thinkers such as Paolo Freire, this thesis sees praxis as a process of action and reflection on the world in order to change material conditions. The first section develops the key theoretical and conceptual foundations for the study. It highlights the importance of understanding class as a relationship, as explained by Marxist thought, and Liberation Theology's emphasis on the oppressed and praxis. It also briefly outlines the British context in which participants act.

The second section moves more directly to answering the primary research question and argues that activists have built the theoretical and practical foundations for a liberative theology that combats class exploitation. It starts by outlining their critiques of apolitical and reactionary trends of Islam that uphold the unjust status quo and their profound belief that a liberative alternative to these is possible. Moving specifically to the issue of class and, using participant insights, the dissertation develops the underpinnings for an alternative theological conceptualisation that centres the principles of establishing justice and struggling against oppression. Coupled with specific verses from the Quran, *hadith* and the example of historical and contemporary religious figures, activists substantiate the argument that, due to the inherently exploitative nature of classed societies, a liberative Islam must provide dignity to the economically marginalised in the short run, while working towards the eventual goal of abolishing class in its entirety. It is important to first establish these theoretical objectives because they become the criteria through which particular forms of activism and their efficacy are judged. Based on this, activists emphasised the importance of working towards structural change and discovering the ways that they can fulfil the commandment to establish justice within their specific contexts. In contemporary Britain, they acknowledged the importance of actions such as charity to alleviate the worst excesses of capitalism but highlighted that it needed to be combined with revolutionary reforms, which challenge the capitalist structure. It is only by pursuing this systemic change that will lead to the eventual abolition of unjust class relations that Islam can be transformed into a tool of economic liberation.

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Introduction

> Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition. – Quran, 13:11

The Research Problem: Introducing Islamic Liberation Theology

The multiple manifestations of injustice seen today have caused many religious believers to raise questions about systemic sin and how to effectively combat oppression. 'Progressive Islam' and Islamic Liberation Theology were born from such questions.[1] The failures of Islamic political ideologies and movements in the nineteenth and twentieth century,[2] and the continuing dominance of exploitative systems that marginalised individuals and communities along economic, gender and racial lines formed the backdrop for this. According to the Progressive Muslim Network, a now defunct coalition of scholars and activists that were committed to a progressive Islam, this movement can be defined as an

> understanding of Islam and its sources which comes from and is shaped within a commitment to transform society from an unjust one where people are mere objects of exploitation by governments, socio-economic institutions and unequal relationships. The new society will be a just one where people are the subjects of history, the shapers of their own destiny in the full awareness that all of humankind is in a state of returning to God and that the universe was created as a sign of God's presence.[3]

This definition brings up several important points. Most significantly, the intellectual pursuit of Islamic knowledge is tied to transforming society and is connected to action. It belongs in the socio-political sphere, rather than purely in intellectual or theoretical academic debate. Connected to this is a commitment to causes of justice and therefore disdain for systems of oppression. The latter is broadly defined as all forms of exploitation in human relationships, whether on an international, national, social or inter-personal level. Lastly, it places emphasis on marginalised and oppressed groups and, recognising their humanity, seeks to make them the agents and subjects of history, rather than simply those that are acted upon by the powerful. In this sense, it echoes the commitment of Latin American liberation theologians

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[1] On progressive Islam, see: Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).. As chapter two will discuss in detail, Islamic Liberation Theology is heavily indebted to its Christian counterpart and also the thought of Ali Shariati. See for example,Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. Hamid Algar (New York: Mizan Press, 1979); Ali Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar, 15th ed. (Chicago, Illinois: ABC International Group, 2010); Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*, New edition (London (GB): IB Tauris, 2014)..

[2] Particularly noteworthy thinkers are Abdul Ala Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb and Ruhollah Khomeini. For a useful collection of key thinkers, see: Hamid EnLaylat, ed., *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005); John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* (New York ; Oxford: Routledge, 2007)..

[3] Quoted in Farid Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 80.

such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, who strive to elevate the voices of the "non-persons" who are not recognised by existing social structures or considered fully human.[4]

This latter issue was systematically addressed by Paulo Freire in his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he explains that oppression is an inherently violent state in which the oppressor prevents the Other from pursuing their "self-affirmation as a responsible person".[5] He notes that the capitalist emphasis on profit, embodied in the ruling class, reduces everything else, "the earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time", to the status of objects, to be used and disposed of in the process of accumulation in whatever way they see fit.[6] Consequently, Freire argues that to resist oppression is to resist dehumanisation and work *with* the people to achieve their liberation.

While a detailed explanation of Islamic Liberation Theology's key theoretical concepts will be undertaken in chapter two, it is worth highlighting these briefly here. Firstly, it not only recognises the existence of oppressive social structures, but the complicity of religious institutions in upholding these. Indeed, liberation theologians would argue that religious interpretation occurs in the context of specific power relations –dominant readings will support the status quo, while revolutionary currents exist on the margins and align themselves with the oppressed. Second, Liberation Theology is a theology of *praxis*. It is not simply concerned with uncovering the readings of the margins but with changing the material conditions and social structures that place people there. Liberation, in this sense, is not a metaphor but an embodied practice.

Although it would be fair to say that Islamic Liberation Theology is a field that is still in its initial stages and remains on the fringes of Islamic intellectual thought, due to the multifaceted nature of oppression, it has by necessity branched into multiple disciplines and sought to address a range of issues. In particular, it has focused on pluralism, race[7] and gender,[8] with

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[4] Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'The Task and Content of Liberation Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, trans. Judith Condor, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28. See also: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (London: SCM Press, 2010).

[5] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, Published in Penguin Classics 2017, Penguin Modern Classics (New York ; London: Penguin Books, 2017), 29.

[6] Ibid., 32.

[7] On the topic of pluralism and race, Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002) reflects on the implications of the multifaith struggle against apartheid in South Africa and what this says about exclusivist notions within traditional Islamic thought.

Elsewhere, authors such as Sherman A. Jackson, Edward E. Curtis IV and Dawud Walid have introduced debates around race, particularly in the context of Black America. See, for example: Edward E. Curtis IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-75* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ahmad Mubarak and Dawud Walid, *Centering Black Narrative: Black Muslim Nobles Among the Early Pious Muslims* (United States: Itrah Press, 2016).

[8] Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017) applied a Liberation Theology lens to analyse the works of Farid Esack, Asghar Ali Engineer and two "Islamic feminists", Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas. Sa'diyya Shaikh, in 'A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community', in *Violence Against Women in Contemporary Religions: Roots and Cures*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007) provides an embodied exegesis of 4:34, which is often interpreted as permitting domestic

other issues, most notably class, being peripheral. This is a problem that applies more broadly than just the Islamic context, with studies of religion and social sciences failing to account for the relationship between religion and class.[9] This is not to say that Muslim scholars have been blind to the issue of class and certainly cannot be accused of completely erasing it and silencing those that it impacts. On the contrary, issues related to capitalist oppression, even if not central, do feature in some of their works. Hamid Dabashi, for example, calls for the development of an Islamic theodicy, aligned with other progressive ideologies, to combat the global empire of capital,[10] while the South African liberation theologian Farid Esack strongly criticises the inequality associated with global capitalism and the US' imperial crusade to conquer markets and subsume all under this economic system.[11] Elsewhere, the African American feminist scholar, Amina Wadud adopts the 'Hajar paradigm', which represents the multifaceted nature of oppression and the intersection of race, gender and class.[12]

At a time when class oppression and inequality are on the rise, affecting the lives of the vast majority of the world's population, the absence of a systematic and detailed focus on the issue is detrimental to liberation movements.[13] This does not mean falling for a crude class determinism or pitting one form of oppression against another, however. Rather, it means understanding, as Third World and Black Marxists[14] and the field of subaltern studies has, that class is interwoven into other aspects of oppression, such as caste, age and gender.[15] Recognising this is essential.

This study looks to set the foundations for this task by analysing how dominant narratives support class oppression and how Islamic sources are (re)interpreted within the class struggle and to support economic liberation. By highlighting the very real way in which class disparities affect Muslims it will illustrate the urgency and necessity of this task and, building on a critical analysis of three case studies in the British Muslim context, it is hoped that this study will provoke discussion on the centrality of class in liberative praxis, providing insights into both

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violence. By discussing these issues with victims of domestic violence, Shaikh challenges dominant interpretations and proposes a methodology from below, which challenges the dominance of a scholarly elite. Although not necessarily from within the field of Islamic Liberation Theology, the neighbouring field of Islamic feminism, promoted by authors such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Kecia Ali, Maya Mernissi and Nevin Reda have challenged the patriarchal foundations of society (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and Islamic tradition. See, for example: Maya Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1992);Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Nevin Reda, *The Al-Baqara Crescendo: Understnading the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

[9] Joerg Rieger, 'Preface', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), vi-viii.

[10] Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203928387.

[11] Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', 91.

[12] Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed*, 152–53.

[13] Joerg Rieger, 'Instigating Class Struggle? The Study of Class in Religion and Theology and Some Implications for Gender, Race, and Ethnicity', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 191.

[14] These intellectual trends will be discussed in detail in chapter two.

[15] Rieger, 'Instigating Class Struggle? The Study of Class in Religion and Theology and Some Implications for Gender, Race, and Ethnicity', 193.

the oppressive and empowering role that Islam can play in this regard. Through this contribution, Islamic Liberation Theology can more effectively serve as a tool for the structural and revolutionary change that is needed to end oppression in all its forms. As the prominent African American activist and scholar, Angela Davis, argues, this can only be achieved by recognising and building on the "intersectionality of struggles" of those striving for freedom.[16]

Research Questions

Focussing on the British context, this study seeks to answer the following primary question:

- How do Muslim activists involved in a political praxis against class exploitation interpret Islam as a liberative tool?

In engaging this overarching question, the following secondary questions will also be addressed:

- Which Islamic textual sources or figures inspire Muslims in this regard and play a central role in their praxis and worldview?
- What are the economic goals towards which Muslims should direct their praxis?
- How do these views differ, if at all, from those views that are generally considered "orthodox" or "mainstream"?
- How can the praxis of British Muslim activists aid our readings of Islam as an ideology of material and systemic change?
- What does this study contribute to our understandings of Muslims' social marginalisation in the UK and to the wider field of Islamic Liberation Theology?

Conceptual Framework

While an in-depth exploration of both class and the theoretical roots of Islamic Liberation Theology will be provided in later chapters, it is worth introducing these here as the foundation for the rest of this chapter. The term class is invoked by politicians, the media and members of the public as if it is a given, with a clear definition and shared understanding. These definitions often centre around descriptive typologies, such as job title, income level, etc. Such conceptualisations, however, are descriptive and tell us very little about *why* economic differences exist, or why the divide between rich and poor continues to widen. It is due to the flaws of this approach that this study uses the materialist foundation proposed by Marxism to understand class in a *relational* manner. For Marxists, class difference is at the centre of their worldview and fundamentally shapes the world in which we live. Today, the relation between the minority who own capital and working masses allows the former to accumulate wealth on the backs of the latter. Indeed, the rich do not win their position through some lottery of fate or God's will, but through the exploitative economic structure that underpins the capitalist system. With the prevalence, and indeed expansion, of capitalism in the twenty-first century, class divides have continued to grow and Marxism, I believe, remains the most effective conceptual lens through which to understand its impact. It

[16] Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 144.

highlights the inherently exploitative nature of capitalism and so makes detailed analysis of marginalisation and resistance possible.

Liberation Theology in the context of Latin American Christians and Ali Shariati within the Islamic tradition is heavily indebted to this Marxist worldview. In Latin America in particular, Marxist economic critiques of capitalism were used as the theoretical foundation through which the region's inequality and poverty was understood.[17] Furthermore, their approach to religion was based on a materialist analysis of knowledge production, which acknowledged the influence of economic and power relations. They cautioned against the tendency to essentialise religion and sought to illustrate how, while accommodationist trends that supported the status quo would often dominate, revolutionary readings that use religion to achieve social change are also possible.

In this sense, Liberation Theology places emphasis on *doing* theology and being involved in historical projects to transform the material conditions of the marginalised.[18] This is again influenced by Marx's critique of traditional philosophy and stress on praxis. He emphasised the central importance of not just explaining the way that the world is but involving oneself in the class struggle by aligning with the working class, who were the primary agents for change in his thought. Building on this, a liberative praxis advocates opting for those on the margins. Echoing Marx, this does not simply mean that they are represented in abstract academic discourses but means working *with* them to challenge the very social structures that marginalise and oppress them.

This study ties these elements together by studying the intersection of capitalist exploitation, class struggle and Muslim belief in the British context. It takes an analytical approach to both class and religion and centres the necessity of changing the material conditions of the dispossessed and exploited.

Methodology and Research Methods

It follows from its emphasis on praxis that, for liberation theologians, theological formulation comes as the second movement, which is preceded by involvement in political struggle to liberate the oppressed and centre those on the margins. It is not a purely academic exercise and needs to be embedded in actual movements for change. This study relies on qualitative research methods to bridge this gap between practice and theory. This is a multi-method approach that aims to make sense of and interpret social phenomena. It is built on the belief that humans are interpretative creatures that make sense of reality through constant interpretation and meaning seeking.[19] From a critical realist perspective, this means that there is an objective reality "out there", but it can only be accessed through people's subjective positions – including that of the researcher.[20] This stands in opposition to other philosophical

[17] This often took the form of Andre Gunder Frank's dependency or Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory. For a useful overview and critique of Latin America's use of these theories, see: Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto* (London: SCM Press, 2006).

[18] For more, see: Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*.

[19] John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2006), 29.

[20] Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, *What Is Qualitative Interviewing*, 'What Is?' Research Methods Series (London ; New Delhi ; New York ; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 22.

positions, such as positivism, which believes in the ability of researchers to produce value-free knowledge and access objective reality, and post-modernism, which challenges the existence of universality and argues that many versions of the truth co-exist.[21] Rather, critical realism asserts that the "world and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction."[22] A liberative approach takes this a step further and seeks to demystify the power dynamics that underpin different subjective positions. It asserts that knowledge is never neutral and either supports the cause of the oppressor or the oppressed, taking an explicit stand in favour of the latter.

From this perspective, no one is free of subjectivity, including the researcher. In fact, the researcher either supports an oppressive status quo or resists it depending on the stance that they take. Acknowledging this is essential because giving equal weight to each viewpoint creates infinite interpretations, while obscuring the reality of oppression and need for revolutionary struggle.[23] The researcher and researched are therefore co-creators of knowledge, both carrying their respective contextual baggage into the process in order to create a deeper understanding of the social reality of marginalisation.

My Positionality

Since all literature is inherently autobiographical,[24] it is necessary at this stage for me to abandon the third person and clarify my own subject position. I am a British Pakistani Muslim heterosexual man who was born in southeast London to immigrant parents who settled in the UK in the 1980s. Unlike many South Asians who emigrated from rural areas in the 1950s and 1960s to resolve labour shortages in post-war Britain, my parents were from the city, both had university degrees and were qualified for "skilled" jobs. Nevertheless, economic hardship was a reality of our lives growing up, as was racism and a distinct feeling of otherness. My religious upbringing was also somewhat unusual in the sense that my father is a Hanafi Sunni and my mother is Twelver Shia. Although I attended a Shia *madrasa* until I was sixteen, the hybrid influence meant that I have never identified with either sect – often leading to accusations of "picking and choosing" what I follow.

Qureshi argues that the Muslim concept of the *umma* often awakens as a result of the suffering of other Muslims,[25] however, in my case, it was the suffering of Muslims that first awoke me to Islam in general. In particular, the 2008-9 massacre in Gaza, which, in its characteristically sinister manner, Israel termed Operation Cast Lead, awoke my interest and active belief in Islam.[26] The "incremental genocide" of the Palestinians of Gaza[27] spurred me to become involved in Palestine solidarity campaigning and was my gateway into learning about Third World and Black revolutionaries, such as Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and Huey Newton. A profound belief in Islam's aversion to injustice drove me to study political Islam and many of its modern thinkers, especially Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran and

[21] For an overview of different approaches, see Ibid., pp.11-23.
[22] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 24.
[23] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 78.
[24] Ibid., 1.
[25] Asim Qureshi, *A Virtue of Disobedience* (London: Unbound, 2019), 65.
[26] Operation Cast Lead was an Israeli military attack on the besieged Gaza Strip that killed 1,500 Palestinians, of which many were civilians and destroyed most of the territory's infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. See: Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths About Israel* (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), 135.
[27] Ibid., 130.

Sayyid Qutb in Egypt. Although they affirmed my belief that Islam was a living, dynamic religion, I questioned their dichotomous worldviews, dividing the world into "Islam" and "non-Islam." I did not see how powerful Muslims who were committing mass murder or amassing grotesque amounts of wealth could be seen as inherently better than the many non-Muslims I had met and read about who were committed to causes of justice. It was this that eventually led me to Liberation Theology and the belief that "orthodox" religion could be used as a tool of oppression and a reactionary force that needed to be confronted if Islam was to be used as a revolutionary ideology that could change the material conditions of the oppressed.

The Case Studies and their Positionalities

This study seeks to bring this ideological struggle into my own immediate context: British Muslims and the issue of class. In order to engage my research questions, I will examine, as case studies, three organisations that are active in class-related issues and advocacy. Even if they do not have an overtly religious character, each of them was founded by Muslims and the organisations give them a means to express their Islamic principles in various ways:

- *Who Is Hussain* is an international charity, headquartered and founded in London in 2012, that looks to use the example of Hussain ibn Ali (d. 61 AH/680 CE), the Prophet's grandson and third Shia Imam, to inspire action in local communities and create a better society. Their London activities include feeding the homeless and poor.
- *Sufra NW London* is a local charity established in 2013, that operates out of St. Raphael's Estate in northwest London, one of Brent Borough's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They started as a food bank for the local community but have since expanded into other areas of community aid.
- *Nijjor Manush* is a community organisation founded in 2017 with the aim of educating, empowering and organising Bengalis and Bangladeshis in the UK to provide radical solutions to the issues that affect the community. Their activities centre on organising community education programmes, which cover a wide range of topics, such as an analysis of historical moments of significance for the UK Bengali community, international developments and how to get involved in activism. This is supplemented by their own campaigns that address current issues, particularly gentrification in London's East End.[28]

In addition to personal proximity, focusing on British Muslims has great analytical value. Their experience is closely intertwined with issues of class and, to a large extent, British Muslims belong to working class communities. Indeed, over 50% of Muslims experience household poverty, compared to a national average of 18%, which is the highest of any religious group.[29] Issues of class are therefore a fundamental part of everyday life for Muslims in the UK and the latter cannot be understood properly without addressing it. While it would be incorrect to suggest that Muslim communities elsewhere in the Anglophone world are not working class, such sharp lines are harder to draw. For example, in the US, while Muslims collectively are

[28] More detailed information on each of these case studies will be given in chapter three.

[29] Statistic taken from study by A. Heath and Y. Li, 'Review of the Relationship between Religion and Poverty; an Analysis for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation', CSI Working Paper, 2015, 2, http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/religion-and-poverty-working-paper.pdf.

more likely to be on low incomes,[30] race is as important, if not more, in determining Muslims' class positions – with African American Muslims generally being poorer than other ethnic groups.[31] In Canada furthermore, very little data is available on poverty by faith group, making it hard to gain an accurate picture.[32]

Further narrowing the focus to London has the added benefit of choosing case studies that are easily comparable to each other. As we will see, London represents a unique social context within the UK and, since Who Is Hussain, Sufra NW London (hereafter Sufra) and Nijjor Manush all operate in the capital, it becomes easier to analyse how the organisations and their members react to similar challenges and articulate their beliefs in relation to it. Situated within a broader British context of austerity, racialisation of non-white populations and Islamophobia, activists also have to negotiate the exceptional diversity of the capital and its centrality in UK politics.[33]

The three case studies themselves represent a range of different outlooks and goals, meaning that they are ideal to collate and analyse a wide range of data. Furthermore, they reflect a diverse cross-section of Muslim society in London and Britain as a whole. Who Is Hussain, although not explicitly, is a primarily Shia organisation and takes clear inspiration from a figure revered in Shia Islam. This is important in challenging Sunni normativity and acknowledging the doctrinal diversity within Islam. Furthermore, although all the organisations are actively involved in a class-based praxis, their outlooks are markedly different and represent a variety of ideologies, if indeed they profess one at all. In this sense, Nijjor Manush has the most radical outlook, explicitly addressing the *causes* of inequality and exploitation by targeting capitalism and systemic change, while Who is Hussain operates on the other side of the spectrum, primarily as a charity that combats the *symptoms* of class warfare. Sufra, and the people in it, lies somewhere in between these two positions. Interestingly however, Nijjor Manush is the only one that focuses almost exclusively on the Muslim community and on one ethnic group.[34] A mix of ethnicities are involved in Sufra and Who Is Hussain, further reflecting the diversity of London's Muslim population. Overall, therefore, these case studies' positioning within the British and London context, where class is fundamental to the Muslim experience, and their diversity makes them ideal for producing insightful data. They reflect various ideological, cultural and religious trends, which can be used to construct an Islamic theology of class struggle.

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[30] 'Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans | Pew Research Center', accessed 22 March 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/.

[31] Youssef Chouhoud, 'What's the Hidden Story Behind American Muslim Poverty? | ISPU', accessed 22 March 2021, https://www.ispu.org/whats-the-hidden-story-behind-american-muslim-poverty/.

[32] Noor Javed, 'For Muslim Poor, a Shameful Admission', accessed 22 March 2021, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/for-muslim-poor-a-shameful-admission/article_e7e190be-4dc9-5375-a76e-29f22d389017.html.

Other European case studies, most notably France, have been excluded because of language barriers. Although a strong case could certainly be made for the centrality of class in many European Muslim experiences.

[33] It is worth noting that residents of other parts of the country are often critical of, what is perceived as, politicians' neglect of the rest of the country and the centring of the southeast of England in political and economic issues, such as public infrastructure.

[34] Although they profess to be open to all, the demographic makeup of the target audience means that they primarily work with Bengalis and Bangladeshis who, in the UK, are almost exclusively Muslim.

Research Methods

This study relies on three qualitative research methods: (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) focus groups and (c) participant observation. First, semi-structured interviews with members of each group were used to understand their individual views and how Islam interacts with their praxis in class struggle. This method was chosen because it allows for flexibility in the interview process, gathering data based on particular questions and themes, while allowing the interviewee to express themselves sufficiently and in detail.[35] In the case of Sufra and Nijjor Manush, I was able to gain access through personal friendships with people involved in the organisations, while for Who Is Hussain, I was able to use mutual contacts to reach members. Two main methods were used to recruit participants: first, the snowball method, ie. asking participants to spread the word; and second, speaking to people at organisation events and campaigns. Although members from each organisation showed a willingness to be interviewed, their structures – either being dependent on volunteers or extremely busy employees – made these, at times, difficult to arrange. In total, sixteen in-depth interviews, each between one and three hours, were conducted with fifteen different participants either in-person or online via Zoom from September 2021 to December 2022. This included five from Who Is Hussain: Amena, Layla,[36] Ameen, Anna and Ali; four from Sufra: Akbar, Tayyaba, Sukayna and Zehra; and six from Nijjor Manush: Adam, Aqeel, Maya,[37] Shelly, Khalid,[38] and Sumaira.[39] Of those interviewed, nine were women and six men, and, with the exception of Anna and Tayyaba, all were in their 20s or 30s. Additionally, two of those interviewed in Who Is Hussain were part of the core decision making group (one on the organisational level and the other regional),[40] while two of the participants from Sufra were employees of the organisation, rather than volunteers. Furthermore, although Nijjor Manush is entirely run by volunteers, several of those interviewed were part of the initial core group that founded the organisation.

Interviews followed a semi-structured pattern, which allowed for fluid and organic conversations that gave participants the flexibility to express themselves in as much detail as they wished. They centred around four key themes directed towards answering the research questions:

- First, interviewees were asked for some biographical information and how their upbringing may have influenced their politics. In particular, they were asked about their personal experiences of marginalisation (economic or otherwise).
- Second, activists were asked about their experience in activism and, in particular, what motivated them to set up or join Who Is Hussain, Sufra or Nijjor Manush.

[35] Edwards and Holland, *What Is Qualitative Interviewing*, 29.

[36] Layla had also volunteered at Sufra before the COVID-19 pandemic, but, at the time of our discussion, had been working with Who Is Hussain for over a year.

[37] Maya was interviewed twice, in September and November 2021, due to time constraints during the first interview.

[38] Khalid, one of the founding members of Nijjor Manush, has since stepped back to focus on other projects and commitments. He is however still in contact with the members and engages in their campaigns in a less formal manner.

[39] All names have been changed to maintain the participants' anonymity. However, pseudonyms accurately reflect their gender.

[40] Another member, around six months after our conversation, was also appointed to a role in the core regional team.

Furthermore, they were asked to explain their particular role and give an assessment of the organisation's activities and what gaps they saw and the future directions they would like to see them take.

- Third, interviews covered political and religious beliefs. This was a broad section that allowed the activists to self-identify both their political and religious identities, before looking specifically at their conceptualisations of poverty, economic inequality and class. They were also asked about how their views may differ from those of other Muslims.
- Finally, these themes were brought together with a discussion on the intersection of religion and politics. Activists were asked about the influence that Islam had on their political beliefs and whether there were any particular Quranic verses, *hadith*, figures or stories that stood out for them in this regard. They were asked about Islam's economic goals and, in particular, whether they believed that Islam sought to manage or abolish class differences. We explored the dialectic between religion and activism by looking not only at how religious ideas influenced praxis but how involvement in the struggle may have shifted preconceived religious ideas.

The second method that was employed was a focus group. Focus groups can be beneficial to create and develop critical consciousness that is directed towards social change.[41] The selection of this method was inspired by Gerald West's work on Contextual Bible Study, which acknowledges the various skills that different groups can bring to the interpretive process through directed group Bible study. West argues that this can aid in the formulation of new, liberative interpretations of religion and acknowledges the agency of regular people in knowledge production.[42] Due to organisational difficulties with Sufra and WIH – recalling my earlier comments about how busy members and volunteers were – I was only able to arrange a focus group for Nijjor Manush. This built on some of the religious themes that emerged in interviews and discussed them in further detail. This involved more direct discussion on religious texts – the Quran and *hadith* in particular – to interpret them in light of the organisation's praxis and their interpretations of their socioeconomic reality. A pre-arranged slideshow was sent to participants, which asked them to select verses or *hadith* that reflected their political views or discuss pre-selected ones. The discussion centred on four themes:

- Participants were asked to select any canonical references that reflected their political views broadly. This question was left open-ended and gave activists the opportunity to express themselves freely, with some producing ideological answers and others focusing on how Islam affected their ethics and motivations.
- Verse 16:90, "Indeed Allah enjoins justice and kindness and generosity", and 4:135, "O you who have faith! Be maintainers of justice and witness for the sake of Allah, even if it should be against yourselves or [your] parents and near relatives", were used to initiate a discussion about justice and what it means in a concrete sense to activists in their praxis.

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[41] Edwards and Holland, *What Is Qualitative Interviewing*, 38.

[42] For an example of this approach, see: Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, 2nd, rev. ed ed., The Bible & Liberation Series (Pietermaritzburg : Maryknoll, N.Y: Cluster Publications ; Orbis Books, 1995); Gerald West, 'The Bible and the Poor: A New Way of Doing Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 159-182.

- The conversation then turned specifically to economics, asking participants to select verses that they believed spoke of Islam's economic objectives. This was supplemented with discussions on Islam's compatibility with existent economic systems (capitalism in particular) and specifically how Islam dealt with class inequality. Regarding the latter, activists were given several Quran verses and *hadith* to direct the conversation: "The spoils of war that Allah gave to His Apostle… are for Allah and the Apostle, the relatives and the orphans, the needy and the traveller, so that it does not circulate among the rich among you (59:7); "That which you give in usury in order that it may increase people's wealth does not increase with Allah" (30:39); "He is not a Muslim who eats his fill when his neighbour goes hungry."[43]
- The final discussion point juxtaposed pre-selected verses and *hadith* that could be interpreted as expressing God's preference for the marginalised, in particular the poor and working class, with those that spoke of a nominal equality of all. With regards to expressions of preference, the foundational verse of Islamic Liberation Theology, 28:5-6, "And we desired to show favour to those who were abased in the land and to make them leaders and to make them the heirs and to establish them in the land" was accompanied by *hadith* such as "The poor are the friends of Allah";[44] "Heaven itself longs for the poor";[45] "I gazed into Heaven and I saw that most of its people were poor";[46] and "Beware of the supplication of the oppressed, even if he is an unbeliever, for there is nothing to veil it."[47]
  These were contrasted to two verses, "Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary among you." (49:13) and "Be maintainers of justice and witness for the sake of Allah… whether it be [someone] rich or poor, for Allah has a greater right over them." (4:135), which suggested a nominal equality of all regardless of their socioeconomic and political positionality.

These two primary methods were supplemented by a third: participation observation. This involved attending events and campaigns setup by the organisations, as well as observing their day-to-day activities. With regards to Who Is Hussain, I attended three of their Central London food drives, while for Sufra, I visited their offices on two occasions and volunteered in their food bank, putting together food packages for guests. Due to logistical and practical restrictions, the opportunities I had to be involved with these two organisations was limited.[48] However, since many of Nijjor Manush's events were online, I was able to attend a larger quantity. I attended seven online and three in-person events, mostly from their *Bangla Fora* series, and two of their Save Brick Lane protests. This participation observation gave me insight into the organisation's operations and how their ideas are implemented within the specific London context in which they operate. It also gave me the opportunity to engage in more informal discussions with people, whether part of the organisation or other event

[43] This hadith can be found in al-Bayhaqi in al-Shu'ab, 9251.
[44] Al-Firdaws. v. 3. no. 4,423.
[45] Bihar al-Anwar. v. 72. no. 58.
[46] Musnad ibn Hanbal. v. 1. no. 2,086.
[47] Musnad Ahmad. no. 12,549
[48] For example, in order to have any client-facing interaction with guests at Sufra, one is required to have a governmental Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, which clears them for contact with vulnerable peoples.

attendees. This provided a more holistic understanding of the organisations and their impact and led to the flourishing of several personal friendships through the research process.

The fourth method used is an analysis of textual primary sources produced by the organisations or their members. A large quantity of open-source data was available, which were used to supplement the information gained from other research methods. Who Is Hussain and Nijjor Manush in particular produce a large quantity of informational material addressing particular issues and, in the case of the former, the figure of Hussain and his legacy. All three organisations, furthermore, actively use social media platforms (Instagram and Twitter/X in particular), which was a helpful research tool to keep track of organisational messaging and activities. Other online sources, such as newspaper articles (either authored by members or about the organisations and their activities) and videos were also used. In the case of Nijjor Manush, furthermore, one of its co-founders, Azfar Shafi, co-authored a book titled *Race to the Bottom: Reclaiming Antiracism*, which addresses many of the issues that the organisation seeks to address.[49] This text is engaged at various points throughout and is part of the tapestry of supplementary materials used to inform the research and produce a holistic understanding of the organisations and their members.

Of course, researching with marginalised groups requires care and reflexivity, as the researcher clearly has greater power over the research process. This is even more pertinent in the context of mass surveillance and the criminalisation of radical Muslim views, with little distinction made between views that are potential preludes to violent extremism and those that are simply anti-status quo. In this sense, being an insider with first or second-degree connections to each of these case studies is beneficial, creating a level of trust and openness that may not be as forthcoming for an outsider. This is not to say that power dynamics are completely removed. Indeed, regardless of positionality, the interviewer's ability to control questions, what and how something is recorded and what is given significance means that they are in a position of power.[50] Subsequently, the interviewees are in a position of vulnerability and put their trust in the researcher to properly represent their discourse and views.

Nevertheless, qualitative research methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation, underpin this study. These are supplemented by analysis of primary textual sources, but priority is given to the interviewees' views, freely expressed in their own voice. The findings are presented in a critically descriptive manner, with themes and textual references extracted from the primary data and arranged to produce a more coherent theological framework, which can inspire further action. Following this process upholds the principle that any theology of class struggle can only emerge as a *second* act and must be preceded by involvement in particular historical movements for change.

Structure and Style

To answer the research questions this study is divided into three parts and six substantive chapters. Part I, *Conceptual Underpinnings and Social Context*, contains three chapters that

[49] Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee, *Race to the Bottom: Reclaiming Antiracism*, Outspoken by Pluto (London: Pluto Press, 2022).
[50] Swinton and Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 65.

provide the theoretical foundation for the thesis and social context in which the activists operate. Chapter one, *Understanding Class: An Analytical Approach*, gives a detailed conceptual framework of the notion of class. It unpacks class stratification models, inspired by theorists such as Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, before giving a comprehensive overview of Marxist political economy. In particular, it will argue that Marxism provides us with the best conceptual framework to understand class because it analyses it in a *relational*, rather than descriptive, manner. It will also discuss the Marxist emphasis on praxis through class struggle and the relationship between class and race and colonialism.

Chapter two, *Preference and Praxis: The Theoretical Underpinnings of Islamic Liberation Theology*, gives a detailed overview of the historical roots of Liberation Theology by, in particular, exploring the influence of Christian theologies, such as Latin American Liberation Theology and Black Theology, and Ali Shariati's work. Using these theoretical foundations, it explains the importance of not essentialising religion but, rather, seeing it as the product of social and power relations. It explains the imperative to give preference to the marginalised and oppressed and discusses what implications this has for liberative methodologies – namely, the centrality of praxis.

Chapter three, *Contextualising a Theology of Praxis: Britain and its Marginalised*, paints a picture of the historical and contemporary context in which activists in Who Is Hussain, Sufra and Nijjor Manush operate. In particular, it develops two pertinent themes that define the British working class experience: racialisation, which is often neglected by popular discourses on the "white working class", and neoliberalism. It relates these, as well as the process of othering, which has become more pronounced in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7, to the Muslim experience, before giving a detailed account of the three case studies, their history and current operations.

Part II, *A Theology of Economic Liberation*, explores the views of activists in relation to Islam and its politico-economic goals. Since there was significant overlap between the views of activists from the different organisations, this section opts for a thematic approach, rather than arranging chapters by case study. This provides a synthesis of the various opinions and topics covered in primary data collection and helps to structure it in a coherent manner that addresses the research questions. It contains three chapters that build on each other to develop the theoretical and practical elements necessary to address economic exploitation in the British context through an Islamic lens.

Chapter four, *Religion's Different Faces: Competing Islams and the Karbala Paradigm*, is the first of three chapters to present the findings from primary data collection. It confirms Liberation Theology's argument that religion cannot be essentialised but takes place in a social context and can manifest itself in different ways and to different ends. Activists critiqued two dominant trends within Muslim communities. The first is an apolitical Islam that detaches itself from any social questions and emphasises individualistic acts of piety and worship. The second is a more overtly oppressive Islam, which aligns itself with capitalism, espousing its merits and giving them religious validation. These are juxtaposed to a liberative alternative, which challenges oppressive systems, and can be informed by the martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali in Karbala, in modern-day Iraq.

Chapter five, *Challenging Hegemony: Developing Liberative Economic Goals*, is a detailed discussion of the various economic goals towards which activists believed Islam was directed. It paints a complexed picture in this regard and analysing differing and contradictory perspectives. For some activists, Islam's economic goals are limited to introducing an ethical praxis into the existing capitalist system. From this perspective, wealth accumulation is to be encouraged, as long as Muslims also give back and fulfil their charitable obligations. The majority of activists, however, proposed some form of Islamic anti-capitalism but were torn between whether Islam accepted class differences or sought to abolish them. Analysing these various perspectives, the chapter illustrates how, Islam's aversion to injustice and exploitation that the activists identify naturally leads to abolition being the end goal of praxis. It ends by outlining activist attempts to reclaim Khadija ibn Khuwaylid, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, as a liberative, rather than capitalist, figure in Islamic history.

Chapter six, *Establishing Economic Justice: Towards a Liberative Praxis*, brings the discussion from the theoretical to the material and explores how Islam's economic goals are pursued by activists within the British context. It starts with a discussion of the importance that activists placed on Islam as a religion of action, which required believers to put their faith into practice in the socio-political sphere. Using the theoretical goals outlined in the previous chapter, activists critiqued the dominant Muslim attitude, which limit economic activity to giving charity. Rather, building on the imperative to abolish class, they advocated for a more far-reaching form of praxis, which, while acknowledging the importance of short term measures, such as charity, to blunt some of the sharpest edges of capitalism, advocated for these to be linked to more long term, systemic change. Pursuing revolutionary reforms that undermine the capitalist logic was seen as the most practical means to do this in the current British context – although some did also identify the importance of directing this towards the eventual goal of seizing power.

Transliteration of Arabic words throughout is based on the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies' system. However, for ease of reading, diacritics, such as apostrophes, have been removed.[51] Furthermore, English translations of Quranic verses are based primarily on Ali Quli Qara'i's translation.[52] Translations are inevitably an imperfect endeavour, particularly in the case of a complex literary text such as the Quran, and Qara'i's attempt does a good job of producing a coherent and (to a large extent) accurate reading. Nevertheless, a wide range of other translations, such as Sahih International, and by authors such as Yusuf Ali and Abdul Haleem, were also consulted and edits made by the author for the purposes of clarity or exposition.[53]

[51] An exception to this is in the case of the word Shi'ism, which is not a direct transliteration of an Arabic word but regularly used within Anglophone Islamic studies. Furthermore, although not following the IJMES transliteration guidance, the spelling Hussain, rather than Husayn, is used to maintain consistency between the spelling used by Who Is Hussain and the historical figure, Hussain ibn Ali.

[52] Ali Quli Qarāʾi, ed., *The Qurʾān: With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* (London: ICAS Press, 2004).

[53] A broad range of English translations can be found online at: 'The Noble Quran', Quran.com, accessed 26 November 2023, https://quran.com; 'The Quranic Arabic Corpus - Word by Word Grammar, Syntax and Morphology of the Holy Quran', accessed 26 November 2023, https://corpus.quran.com/.

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to add to the growing literature within the field of Islamic Liberation Theology, providing the first systematic analysis of the issue of class. The first major contribution it makes is through its method. By using a social research methodology, it goes to the very heart of Liberation Theology's aims of changing the material conditions of marginalised peoples. To date, the majority of theological challenges to dominant readings of Islam have focused on hermeneutical analysis of canonical sources, producing new interpretations of the Quran and, to a lesser extent, *hadith* literature. In so doing, they have been able to illustrate (very well in some cases) that Islamic sources have been distorted by the powerful and can be re-interpreted to combat various forms of oppression.[54] While this hermeneutical process is essential, it is not enough. As the Argentinian liberation theologian Ivan Petrella notes, it is only when this academic exercise is attached to a historical project, in other words a means by which ideas can be transformed into a concrete reality, that they acquire real content and can be used to achieve real world liberation.[55]

By focusing on the Islam of laypeople rather than a scholarly elite, whether this be the traditional *ulama* or academics, this study democratises the interpretive process. More specifically, it focuses on those engaged in class struggle on the margins and recognises their agency, not only as social actors, but as makers of religious knowledge. This is a "*tafsir* of praxis", as explained by the South African feminist theologian Sa'diyya Shaikh, one of the few scholars to use a similar method. As she explains in the context of Muslim survivors of domestic abuse in Cape Town and how they reread verse 4:34 of the Quran in light of their oppression:

> I focus on how ordinary women engage, interpret, contest, and redefine the dominant understandings of Islam and how their engagement can inform some of the ethical quandaries that emerge from ahistorical interpretations of the Qur'anic text. I argue that this often invisible community of the text, through its explicitly *experiential* grappling with Qur'anic ethics, offers us a "tafsir through praxis."[56]

This approach has a twofold benefit. Firstly, it affirms the humanity of the marginalised and recognises their agency as subjects of their own liberation and interpreters of religion. Secondly, it makes liberative hermeneutics less abstract through attaching them to specific historical projects in which British Muslims are engaged. Such a method is essential to achieve Liberation Theology's primary goal, which, as Petrella notes, is to change material reality for the marginalised:

> New historical projects are not part of a utopian or romantic or messianic quest, on the contrary, they are based on the tragic recognition that an

[54] Rahemtulla for example criticises Amina Wadud's use of Fazlur Rahman's elitist "double movement theory", in which the Quran is first read in its revealed context to extract principles that are then applied to the present day. This method maintains a hierarchy in which interpretation is reserved for an academic elite, albeit not just the traditional *ulama*. See: Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed*, 109–10.

[55] Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 14–17.

[56] Shaikh, 'A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community', 69–70. Emphasis in original.

> alternative to the present is required to give most people a chance to survive.[57]

This study, therefore, seeks to radicalise Islamic Liberation Theology and bring it back to its roots. This can only occur when it prioritises praxis and becomes fully immersed in the fight against oppression.

The second, related contribution that this study makes is in illustrating the dialectic between theory and practice. While I have emphasised the centrality of the latter and reclaiming Liberation Theology's focus on achieving material change, this cannot be achieved without a clear ideological understanding of the contemporary reality and the trajectory and end goals towards which praxis is directed. It is for this reason that the thesis places a great emphasis on theoretical questions, providing a solid foundation from which particular tactics and strategies for change can be derived. Indeed, as Freire notes, praxis is a process of action and reflection. In other words, to neglect either would be detrimental to the process of liberation.

The third contribution this study makes is in systematically addressing the issue of class within an Islamic Liberation Theology framework. The urgency of this cannot be understated in light of the growing global inequality between a rich minority and the masses. During the three and half years of research, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing cost of living crisis, exacerbated by global instability, have accelerated a familiar trend. In 2020, Oxfam reported that the world's 2,153 billionaires (less than 0.0000003% of the population) had more wealth than the lowest 60%,[58] while in January 2023 they reported that the richest 1% obtained nearly twice as much wealth as the other 99% combined between January 2021 and December 2022.[59] The UK does not fare much better than this global trend. It has one of the highest Gini coefficient ratings in the developed world,[60] with the top 20% receiving 42% of total household income in 2018-9, compared to 7% for the lowest 20%.[61]

Looking more specifically at the economic position of Muslims, although it is hard to generalise because of the large disparity both within and between Muslim-majority countries, a large portion of the world's Muslims belong to the subaltern or lumpenproletariat classes. A 2008 UK government report, for example, found that the average per capita incomes of countries with a Muslim-majority were 44% of those of non-Muslim countries and that under-5 mortality rates were nearly twice as high.[62] More recent World Bank data suggests that this

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[57] Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 63.

[58] 'World's Billionaires Have More Wealth than 4.6 Billion People', Oxfam International, 25 May 2022, https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/worlds-billionaires-have-more-wealth-46-billion-people.

[59] 'Richest 1% Bag Nearly Twice as Much Wealth as the Rest of the World Put Together over the Past Two Years', Oxfam International, 4 September 2023, https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-bag-nearly-twice-much-wealth-rest-world-put-together-over-past-two-years.

[60] Richard Partington, 'UK Income Inequality Greater than Previously Thought, Says ONS', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2020, sec. Inequality, https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2020/feb/25/uk-income-inequality-greater-than-previously-thought-says-ons.

[61] Brigid Francis-Devine and Stephen Orme, 'Income Inequality in the UK', 28 November 2023, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7484/.

[62] Frances Stewart, 'Global Aspects and Implications of Horizontal Inequalities':, no. 60 (n.d.), accessed 13 February 2021.

trend has persisted. Taking GDP per capita as an indicator, ten of the poorest twenty countries are those in which Muslims make up the largest religious group.[63]

Zooming into the British context, a similar picture can be painted. A 2017 report by the UK Social Mobility Commission, for example, described Muslims as experiencing "the greatest economic disadvantages of any [religious] group in UK society."[64] According to the Office for National Statistics 2011 census,[65] only 19.8% of the Muslim population of economically active age (between 16-74 years old) is in full-time employment. From these, only 6% are in "higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations".[66] This also carries gendered and racial implications, with only 29% of 16 to 24-year-old Muslim women in employment, compared to a national average of 50%,[67] and Black Muslims (both male and female) experiencing the highest unemployment rates.[68]

The situation in London reflects the national picture. According to the 2011 census, 37.4% of British Muslims live in London,[69] with 2014 Office of National Statistics (ONS) figures suggesting that 14.4% of the capital's population are Muslim.[70] Here again, unemployment rates are highest for Muslims, with 44% of those that are employed paid below the London Living Wage. Furthermore, Muslim median wealth is £20,500 – the lowest of any religious group.[71]

Although this study is not primarily focused on explaining the many reasons for these disparities,[72] the above illustrates the importance of the class issue, both within the UK and

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[63] These are Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Niger, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Yemen, Gambia and Burkina Faso. With the exception of Somalia, this is judged on 2019 World Bank figures. See: 'World Bank Open Data', World Bank Open Data, accessed 13 February 2021, https://data.worldbank.org.

[64] Jacqueline Stevenson et al., 'The Social Mobility Challenges Faced by Young Muslims' (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), 5.

[65] Although a more updated census took place in 2021, at the time of writing, the data had not yet been broken down in as much detail. However, from the data that is available, these trends have continued. See: 'Census 2021 First Look', Muslim Council of Britain, accessed 28 November 2023, https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/MCB-Census-2021-%E2%80%93-First-Look.pdf.

[66] The national averages are 34.9% and 10%, respectively. See: Stevenson et al., 'The Social Mobility Challenges Faced by Young Muslims', 6.

[67] 'British Muslims in Numbers: A Demographic, Socio-Economic and Health Profile of Muslims in Britain Drawing on the 2011 Census' (London: The Muslim Council of Britain, 2015).

[68] Farah Elahi and Omar Khan, 'Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All' (London: Runnymede Trust, 2017), 26, https://assets-global.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/61bcd30e26cca7688f7a5808_Islamophobia%20Report%202018%20FINAL.pdf.

[69] Sundas Ali, ed., 'British Muslims in Numbers: A Demographic, Socio-economic and Health Profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 census', *MCB* (Jan. 2015), p.25, https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf, accessed 13 Feb. 2021.

[70] Polly Vizard, Ellie Suh, and Jack Cunliffe, 'Inequalities and Disadvantage in London: Focus on Religion and Belief', Trust for London, 20 October 2016, https://trustforlondon.org.uk/news/inequalities-and-disadvantage-london-focus-religion-and-belief/.

[71] To compare, the equivalent figures for Christians, Hindus or Jews are £164,000, £277,400 and £312,500, respectively. Ibid.

[72] The Runnymede Trust, one of the UK's leading independent, anti-racism think tanks, summarises some of the key issues well. In their report "Islamophobia: Still a challenge for us all", they identify racial and specifically anti-Muslim discrimination as two key factors that result in Muslims' relative poverty and lack of employment opportunities. See: Elahi and Khan, 'Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All', 26–29.

globally, and specifically relating to Muslims.[73] The absence of a systematic account of how to respond to capitalist exploitation and address this material reality, despite the disproportionate effects of class on Muslims, is nothing less than a major failure on Islamic Liberation Theology's part. This study goes some way towards initiating this discussion and provide a framework for further research and praxis in this area.

The fourth contribution this study makes is to further Liberation Theology's goal to challenge hegemonic and absolutist interpretations of religion. By recognising the sharp disparities in the everyday experiences of Muslims and highlighting the role that class plays in many people's lives, it will become clear that the questions that rich and poor Muslims ask of their religion are markedly different. It affirms the logical, yet often overlooked, reality that the questions the Saudi royal family, for example, ask of religion are markedly different to that of the unemployed British Asian woman living in inner city London. In portraying Islamic knowledge production that is embedded in material reality, it becomes possible to challenge hegemonic discourses and the powerful forces who claim to have exclusive rights on what Islam means and how it should be practiced.

Within the British context, creating this extra nuance has added meaning when the broader political context is considered. In the post-9/11 world where political events have pushed subtle and overt forms of Islamophobia, Muslims are often dichotomised between those "good" Muslims who accept the ill-defined notion of British values and those "extremists" who do not.[74] This superficial separation threatens to label any Muslim opposition to the existing status quo, whether directed at domestic or foreign policy, as extremist, regardless of its nature or the tactics employed. By highlighting Islamic praxis in the class struggle, this study challenges such simplistic notions that are frequently employed by politicians, the media and liberal Muslims. It paints a more complex picture of Islam and Muslims, challenging hegemonic voices both within and without.

[73] As we will see in the next chapter, class and "working class" are not strictly synonymous with income level and poverty, respectively. However, such indicators can be useful to paint a picture of the general class position that people hold. Other factors such as healthcare, employment and education can similarly be indicative.
[74] For a critique of Liberal Muslims' responses to the post-9/11 portrayal of Islam and Muslims, see: Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam: Beyond 9/11'.

PART I:
Conceptual Underpinnings & Social Context

1. Understanding Class: An Analytical Approach

> Let the ruling classes tremble at a communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. – Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels[1]

> Man, in varying degrees, comes to know the different relations between man and man, not only through his material life but also through his political and cultural life… Of these other types of social practice, class struggle in particular, in all its various forms, exerts a profound influence on the development of man's knowledge. In class society everyone lives as a member of a particular class, and every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the brand of a class. – Mao Zedong[2]

Introduction

Before looking at the theological formulations of activists involved in activism against economic exploitation, it is essential to first understand the key concepts on which it rests, namely class and how it links to praxis. Although class is regularly referred to in academic and public discourse, definitions and understandings of the concept are often vague. Within modern Islamic political thought, furthermore, there has been no systematic study of class.[3] This chapter primarily focuses on developing this conceptual framework and developing a clear definition of class, based on a relational and analytical understanding of the term. This theoretical foundation is essential in giving us a clear view of what social structures we are challenging and what alternatives we seek.

The chapter starts by first scrutinising Max Weber's concept of class, critiquing its lack of analytical rigour and inability to understand the roots of exploitation within modern capitalism. It then engages with Pierre Bourdieu and his understanding of capital as a cultural as well as economic concept. However, just like Weber, Bourdieu does not explain *why* class differences exist and what the root causes for social disparities are. As an alternative proposal, the chapter then develops an in-depth explanation of the Marxist concept of class, illustrating how it provides a more sophisticated class model that does not fall into the same traps as Weberian or Bourdieun sociology, by highlighting the inherent exploitation within class societies and the centrality of human agency and praxis in bringing about transformative change. Finally, it ends with a discussion on the way in which Third World and Black Marxists

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party: A Modern Edition*, ed. Tariq Ali (London ; New York: Verso, 2016), 75.

[2] Zedong Mao and Slavoj Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction*, Revolutions (London ; New York: Verso, 2017), 53.

[3] Although considerable work has been done by thinkers on the Islamic Left, such as Hassan Hanafi and Mustafa Siba'i, and Ali Shariati has engaged critically with Marxism, the use of class as a hermeneutical lens is noticeably missing. See, for example: Mustafa al-Siba'i, *Ishtirakiyat al-Islam [The Socialism of Islam]* (Damascus: Mu'assasat al-Matba'at al-Arabiyah, 1960); Hassan Hanafi, *Al-Yamin wal-Yasar fi al-Fiqr al-Dini [The Right and the Left in Religious Thought]* (Cairo: Maktabah Madbuli, 1989).

have expanded Marxist thought to include concepts such as race and colonialism. While they complicate the concept of class, they reinforce its fundamental character for understanding our contemporary moment and the nature of change.

Max Weber and the Stratification Model of Class

Although the majority of Weber's (1864-1920) relevant writings were written after Marx's death in March 1883, his concepts dominate popular and political discourses surrounding class. This makes it the ideal place from which to start understanding it and building a conceptual framework. Weber's writings on class can be read as a conversation, or indeed response, to Marx. *The Spirit of Capitalism*, one of his most famous books, for example, is an "implicit polemic against Marxism", which elevates the role of ideas rather than economics in the development of capitalism – in other words, it is situated in an idealist, rather than materialist, philosophical tradition.[4] However, as we will see, although Weber sought to supplant and develop Marx's concept of class, he failed to sufficiently theorise the fundamental class antagonisms that were inherent to the capitalist economic system.

Two of his works, *Economy and Society* and *Class, Status and Party* explain Weber's ideas most clearly. By taking the individual as the starting point, he explains that a person's class position is determined by their provision of goods, social standing and fate. Building on this, a class therefore is a grouping of individuals that share the same level of accumulation of these factors.[5] In a somewhat confusing fashion, Weber classifies people into three types of classes: property, commercial and social. Property classes are further subdivided into three groups:

- *Positively Privileged Property Class:* those that have a monopoly on high-cost consumption goods, accumulating wealth from surplus and capital through savings and enjoy an educational background that gives them social rank. Typically, this group is made up of rentiers, such as slaveowners, landowners, technology owners, creditors and those who work in securities.
- *Negatively Privileged Property Class:* those that are property (such as slaves), have lost their social position, are indebted or poor.
- *Middle Class:* the majority that are between these two extremes of the positively and negatively privileged. These possess property and education from which they can make their living and can be (although not necessarily) a part of the positively privileged commercial class.[6]

Weber also divides the commercial class into three groups along similar lines:

- *Positively Privileged Commercial Class:* enjoy a monopoly over the management of goods that can be used for production and are able to secure influence over economic policy in political organisations. This class is predominantly made of entrepreneurs (such as merchants, industrialists, bankers, professionals, etc.) and looks to manipulate the use of goods in favour of their own class.

[4] Kieren Allen, *Max Weber: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 40.
[5] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: A New Translation*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 450.
[6] Ibid., 451-2.

- *Negatively Privileged Commercial Class:* workers with various qualities that lack entrepreneurship. They are divided into skilled, semiskilled and unskilled.
- *Middle Class:* independent farmers and craftsman that do not belong to any of the above categories. This is a relatively broad term that includes officials (both public and private) and professionals (such as lawyers and physicians).[7]

Finally, social classes are of four types: workers, the petty bourgeoisie, propertyless intelligentsia and property class. According to Weber it is relatively easy to move up this ladder between generations, with none having a fundamental character.[8]

As the above exposition illustrates, Weber's perception of class is somewhat overlapping and scattered. The first crucial point to note however is that, following Nietzsche's belief that power struggles are at the heart of human life, these classes are seen to be competing for position in the market – not differing relations of production.[9] It is this that allows Weber to assert that revolutionary struggles exist to redistribute property, rather than to change the economic structure itself.[10] Secondly, classes, for Weber, do not represent communities but are reflections of a particular social situation. Being the consequence of market conditions, classes lack "belonging" and are unlikely to develop a common consciousness.[11] The scope for class-led change is therefore minimal in Weber's worldview.

Crisscrossed over the concept of class is status, which is given far greater social significance by Weber. It is considered truly social and is based on the distribution of prestige, or honour, and is determined by factors such as lifestyle, race, occupation and lineage.[12] As the outcome of communal relationships, status groups often seek to exclude outsiders and are based on tradition or history. Consequently, they can undermine market rationality through their influence on consumption patterns.[13] Crucially, since status overlaps with class, fragmenting it further, it obstructs the development of strictly class-based communities and consciousness.

Although Weber provided little more than an abstract description of classes in society, Weberian sociologists have used this to develop a variety of stratification models, some even receiving funding from the US government.[14] While it would be superfluous to go through all of these, they share some features that are worth noting. Most significantly, based on Weber's emphasis on the market, stratification models often focus on occupational typologies to divide groups into classes. According to this view, the fundamental factor that determines an individual's class is their job or their salary. Many have followed this logic to play down the role of class (some going so far as to claim its redundancy) and the dominance of a content middle class.[15] Overall, they follow Weber's lead in providing a fragmented description of

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[7] Ibid., 452-4.

[8] Ibid., 454.

[9] Allen, *Max Weber: A Critical Introduction*, 82-83.

[10] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 453.

[11] Nicholas Gane, 'Max Weber as Social Theorist: "Class, Status, Party"', *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 2 (May 2005): 216–17.

[12] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 455-56.

[13] Gane, 'Max Weber as Social Theorist', 217–19.

[14] Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon, *The American Perception of Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 42.

[15] For a more detailed look at Weber's legacy see Allen, *Max Weber*.

society's economic reality, dividing people into arbitrary groups that are based on abstract categories. This does little to aid an understanding of the nature of a capitalist economy or people's differing positions within it.

Weberian-inspired models of class therefore share the characteristic of being descriptive, rather than analytical, and are inadequate to understand the relationship *between* classes. They do not answer questions such as why some people are rich while others do not have enough food to eat, who is responsible for these economic and social inequalities, why are they worsening over time and what does it say about the power relations between the different groups? By being purely descriptive, they present class as an almost natural phenomenon, ordained by fate (or God), which has coincidentally placed people on different steps of the socio-economic ladder. Or, and perhaps as dangerously, this typology promotes the idea that people are wealthy or poor solely, or primarily, as a result of their own abilities and efforts. These blind spots are illustrated simply by the old Spanish couplet:

> The blessed Lord de Porres
> unrivalled in charity,
> first creates the sick and the poor,
> then donates a hospital.[16]

Looking at the case of the middle class, which, according to many stratification models, are the content majority, demonstrates this point clearly. Of course, if we see modern capitalism as the global economic system that it is, this immediately becomes a farcical claim. Considering that 10% of the world lives in extreme poverty and around two-thirds live on less than $10 a day,[17] it seems a stretch to claim that the majority belong to the content middle class, who enjoy relatively comfortable lifestyles, good incomes, job security and promotion opportunities.[18]

By focusing on the market, Weber failed to recognise (or chose to ignore) the exploitation present in the production process. For example, by focusing on their job title or level of income, the reality that the middle class are increasingly being "proletarianised" and facing the same economic pressures imposed by capital on workers, such as increased productivity and lower costs, are masked.[19] By hiding behind a descriptive classification of economic difference, Weberian sociology obscures the economic reality of exploitation that exists within class societies. By ignoring the realm of production, Weber can be accused of almost "de-economising" class and turning into an incidental consequence of the way things are. Indeed, stratification models are only useful in providing a description of individuals' lifestyles or social rank – the latter of which is, at least in part, itself manufactured by the widespread use of these abstract class categories. Social mobility, furthermore, is premised as an *individual* act, rather than a collective one through which a group (or class) betters their socioeconomic situation. In order to understand class divisions, inequality and exploitation, therefore, an alternative conceptual framework is necessary – Marxism.

[16] Quoted in Ibid., 80.
[17] Joe Hasell et al., 'Poverty', *Our World in Data*, 22 September 2023, https://ourworldindata.org/poverty.
[18] These are the key indicators of the middle class used by the Weberian sociologist, David Lockwood. See: Allen, *Max Weber*, 94.
[19] Allen, *Max Weber*, 93-95.

Before engaging a Marxist analysis, however, a brief epistemological point related to using Weber as the basis of a liberative theology is worth mentioning. A product of Western Enlightenment thought, Weber's worldview is steeped in a bourgeois arrogance that leads him to support both capitalism and colonialism. Allen argues that Weber was a "class conscious bourgeois" who looked to detract from the social reality that the concentration of wealth in a few hands could only occur if there was exploitation.[20] Furthermore, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he completely ignores any question about what Europe may have done to the rest of the world to prevent development there. Instead, he blames the absence of factors such as a valid science, systematic theology and historical writings to match Ancient Greece's for the non-European world's failures.[21] While Western academia is (now) quick to separate such inaccurate and deeply racist statements from the work of European thinkers, it would be more accurate to see these as an intrinsic part of a worldview that has, and continues to, subjugate the world's racialised poor.[22] While the debate surrounding the decolonisation of knowledge is beyond the scope of this study and Marxist thought cannot claim to be completely free of a Eurocentric bias, it would be contradictory to base a liberative theology of class on the works of a man who readily defended Western imperial expansion, bourgeois capitalism and white supremacy.

Pierre Bourdieu's Different Forms of Capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), the French sociologist, challenged what he perceived to be Marx's economic determinism and sought to introduce a more holistic understanding of capital. Just like Weberian notions of class, his ideas, particularly social capital, have permeated public and academic discourse and therefore need to be considered.[23] For Bordieu, an individual or group's position varied according to the context (or in his terminology, fields) in which they were participating, for example, in education, politics, or social life. Their relative position in these different fields was determined by their unique combination of four different forms of capital and the value placed on them:

- *Cultural*: This is possibly Bourdieu's most important observation and refers to the value that society and institutions with power place on particular forms of knowledge and lifestyles. This value is not necessarily determined by its usefulness but gives possessors the ability to manage and produce social relations and cultural products that are consumed by others. Cultural capital can be embodied, ie. developed through habits taught in one's upbringing; objectified in the form of particular physical goods; or institutionalised through official recognition. The example of education can perhaps make this less abstract: having educated parents, Bourdieu would argue, allows a child to obtain knowledge from an early age (embodied cultural capital) and have access to greater resources that can aid this pursuit, such as books and libraries (objectified cultural capital). This can then

[20] Ibid., 95.

[21] Ibid., 33-4. Also see: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Kalberg Stephen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[22] Kehinde Andrews shows how Enlightenment thought plays a crucial role in upholding a global system of white supremacy and racialised capitalism. See: Kehinde Andrews, *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World* (Dublin: Allen Lane, 2021).

[23] In practice, common discourses often conflate social and cultural capital, referring to some combination of the two when they speak of "social capital".

be translated into good grades or a university degree (institutionalised cultural capital).

- *Social*: This refers specifically to a person or group's ability to mobilise resources through their social networks. Bourdieu's focus here was on how these networks are accumulated, produced and maintained. An example of this would be to use contacts to get a job or work experience.
- *Economic*: Bourdieu did not pay too much attention to economic capital because he saw it as obvious. While there are some suggestions that he agreed with Marx that this was based on an exploitative relationship, he fails to define this form of capital in any great detail.
- *Symbolic*: Put simply, symbolic capital is the prestige that an individual or group receive through public recognition for possessing one or more of the other forms of capital. Unlike cultural, social and economic capital, this is not independent but is predicated on the accumulation of the others and the ability of society to recognise this. For example, in addition to cultural capital, an individual may receive social prestige for attending a prominent school or university.[24]

Class, for Bourdieu, is therefore determined by a combination of social, economic and cultural capital, while symbolic capital is a reflection of power relations and which factors are valued by dominant classes. In a similar manner to Weber however, he produces a descriptive model of social stratification, which provides no explanation of the origin of class. Although he does recognise that economic exploitation is a material reality (unlike Weber), his emphasis on culture means that his focus is on how the latter is used to sustain class differences – something clearly influenced by Weber's concept of status. Furthermore, by failing to engage with the Marxist tradition as a whole (primarily focusing on Marx himself), Bourdieu overlooked the analytical manner in which other Marxists, particularly Gramsci, spoke about culture (discussed later).[25] This is not to deny the influence that culture has in sustaining class differences, but highlights the importance of attaching it to the economic foundation of society. Unfortunately for Bourdieu, his theory begins with a misrecognition of capitalism and, by neglecting political economy and focusing solely on how capital operates within particular fields, he provides no theory to explain the totality of class and its origins.[26]

Framing the Field

Despite the severe limitations and problematic foundations of the descriptive models presented by Weber and Bourdieu's thought, there is no doubt that these continue to frame the ways in which class is understood. The British context is no different in this regard and descriptive indicators are often cited to locate individuals' class positionings.

This phenomenon was visible among the participants who took part in this study. When asked about their own class position, Sumaira, for example, described herself as living a "very middle class life" because she "owns a house… has an income that allows her a lot of luxury

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[24] For a detailed look at Bourdieu's capitals, see: Erik Neveu, 'Bourdieu's Capital(s): Sociologizing an Economic Concept', in *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J. Sallaz, vol. 1 (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[25] Michael Burawoy, 'The Poverty of Philosophy: Marx Meets Bourdieu', in *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J. Sallaz, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018). 395.

[26] Ibid. 384.

expenditure and also [is] educated to university level."[27] Similarly, Shelly described herself as working class because "my dad is a taxi driver, simple as that." In both these examples, working and middle class positionalities are invoked according to descriptive indicators that are associated with the stratification models discussed above. For Sumaira, her middle classness is determined by her level of income and education, while for Shelly it is her father's job title that places her in a working class category.

While, in this regard, Weber remains important for our understanding of class, the interviews also revealed how these stratification models obscure the reality of class and create a confused picture of what it means. This was perhaps most clearly illustrated by Maya, who has a doctorate and, at the time of our interview, had worked in several precarious, post-doctoral positions. In response to the question of her class position, she said:

> I don't want to come across as pretentious by saying that I am working class, because I know I'm in a limbo between working and middle. But then looking at it materially, I have nothing to showcase [for it], to say that look, I'm middle class.[28]

Based on her own experience, she recognises that "salary isn't a sustainable marker" and that although people's perception of your class position can be assumed from cultural indicators such as the way you dress or speak, these do not always reflect an individual's material position.[29]

These examples were typical of discussions with participants about class is and what it means. It invokes a mixture of the Weberian social stratification models and cultural factors that dominate public discourse and produce an overlapping and confused understanding of class. In this sense, such descriptive typologies become a means through which the material reality of exploitation that is exposed by more analytical models is obscured – something that remains central to Marxist thought.

The Marxist View on Class

Unlike the social stratification models that are inspired by thinkers such as Weber and Bourdieu, the works of the revolutionary nineteenth century philosopher, economist and political theorist, Karl Marx, some of which were co-authored with Friedrich Engels, address the issue of class with the explicit aim to uncover the fundamentally exploitative relations that exist in economically unequal societies. Their critical approach provides a strong analytical tool through which class can be understood and sheds light on some of the questions that descriptive models cannot answer. Furthermore, they were not written as detached abstractions, but with the explicit aim of promoting proletarian revolution and have, and continue to, inspire many of the world's oppressed, including in the Muslim-majority world. As his close friend and comrade Engels said, speaking at Marx's graveside:

> Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society… to

[27] Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
[28] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
[29] Ibid.

> contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat… Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion.[30]

This section explores two of his most important theoretical insights, namely, historical materialism and surplus value. Importantly, however, it recognises that Marxism as a discipline is not limited to the thought of Marx (as some of its critiques such as Bourdieu have mistakenly believed) but, as we will see, has been adapted by other thinkers and pulled in different directions, with some of Marx's original insights being refuted in the process. Thus, although Marx's work provides the foundation, it is when we take the discipline of Marxism as a whole that we get a more complete picture of the realities of political economy, built on an analytical approach to the concept of class that explains its origins and exploitative nature.

Historical Materialism

Central to Marx and Engels' formulations of class is the materialist conception of history, or historical materialism. This asserts that the existence of living human beings (and therefore their means of producing their subsistence) is the first premise of human history.[31] As Engels argues, "mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc."[32] In a challenge to idealist philosophy, which places greater emphasis on the role of ideas in pushing historical change, Marx argues that it is determined by relations of production, which is the way in which individuals are connected to the collective process through which goods are produced.[33] Building on this, he divides history into five grand epochs, or modes of production, with the sixth, Communism, to be realised in the future:

- *Primitive communalism:* small nomadic societies where production was focused on self-subsistence through sources such as hunting and fishing. It remained the dominant mode of production until the development of agriculture and subsequent establishment of settled communities.
- *Ancient:* civilisations such as Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, which were built on unequal relations between citizens and slaves and contained limited production and private property. These lasted in Europe until the collapse of the Roman Empire in the Fifth Century CE.
- *Asiatic:* the unique relations of production that existed in Asian societies, such as India, where a ruling elite appropriated surplus from relatively autonomous rural communities. Although the validity of this particular distinction has been questioned, advocates believe it to exist until the confrontation with European colonialism.[34]

[30] Friedrich Engels, Quoted in John Molyneux, *The Point Is to Change It!: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2012), 7.

[31] Ibid., 55-6.

[32] Friedrich Engels quoted in Ibid., 59-60.

[33] Ibid., 56; Vítor Westhelle, 'Class, Sin, and the Displaced', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 66.

[34] Famously, Edward Said labelled Marx as a typical example of a nineteenth century orientalist because of, what he saw as, his essentialist perception of Indians, embodied in the Asiatic mode of production. The Lebanese socialist, Gilbert Achcar, however, has been critical of Said and what he sees as his misreading of a single article by Marx on India in 1853. Achcar argues that Marx's initial perception of India was not essentialist, but a "naively positivist conception of the role of capitalism", something that he moved away from in later writings where he recognised the effects of colonial domination. For more, see: Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013); Jean-Numa Ducange and Gilbert Achcar, 'Marx and the

- *Feudal:* the unequal relationship between a landed nobility and those that worked the land (serfs), with small-scale mercantile activity. This continued in Europe until the rise of the bourgeoisie (from the merchant class) and advent of capitalism.
- *Capitalism:* initially developed through the concentration of capital and increasing role of commodity production in Holland and England, soon coming to dominate globally. It is characterised by the iniquitous relationship between the owners of capital (capitalists) and workers (proletariat).
- *Communism:* the final stage of human history, which would be realised when the contradictions of capitalism would lead to working class revolution and the establishment of a classless society.[35]

By viewing history as the consequence of relations of production, Marx was able to show that, with the exception of the stage of primitive communism, humans had always been organised in classed societies around the private ownership of production and consequent appropriation of wealth by a minority. For him, this meant oppressive societies where humans are, to varying degrees, alienated from their labour and nature. In an inversion of Hegelian philosophy, Marx argued that humans are differentiated from other species because of their ability to produce beyond immediate needs (not because of their consciousness as idealists believed). Consequently, it is control over this production which makes one truly human. In a class society, however, where a minority controls the production process, appropriates the majority of the wealth and removes productive agency from the workers, the toiling majority are no longer free – they are suffering from *alienation* to their own nature, the world around them and other human beings.[36] Indeed, according to Marxism, this "exploitation is not the exception but the rule, inherent in the system, of every form of class society in history."[37]

Surplus Value: The Core of Economic Exploitation

After clarifying this perspective of human history, Marx's other major concern was to see how the current capitalist mode of production reflects this exploitation and alienation. Indeed, his greatest work, *Capital*, which was published in three volumes starting in 1867, meticulously, and somewhat arduously, explains this.[38] As Singer argues, *Capital* is more than an economic text:

> The aim of Capital, then, is to rip aside this mystical veil over the life-processes of modern society, revealing these processes as the domination of human beings by their own social relations… [it] is based on the idea that human beings are in a state of alienation, a state in which their own

Prophet', 2018, https://jacobin.com/2019/04/marx-prophet-proletariat-muslim-fundemantalism-islam-socialism.

[35] Molyneux, *The Point Is to Change It!: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, 55–61. This theory is most thoroughly explained by Marx in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970).

[36] See: Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*, Rev. ed., Very Short Introductions 28 (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33–58.

[37] Molyneux, *The Point Is to Change It!: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, 21.

[38] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, ed. Samuel Moore, Edward B. Aveling, and Ernest Untermann (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2013). Also see David N. Smith and Phil Evans, *Marx's Capital: Illustrated*, Updated edition (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2014); David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, Complete edition (London: Verso, 2018).

> creations appear to them as alien, hostile forces and in which instead of controlling their creations, they are controlled by them.[39]

Within capitalism, just like all other modes of production, class is determined by relations of production, which are how different groups are related to productive forces (raw materials, technology, tools and labour). The capitalists, who own these means of production, benefit from this system and are able to use their position to amass more profit, capital and socio-political power. Conversely, the workers are left with no option but to sell their labour power in exchange for the wages that they need to survive. They therefore simply become factors of production, "stripped of humanity and reduced to a part of the production system."[40]

Marx's theory of surplus value, which Engels hailed as his second great scientific discovery (after historical materialism), explains this in concrete terms.[41] Put simply, surplus is the profit acquired by the capitalist after paying wages,[42] however, because of its central importance in Marxist economics and in understanding class exploitation, it is worth explaining in greater detail.[43] It is based on the classical economist David Ricardo's labour theory of value, which argued that the exchange value of a commodity corresponds to the amount of labour used to produce it. The uniqueness of labour, however, is in its dual function as a commodity and the means through which other productive forces (such as raw materials) are transformed into goods that have monetary value on the market. Taking Ricardo's theory a step further, Marx argued that if labour is exchanged for its true value, this would be the value of the commodities produced in a day's labour plus the value of a day's work. Consequently, there would be nothing left for the capitalists to appropriate as profit.[44]

"Capitalism enslaves its workers", however, by not paying them this true value.[45] Instead, labour is objectified and turned into a commodity like any other and workers are given a predetermined wage – what Marx calls objectified labour. This wage is lower than the value of what is produced over that time, or living labour, with the surplus becoming the profits that are appropriated by the capitalist class.[46] This is converted into capital, which is used to pursue new investments and re-produce the capitalist class structure, through political influence and the use of 'unproductive' labour, such as lawyers and managers.[47]

This unequal balance of power within the relations of production means that workers have no power over what or how goods are produced, nor how profits are distributed. This power, which is exclusively in the hands of the capitalists, means that the primary goal of economic activity is capital (or wealth) accumulation rather than broader social benefit. This can be

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[39] Singer, *Marx*, 68.
[40] Jung Mo Sung, 'Save Us from Cynicism: Religion and Social Class', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger, trans. Emily Everett (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.
[41] Singer, *Marx*, 66.
[42] Molyneux, *The Point Is to Change It!: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy,* 22-6.
[43] The theory of surplus value forms the foundation of *Capital* and is explained in detail in Part 3 of the First Volume.
[44] Singer, *Marx*, 61-4.
[45] Karl Marx quoted in Ibid., 70.
[46] Ibid., 66.
[47]Richard D. Wolff, 'Religion and Class', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33–34.

illustrated using the example of improved productivity, whether through technological advancements or the division of labour: if goods are produced more efficiently, this increases the value of living labour but not necessarily wages. In other words, the capitalist's profit margin grows without the majority necessarily seeing any benefit.[48] What this example shows is that the imbalance of power inherent to capitalism works to reproduce the exploitative status quo, increasing inequality, while greatly benefitting the capitalist class and leaving the proletariat in its subordinate position.

What Marx's theories of historical materialism and surplus value ultimately show is that class, in opposition to Weber, is not a natural phenomenon or just a situation, but the *product* of social relations. Class is defined by domination and subordination – one cannot exist without the other. As the British Marxist E.P. Thompson reminds us:

> There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning… "It", the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production… If we remember that class is a relationship and not a thing, we cannot think in this way.[49]

Further, Marx's theories demonstrate how classed societies are inherently exploitative. Afterall, the only difference between ancient, feudal and capitalist societies is the means through which surplus value is extracted. They all include inherent contradictions and a fundamental clash of interests between the wealthy elite and exploited majority. Due to this, class conflict is inevitable.

Marxism and Class Struggle

Marx recognised that, because of significant increases in productivity, capitalism had the potential to meet everyone's material needs. However, he believed that, because of its unequal relations of production, it would never realise this – something that could only be done through the collective ownership of the means of production. As Vladimir Lenin explains:

> It goes without saying that if capitalism could develop agriculture... raise the standard of living of the masses... there could be no talk of a superabundance of capital... But if capitalism did these things it would not be capitalism; for uneven development and wretched conditions of the masses are fundamental and inevitable conditions and premises of this mode of production. As long as capitalism remains what it is, surplus capital will never be utilised for the purpose of raising the standard of living of the masses..., for this would mean a decline in profits for the capitalists; it will be used for the purpose of increasing those profits by exporting capital abroad to the backward countries.[50]

After the failure of 1848 revolution in France, Marx wanted to "gain revenge upon victorious capitalism" by emphasising its internal contradictions, which would inevitably lead to its

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[48] Singer, *Marx*, 70-1.
[49] E.P. Thompson quoted in Vanneman and Cannon, *The American Perception of Class*, 40.
[50] V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 75.

demise.[51] One such contradiction is that goods circulate more freely as a result of greater production, but *access* to them is restricted by the poverty of the majority.[52] Another more crucial tension is the monopolisation of capital. Competition among capitalists leads to smaller firms being subsumed by larger, more efficient ones, concentrating capital in fewer and fewer hands, while leading to the proletarianisation of greater numbers. According to Marx, this not only increases the number of capitalism's discontents but gives them more opportunity to organise in the workplace.[53] This brings us to the role of agency and praxis.

Marx was not content to simply explain this unjust status quo or describe the reasons for its inevitable demise. Rather, he criticised philosophers for doing just this and presented what Balibar describes as a "*non-philosophy* or even an *anti-philosophy*".[54] He argued that the philosophers had, at best, only left the world as they found it, while often obscuring the need for change. His alternative required collapsing the unnatural division between philosophy and praxis and being involved in social revolution – a perspective aptly voiced in Marx's famous Eleventh Theses on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; *the point is to change it*."[55]

After explaining the economic reality of the world therefore, attention needs to be turned to engaging in class struggle and collectively seizing the means of production. This, of course, is easier said than done and has led to considerable theoretical debate on how best to achieve these aims. The writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) are particularly important and he is, perhaps, the most accomplished Marxist theoretician of praxis. Writing in the turbulent interwar years in Europe, he saw the Russian Revolution succeed, the failure of similar revolutions in Western Europe and the rise of fascism in his lifetime. In opposition to more deterministic Marxist doctrines, he emphasised the role of individuals in changing their situation.

> If you plant an acorn, you can be sure of getting an oak shoot, and of having to wait a certain number of years for the tree to grow and give fruit. But history is not an oak tree, and men are not acorns.[56]

He therefore rejected later Marx's notion that economic crises and capitalism's internal contradictions would inevitably lead to its collapse and emphasised the centrality of human revolutionary action. In this sense he echoed the early Marx (who had not yet lived through the disappointments of failed revolutions), when he said:

> Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.[57]

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[51] Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, New and updated edition (London: Verso, 2017), 8–9.
[52] Ibid., 38.
[53] Singer, *Marx*, 72-4.
[54] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 2.Emphasis original.
[55] Karl Marx quoted in Ibid., 16. Emphasis added.
[56] Antonio Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916 - 1935*, ed. David Anthony Forgacs, New ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), 49.
[57] Karl Marx quoted in Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 4.

This quote from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* summarises a praxis-based Marxist perspective well. Scientific historical materialism provides the context and theoretical foundations on which class consciousness and revolutionary activity is built, but it is the movement of human beings (in the form of the working class) that ultimately leads to revolution and a more just change.

In trying to understand why other European states had not followed the same path as revolutionary Russia, Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony. He argued that the ruling capitalist class is able to obtain the consent of subordinated groups in their own domination through social and cultural domination. In conjunction with traditional intellectuals, capitalists develop a "common sense" that upholds their interests. While this will be discussed in more detail in later chapters through examples, this results in the marginalised internalising the same norms and values that work to oppress them. It is the duty of the organic intellectual to challenge this hegemony and produce an alternative way of thinking.[58] This was in sharp contrast to Bourdieu, whose concept of *habitus* (although certainly overlapping with Gramsci's theory of hegemony), believed that dominated classes reproduced existing structures by developing the skills to work within the rules.[59] Because of this, they are unable to instigate change, which happens through "classification struggles" within the dominant class (made up of those that have large amounts of economic or cultural capital). Unlike for Gramsci (and Marxists as a whole), for Bourdieu, change is an inherently top-down process, with *habitus* preventing the dominated from participating.[60] This, as the next chapter will show, goes completely against a Liberation Theology outlook, which is predicated on creating change *with* the marginalised, something with which Gramsci tasks organic intellectuals.

In contrast to Bourdieu, for Marxists therefore, substantial change to relations of production can only occur from below in the form of socialist revolution, led by the working class, against their capitalist oppressors. Marx critiqued settling for better (or equal) wages as "nothing but a better slave-salary", since it did not settle the inherently exploitative economic relations between labour and capital and, just like they were given, they could be taken away.[61] Workers remained alienated and reform was not enough to secure their self-determination. Indeed, there was no middle way for Marx between the status quo and revolution. Reformism, or any negotiated settlement with capital, was a form of regression that ultimately halted the revolution and helped the State to defend the established order.[62] While Marxists, such as Lenin and Gorz, subsequently developed theories on how reforms can be used to pave the way for structural change (discussed in detail in chapter six), these were always seen as a means to an end, rather than the end itself. The proletariat would need to transform from a potentiality to reality by becoming self-conscious, a class for itself, aware of the reality of its oppression and its capability to be the drivers of history. It is this ambition that strikes at the

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[58] For a more detailed discussion of hegemony and the role of intellectuals in Gramsci's thought, see: Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader*; Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, n.d.; Paul Le Blanc, ed., *From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996); David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, 4th ed (Basingstoke ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 190-210.

[59] Burawoy, 'The Poverty of Philosophy: Marx Meets Bourdieu'. 386.

[60] For a detailed Marxist critique of Bourdieu's thought, see: Michael Burawoy, *Symbolic Violence: Conversations with Bourdieu* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

[61] Karl Marx quoted in Singer, *Marx*, 36.

[62] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 20.

essence of Marxism and ambitions. Most explicitly expressed in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx, and Marxists after him, wanted to wake the masses up, make them understand their reality and prepare them to become the chief protagonists in socialist revolution. Class struggle is therefore as fundamental to Marxist theory as the conception of class itself. Rather than viewing the worker as a passive object, it sees them as the primary agent of praxis, the means through which revolutionary change in the world can occur.

Race, Class and Colonialism: A Materialist View on Identity

Despite the many insights that Marx and the European Marxist tradition can provide, it has often been accused of neglecting the role of race (and other identities such as gender) in organising today's economic reality. Their overwhelming focus on class has, at best, led to them seeing race as secondary, while often leading to it being dismissed as an unimportant social factor and form of oppression. This crude class determinism leads to simplistic arguments such as solving the class issue would automatically fix problems related to race and gender.

Marx's own thought showed some evolution in this regard. In some of his early work, especially in the period from 1848-53, he celebrated colonialism for bringing "even the most barbarian nations into civilisation" and forcing them to "adopt the bourgeois mode of production."[63] At this stage of his thinking, colonialism was seen as the necessary evil to bring the world to the capitalist stage of production, which was required in order for the eventual transition to communism to be made. By the mid-1950s however, Marx's thought seems to have become explicitly anti-colonial, particularly in his writings on India, Russia and Ireland.[64]

Underdevelopment as the Dark Side of Development

This latter period provided two key insights, which have been developed by what are often termed Third World, decolonial or Black Marxists. Firstly, Marx identified the role that slavery and colonialism played in the primitive accumulation process that made capitalist development possible. He argued:

> Without slavery, you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition for large-scale industry.[65]

This led him to supporting the case for slavery abolition in the US Civil War (1861-65) because, despite recognising that this was primarily motivated by bourgeois economic interests, he saw it as the precondition for a real working class movement. Marxists from the colonised periphery were all too aware of the contribution that their exploitation made to the development of Europe and its settler colonies in North America and Oceania. This led to Frantz Fanon (1925-61), a trained psychiatrist from Martinique who made his name as a revolutionary intellectual during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), arguing:

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[63] Karl Marx in Kevin B. Anderson, *Class, Gender, Race and Colonialism: The 'Intersectionality' of Marx* (Daraja Press, 2020). 3.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. 11.

> The wealth of the imperial countries is our wealth too… Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers her is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped peoples. The ports of Holland, the docks of Bordeaux and Liverpool were specialised in the Negro slave trade, and owe their renown to millions of deported slaves. So when we hear the head of a European state declare with his hand on his heart that he must come to the help of the poor underdeveloped peoples, we do not tremble with gratitude. Quite to the contrary; we say to ourselves: 'It's a just reparation which will be paid to us'… This help should be the ratification of a double realisation: the realisation by the colonised peoples that *it is their due*, and the realisation by the capitalist powers that in fact *they must pay*.[66]

Eduardo Galeano (1940-2015), the Uruguayan journalist and author, in *Open Veins of Latin America*, traces the history of European and US colonisation and imperialism and substantiates Fanon's assertion. He quotes Marx's *Capital*, which identifies the discovery of gold and silver; genocide and enslavement of the Indigenous peoples; colonisation; and Transatlantic slave trade as the "dawn of the era of capitalist production" and "chief momenta of primitive accumulation."[67] The first half of the book explores how Latin America was dependent on imported slave labour (after the genocide of its inhabitants) and organised as an auxiliary to the European economy, providing it with the raw materials that it needed to develop.[68]

Eric Williams' (1911-81) landmark study, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944, for the first time gave a detailed account of the vital role that slavery in North America and the West Indies played in British industrial development, helping it to dominate the world economy. Analysing slavery through a materialist lens, Williams, who was also the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, illustrated how support for it and its abolition were both motivated by the interests of capital.[69]

Not only was this international division of labour vital for the development of the Western world, but it was also the reason for the underdevelopment of the Third World. Walter Rodney's (1942-80) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* echoes Galeano and Williams in showing how Africa was exploited to serve European needs. He goes into great detail about the negative impact that this had on Africa's own development. For example, the Transatlantic slave trade meant that a significant portion of Africa's working age population was exported to the Americas and Caribbean, while European dominance prevented local needs being met, tying different regions into a relationship of dependency, which prevented intra-African trade.[70] Originally published in 1972, Rodney's work laid the foundation for theoretical challenges to mainstream developmental theories, often developed in conjunction with institutions of global capital (such as the International Monetary Fund or World Bank), that

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[66] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Reprinted, Penguin Classics (London New York: Penguin Books, 2001). 81. Emphasis in original.
[67] Karl Marx quoted in Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (London: Profile Books, 2009). 28.
[68] Ibid. 11-170.
[69] Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). 123-42.
[70] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, New edition (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018). 120-8.

saw economic development as a linear path.[71] Rather, development and underdevelopment were proven to be in a dialectic relationship, with progress for some predicated on the exploitation of others.[72] Third World Marxists therefore highlighted the importance of seeing capitalism in an internationalist manner, bringing it from the centre to the periphery. As Galeano argued:

> We lost; others won. But the winners happen to have won thanks to our losing… *Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others – the empires and their native overseers.*[73]

Organising Labour and Dividing Workers

The second insight Marx provided into the role that race played within a capitalist society concerned the way in which the bourgeois ruling class used it to keep the working class divided. This, in turn, would prevent them from forming a united front against their exploiters. Explaining why Britain had not seen the level of class struggle that he had predicted in his more theoretical texts, in 1870 he wrote:

> The English bourgeoisie has not only exploited Irish poverty to keep down the working class in England by forced immigration of poor Irishmen, but it has also divided the proletariat into two hostile camps ... The common English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He views him similarly to how the poor whites of the Southern states of North America viewed black slaves. This antagonism among the proletarians of England is artificially nourished and kept up by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of the preservation of its power.[74]

Subsequent generations of Marxists, particularly those of colour, have looked to develop this analysis in various contexts. Roediger, for example, explains how, in the US, in order to reconcile the notion of personal independence with working norms such as indentured labour, the white working class used racial stereotypes to differentiate themselves from Black slave

[71] One of the most prominent of these is W.W. Rostow's Modernisation Theory, which divides economies into five stages of economic growth: "traditional society", characterised by a subsistence, agriculture-based economy; "preconditions for take-off", where society begins to develop manufacturing; "take-off", which is a short, intensive period of industrialisation; "drive to maturity", which is a long period of growth, where standards of living rise; and the "age of high mass consumption", which is characterised by mass production and consumerism. For more, see: S. C. Tsiang, 'A Model of Economic Growth in Rostovian Stages', *Econometrica* 32, no. 4 (1964): 619–48, https://doi.org/10.2307/1910181; 'International Development Patterns, Strategies, Theories & Explanations | GEOG 128: Geography of International Affairs', accessed 17 November 2023, https://www.e-education.psu.edu/geog128/node/719.

[72] Dependency theory, developed by thinkers such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, developed these ideas in the 1960s to understand the reasons for the lack of development in Latin America. Its neo-Marxist iteration divided the world into the developed "core" and underdeveloped "periphery", which was integrated into the world capitalist system as a source of natural resources and cheap labour and a market for developed nations.

[73] Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*. 2. Emphasis in original.

[74] Karl Marx in Anderson, *Class, Gender, Race and Colonialism: The 'Intersectionality' of Marx*. 10.

labour.[75] These racial tensions, which continued to proliferate in the post-Civil War era, benefitted the capitalist class, who used it to foster competition, thus increasing productivity, and keeping workers divided among themselves. Indeed, Roediger goes so far as to argue that the management model associated with Fordism originated in the racialised organisation of labour under slavery.[76] Elsewhere, in San Domingo (modern day Haiti), fear of slaves (who overwhelmingly outnumbered the white population) led to society being organised by 128 racial divisions on the spectrum between Black and white[77] and, while slaveowners were a small minority, racial divisions were used to insulate the slave system from its internal contradictions.[78]

As these two examples of the US and San Domingo illustrate, race is a social system that is designed to control class antagonisms and justify continued exploitation. It is not an objective fact but a fluid social construction that can evolve to meet the needs of the bourgeoisie. It is for this reason that it has been organised in different ways in various contexts and the lines of who is included and excluded from whiteness fluctuate.[79] This does not mean that it is solely an economically rational construct – indeed, Rodney recognises that racism, at times, undermined economic interests[80] – but it is the economic structure of society that explains its origins and continued relevance in material, rather than ideational, terms.

This Marxist insight into how race is used to organise class relations has led to questions about how multiple oppressions can be combatted simultaneously. This is not, however, the same as theories of intersectionality, which have become increasingly popularised in progressive liberal circles.[81] As we have seen, Marxists highlight that class is not an identity, but a *relationship* rooted in material reality. Consequently, rather than seeing it as one of many intersecting identities, focus is placed on how capitalism uses various identity markers to marginalise groups and maintain the status quo.[82] Although these other identities complicate the class struggle, they do not alter its fundamental necessity, nor the fact that substantial

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[75] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev. ed, Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 2007). 13-4.

[76] David R. Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism*, Paperback edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2019). 122.

[77] For example, the *sang-mêlé* was considered a person of colour even though they were 127 parts white and one part Black. A *quarteron* was someone who had one white and one mulatto (half Black, half white) parent, or someone with an 88:40 or 72:56 split of white and Black. See: C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, ed. James Walvin, New ed. (London: Penguin, 2001). 31.

[78] Ibid. 22-49.

[79] A good example of this would be the Irish, who, as Marx noted, were racialised in nineteenth century Britain but came to be considered white in the US (and later Britain too). Elsewhere, Fanon tied racial identification in the colonies to wealth – "you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich." See: Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. 31.

[80] Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

[81] The term intersectionality was popularised by Kimberle Crenshaw, who identified the way in which narratives around race and gender discrimination within the legal system marginalised Black women, who were excluded from both discourses. It has been developed in various directions, particularly by feminist thinkers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. See: Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

[82] Jessica Cassell, 'Marxism vs. Intersectionality', In Defence of Marxism, 13 July 2017, https://www.marxist.com/marxism-vs-intersectionality.htm?fbclid=IwAR1frvcuw68yjqquwb20N_aX_5Ret7ASyiRnzII0F8Ttqj-a-7NaKXeYiVU_aem_AYbt4XTR1b7yTM5pGBya5D7lIb0Reg1-v_Jr1vm9ys7rzzGamnkD-4ZWQSqWJQzw9tI.

change can only be achieved by changing the material base – not through a politics of recognition or privilege.[83] As Brown explains:

> While ascriptive oppressions call for equality… the emancipatory logic of Marxism calls for a total restructuring of the economic infrastructure that undergirds all of these various forms of oppression. In short, capitalism *exploits*, while racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on *discriminate*.[84]

The Black Panthers' Rainbow Coalition is possibly one of the most inspiring recent examples of this understanding being transformed into a form of activism. Established in June 1969 due to the tireless work of the Chicago chapter of the party and their leader, Fred Hampton, the coalition was an alliance with the Young Lords and Young Patriots, revolutionary groups representing the Puerto Rican and white communities, respectively, that sought to develop "a revolutionary commitment to class struggle across race."[85] As a Marxist organisation, the Panthers sought to move beyond a racial politics, as the New York Black Panther leader, Carlton Yearwood, explained:

> We believe that racism comes out of a class struggle, it's just a part of the divide-and-conquer tactics of the Establishment and a product of capitalism. When we provide free breakfasts for poor kids, we provide them for poor whites and poor blacks.[86]

It was solidarity and class struggle, not identity, which was at the core of their praxis, as Fred Hampton explained:

> We gonna fight racism not with racism, but with solidarity. We not gonna fight capitalism with Black capitalism, but we gonna fight it with socialism. We not gonna fight reactionary pigs[87]… with any reaction on our part. We gonna fight their reaction when all of us get together and have an international proletarian revolution.[88]

Black and Third World Marxists introduced discussions on race and colonialism, which had generally been neglected by the European tradition. Although this introduced nuance to Marxist arguments by complicating the working class, they still recognised that society was fundamentally organised by relations of production. Other forms of oppression were used to

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[83] For a detailed critique of modern identity politics and a proposal for an alternative, based on the Black revolutionary theorists and their freedom struggle, see: Asad Ameen, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London ; New York: Verso, 2018).

[84] Derek Brown, 'Marxism and/as Black Theology: From Cone to West and Back Again', *Black Theology* 22, no. 1 (2024): 47. Emphasis in original.

[85] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). 292.

[86] Carlton Yearwood in Ibid.

[87] Pigs was a term coined by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale during the formative years of the Black Panther Party to refer to law enforcement, such as the police and intelligence agencies, and the military, which was seen as the international arm of US imperialism. The term was coined to inspire a negative visceral reaction and be evocative. See: Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, ed. J. Herman Blake, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

[88] Fred Hampton in Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*. 230.

sustain this status quo and should be analysed through this materialist lens.[89] As C.L.R. James eloquently summarises:

> The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.[90]

Conclusion: The Spectre of Marx Today and Omnipresence of Class

Class as a term is often invoked as a given, as if the meaning is known and accepted by all. As this chapter shows, however, this is not the case. Rather, there are many conceptualisations of class, which fundamentally contradict each other. Social discourse often refers to class through a combination of Weber and Bourdieu's ideas. Weber, in particular, portrayed classes as dislocated collectives that were competing for position in the market – ie. improving their relative provision of goods. Social stratification models, which divided class along the lines of employment, occupation, income, etc. were developed from this position. Partly inspired by Weber, Bourdieu's idea of class built on his theory of capital as a cultural and economic phenomenon. For him, a person or group's class position was determined by their unique accumulation of these capitals. Ultimately, however, neither Weber nor Bourdieu are able to explain *why* classes exist and where they originate from. As a result, they have little analytical value and are descriptive in nature.

Marxism, on the other hand, looks to get to the roots of why class exists and how it operates within a capitalist economy. Marx's theory of historical materialism lays the foundation for much of this thought, arguing that society is primarily organised according to the relations of production. He illustrates how, whether it was in ancient, feudal or capitalist societies, for most of their history, humans have lived in classed societies, where the majority were alienated from their labour. Not only this, but inherently conflicting interests meant that class struggle is inevitable – driving structural change that would eventually lead to the creation of a classless society. This does not mean that everything (science, religion, etc.) can be reduced to class, as some of Marx's detractors and supporters have proposed, but points to it being the most fundamental factor in human history.[91] In other words, it is the material reality, which is organised by the economic structure of a society, not abstract ideas or individuals, that drive history. Other forms of identity, such as race and gender, are vital to consider but, as Third World Marxists have illustrated, these are developed within the overarching social structure of class and are not fundamental.

The role of the organic intellectual in this context is to demystify this reality, not simply by explaining how things are but actively working to change them, in conjunction with capitalism's discontents, the working and marginalised classes. This requires challenging the "common sense" that promotes the interests of the ruling class and developing a counter-

[89] The specificities of race and class in the British context will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.
[90] James, *The Black Jacobins*. 230.
[91] Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). 28-45.

hegemony that encourages structural stage. As we will see in the next chapter, Liberation Theology can be considered a part of this task.

Ultimately, Marxism's value comes from its ability to explain class in an analytical manner. From this perspective, class is an inherently exploitative relation through which a small minority (today, the capitalist class) is able to extract surplus labour from the majority (the working class). Colonialism, slavery and imperialism (in their historical and contemporary manifestations) give this reality an international character, which has resulted in an ever-increasing divide between the rich and poor, something that is all too apparent today, and the concentration of the means of production in the hands of a shrinking number of large capitalist monopolies.

Relations of production are essential, and indeed foundational, to understanding class. Exploitation does not, however, only appear within labour relations but is omnipresent throughout society, where it manifests itself in all aspects of life, human and non-human. Whether it is through the degradation of the environment; imperialism (and the violence that comes with it); racism; or mundane everyday experiences, such as access to food, healthcare or housing, the effects of exploitative class relations and capitalism are present. With the expansion of neo-liberal economic regimes, which has subjected all aspects of life to the market (something that we will discuss in detail in chapter three), this is truer than ever. Thus, while classical Marxism has rightly sought to emphasise labour relations, anti-capitalist or class-based praxis can occur in different arenas – including poverty alleviation and anti-gentrification initiatives. This thesis will focus on such social manifestations, using class as a framework to connect them to a broader anti-capitalist class struggle. By approaching class as a *relational* phenomena, we are able to understand the exploitative nature of capitalism, not only within labour relations but every aspect of life, where it serves to dispossess the majority in order to satisfy the unsatiable greed of a minority.

Some have argued that because the capitalism that Marx was describing in the second half of the nineteenth century differs significantly from what we see today, or because of the failure of Marxist-inspired projects, especially the Soviet Union, Marxism is no longer relevant.[92] However, capitalism's fluidity and ability to adapt to different times and spaces does not mean that the realities uncovered by Marx and Marxists are obsolete – the exploitation may have changed form, it may have be concealed by different ideological justifications, but it is still present. It is for this reason that Eagleton asserts:

> Marxism is a critique of capitalism—the most searching, rigorous, comprehensive critique of its kind ever to be launched. It is also the only such critique that has transformed large sectors of the globe. It follows, then, that as long as capitalism is still in business, Marxism must be as well. Only by superannuating its opponent can it superannuate itself. And on the last sighting, capitalism appeared as feisty as ever.[93]

[92] Perhaps the most famous example of this is Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* thesis (developed between 1989 and 1992), which argued that the struggle of ideologies, so central to the Cold War, was over, ushering in the new age of undisputed liberal democracy – a claim that seems laughable thirty years later. See: Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.
[93] Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*. 12.

2. Preference and Praxis: The Theoretical Underpinnings of Islamic Liberation Theology

> Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectic-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and doing. – Mao Zedong[1]

> True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce. – Paolo Freire[2]

> Now, political education means opening [the masses'] minds, awakening them and allowing the birth of their intelligence… [it] cannot mean making a political speech. What it means is to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too. – Frantz Fanon[3]

Introduction

Since its inception in the late 1960s with Black Theology in the USA and Liberation Theology in Latin America, liberative interpretations and methodologies have influenced religious traditions globally. For Islamic Liberation Theology, the influence of these two tendencies is coupled with the thought of Ali Shariati, who, lecturing and writing in the early 1970s, presented a revolutionary interpretation of Islam that was aimed at inciting opposition to the Shah's brutal regime in Iran. This chapter will start by discussing these two theoretical origins and identifying the most important hermeneutical keys that can be drawn from them. Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology assert that religion can be used to both uphold and combat oppressive status quos and that God's preference for the poor should lead to Christians challenging oppressive social structures. Similarly, Ali Shariati provides a grand narrative of history as the struggle between the religion of accommodation and the religion of revolution. He argues that the "true Islam" of the Prophet Muhammad, Shia Imams and

[1] Mao and Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction*, 65–66.
[2] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 24.
[3] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth, 159.*

the righteous throughout history is that which aligns itself with the masses, not a small powerful elite.[4]

After explaining these theoretical underpinnings of Islamic Liberation Theology, the chapter briefly looks at how these produce a critique of Marxist anti-religious attitudes, which often essentialise religion as purely a reactionary force that prevents revolutionary change. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the centrality of praxis and its implications. It shows how having a preference for the marginalised, as articulated by Shariati and Christian liberation theologians, requires working towards material change. It discusses what this solidarity looks like practically, ultimately proposing a methodology that centres the activists that are embedded in struggles for change.

The Theoretical Origins of Liberation Theology

To understand Islamic Liberation Theology today, it is essential to first explain its theoretical origins, which can be traced back to three broad intellectual trends. The first two, both coming from within Christianity, are Black Theology, which originated in the US in the late 1960s, and Latin American Liberation Theology, also from the same era. Of course, the term "liberation theology" is derived from the latter but this should not lead to the false notion that this is a "foreign import" into the Islamic tradition. Rather, at around the same time as these trends were emerging within Christianity, Ali Shariati was developing his unique blend of Islam and revolutionary politics in Iran. His ideas are of fundamental importance and greatly aid in the task of developing a uniquely Islamic Liberation Theology. This section outlines the key elements of these three trends.

Latin American Liberation Theology and Black Theology

Islamic Liberation Theology, even if it is not its by-product, is undeniably influenced by its Christian counterparts in Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology. The latter developed in the context of revolutionary upheavals, inspired by the success of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and catastrophic levels of poverty and inequality, which were often racialised, with the white minority monopolising wealth at the expense of Indigenous and other non-white populations.[5] At the same time, at Vatican II in 1960, Pope John XXIII called for the Church to become a social actor that engaged with the outside world to provide dignity for all and emphasise humankind's interrelatedness. This pushed Latin American churchmen towards a liberative theology as they sought to apply Vatican II to their context. The second Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 was a particularly significant event in the development of this theology. Three years later, Gustavo Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation*, often considered the founding text of the movement, with other figures such as Leonardo Boff in Brazil, Jon Sobrino in El Salvador and Juan Luis Segundo, developing the field further.[6]

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[4] See: Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*; Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*.

[5] For a good overview of conditions in Latin America during this time, see: Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*.

[6] Some of these authors' foundational books include: Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1976); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, Rev. version of the orig. Engl.-language transl., [Nachdr.], SCM Classics (London: SCM Press, 2010); Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*

Although late 1960s Latin America is often considered the founding moment of Christian Liberation Theology, it is important to also acknowledge the simultaneous development of Black Theology in the late 1960s, first articulated by James Cone.[7] Writing in the context of the Black Power movement, which swept across African American communities in the aftermath of Malcolm X's assassination in 1965 and with the rise of figures such as Kwame Ture (previously known as Stokely Carmichael), Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Cone's *Black Theology & Black Power*, first published in 1969, and *A Black Theology of Liberation*, first published in 1970, explicated the core tenets of this movement for the first time.[8]

Although Liberation and Black Theology came out of very different political contexts, as well as originating in the Catholic and Protestant traditions, respectively, there were some remarkable similarities between them, which have become the key themes of liberation theologies that have succeeded them. The first of these is a critique of dominant theological interpretations, which, they highlight are not objective but the reflection of power relations and function to justify oppressive structures. Chopp, for example, notes:

> the history of the people of Latin American is a history of the "other", a history of the "underside" … people whose lives have been determined by a centuries-old system of structural oppression, a system that has used Christianity time and time again to secure the dominance of the few over the masses.[9]

Cone describes this as a white theology, which has oppressed other racialised groups in the name of Christianity, for example, by justifying the genocide of the native population of the Americas from the 1500s and enslavement of Africans:

> American white theology has not been involved in the struggle for black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the white oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans. From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been "patriotic," either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to blacks.[10]

For both Cone and Latin American liberation theologians, the actions of this "white theology" contradicted the true message of the Gospel. Rather, Christians should be on the side of the

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(Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012); Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2014).

[7] Antonio offers an alternative historical origin for Black Theology, which dates back to enslaved Africans' expressions of faith. He attempts to trace some of these manifestations and illustrate how Christianity was used by the enslaved to survive their conditions. See: Edward Antonio, 'Black Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[8] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20. anniversary ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997).

[9] Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007). 8.

[10] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 4.

oppressed and emulate God's preferential option for the poor and marginalised. Indeed, for Cone, "if God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow, meaningless diversion."[11] Rather than being neutral, events such as the Exodus show that God stands with the oppressed. In the context of US racism, this makes God Black and opposed to the white supremacy that structures society.[12] In Latin America, liberation theologians identified poverty as the key issue and critiqued the global capitalist system, enforced by US imperialism, for transforming the poor into non-persons that were not worthy of life.[13] The material reality of death, caused by this poverty, is contradictory to a God of life and the moral and rational position that all human beings deserve life. As Fitzgerald explains:

> The relationship between theology and economics is thus seen by liberation theologians as reflecting the fundamental historical contradiction between death and life in Latin America. The historical contradiction obviously has social, political, cultural, anthropological, ethical and spiritual dimensions as well; but economics is fundamental because it defines wealth and poverty. 'Life' in this context has a clear meaning: it is tangible human life expressed by work, land, house, food, health, education, family, participation, culture, environment, and even *fiesta*. Basic needs thus go beyond essential physiological necessities because the realities of life are not merely economic – although they are not simply spiritual either… When basic needs are discussed in Latin America – particularly by the poor themselves – no philosophical distinction between 'infrastructure' and 'superstructure' exists: there is only a single reality of life or of death.[14]

As we can see, Liberation Theology takes seriously the social context in which theological interpretation takes place and interrogates the political effects that it has. It challenges the idea that it can be objective and makes explicit its preference for the oppressed.

The Church's historical complicity in upholding racist and capitalist political structures, however, was seen as contradictory to this godly preference for the marginalised. Liberation theologians argued that it logically follows that Christians must manifest this by dismantling oppressive socio-political structures, whether that be white supremacy in the US, or capitalist imperialism in Latin America. While, the centrality of praxis will be discussed in greater detail later, it is worth noting that Black theologians were involved in the Black Power movement, through organisations such as the Black Panther Party,[15] and Latin American Liberation Theologians aligned with revolutionary movements, most significantly the Sandinista National

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[11] Ibid. 6-7.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'The Task and Content of Liberation Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, trans. Judith Condor, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28.

[14] Valpy Fitzgerald, 'The Economics of Liberation Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 252–53.

[15] For example, Father Earl Neil, the past of St. Augustine Church in Oakland, was an active member of the Black Panthers and the church was used as the location for the organisation's first free breakfast programme. See: Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 301.

Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua.[16] As Petrella explains, the praxis of the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians was based on four principles:

- Revolution is necessary and reformism is ineffectual tool that acts as a smokescreen for the status quo.
- The poor are the primary (and at times, exclusive) agents of social change.
- Socialism is the solution that can combat the injustices of capitalism and deliver the means of social salvation for Latin America's poor masses.
- Emphasis should be on obtaining state power, with other cultural manifestations of politics being secondary.[17]

From these origins, Liberation Theology has expanded into a variety of contexts, such as Dalit Theology in India and Palestinian and Native American Liberation Theologies. Additionally, others have sought to deepen its analysis by considering other forms of oppression, such as those associated with gender and sexuality.[18] Despite this variance, they share the key themes that were developed by Latin American and Black theologians in the late 1960s. They take a critical and material approach to the development of theological interpretation, analysing how power relations influence these, and make explicit their preference for the marginalised in all aspects of social life.

Liberation Theology, Black Theology and Class

Building on these foundations, liberation theologians have recognised the central importance of class exploitation and labour relations in the project to create a more just world. Míguez, for example, notes that no factor can alter social injustice to the extent that changing class relations can. It is therefore "a heuristic tool essential for any tool that claims to have a substantial impact on social reality."[19] Collins notes how Calvinism legitimised capitalist values, such as wealth, which were previously seen as vices in Christianity. She echoes the views of

[16] After the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime and established a revolutionary government in 1979, the Church's far reach was used to deliver services to the people of Nicaragua, such as the literacy campaign and health clinics. Liberation theologians also had prominent positions in government. For example, Ernesto Cardenal was appointed the Minister of Culture and Miguel D'Escoto became Foreign Minister in 1979. Elsewhere, Fernando Lugo, a Catholic bishop aligned to the Liberation Theology movement, became president of Paraguay in 2008, after 61 years of one-party rule by the right-wing Colorado Party. He aligned himself with the Pink Tide sweeping Latin America, as left-wing governments came to power in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil, and sought to tackle inequality and encourage land reforms and public investments that would improve the lives of the country's poor and Indigenous populations. For more, see: Dana Sawchuk, 'The Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution: A Gramscian Analysis', *Sociology of Religion* 58, no. 1 (1997): 39–51; Hugh O'Shaughnessy and Edgardo Venerando Ruiz Díaz, *The Priest of Paraguay: Fernando Lugo and the Making of a Nation* (London ; New York: Zed, 2009).

[17] Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 1.

[18] For an introduction into the various trends and trajectories in Christian Liberation Theology, see: Christopher Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Thia Cooper, ed., *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[19] Néstor O. Míguez, 'The Theological Value of Social Class Analysis and Other Social Distinctions', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 95.

liberation theologians before her, highlighting how religion has been used at the service of both the capitalist class and marginalised.[20]

It is, however, the work of Joerg Rieger that is most central to the development of a class-based Liberation Theology. Rieger observes that, while Latin American Liberation Theology did deal with the subject of economics, its primary concern was the imperialist relations of dependence between the Global North and South.[21] Drawing on the Christian philosopher Paul Tillich, he proposes seeing class, and labour in particular, as the "ultimate concern" for theology, since it "determines our being or not-being."[22] A prolific writer and organiser, he has written extensively about the potential for faith to be a force through which labour can be organised to challenge the power of capital and create a fundamentally different class relationship to those that dominate today.[23]

Black Theology has similarly also built on the foundational works of James Cone to place greater emphasis on the economic roots of racism. Sinclair, building on the Black Marxist tradition discussed in the previous chapter, for example, proposes that we take a Marxist reading of Cone to form the basis of a theology of economic liberation. She argues that this will allow racism to be seen as an alienating social relation, which serves to maintain capitalist production processes.[24]

Perhaps the most prominent Black theologian to emphasise the economic is Cornel West, who, intimately connected to Cone, proposed a radical Christian theology, inspired by Marxism, to respond to racialised capitalism. While not reducing racism to its economic utility for the ruling class, he notes that it is a result of material economic relations. For this reason, he proposes the path of "prophetic pragmatism", through which one can tackle the ascriptive

[20] See: Sheila D. Collins, 'Religion and Class in the Construction and Deconstruction of the Myth of American Exceptionalism', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 99–120.

[21] Although Rieger makes a distinction between the content of his work and that of the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians, it would be more accurate to see them in a continuum. Dependency theory, on which so much of the latter depended, was, in essence a class-based analysis of the international division of labour, which saw resource-rich but poor countries of the Third World being exploited by the imperial core, causing widespread poverty and economic hardship. Rieger's work reclaims this class analysis, applying it primarily to the US context, seeking to recentre political economy in Liberation Theology. See: Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*, Dispatches (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 126.

[22] Ibid., 99-100.

[23] For more, see: Joerg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America's Inequalities* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2016).

[24] Charlene Sinclair, 'Toward a Twenty-First Century Black Liberation Ethic', in *The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Thia Cooper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 165–70.

forms of racism, as well as their role in disrupting class solidarity.[25] In other words, "class solidarity is a form of anti-racist practice."[26]

This brief overview, shows the directions in which, building on the foundations set by Latin American Liberation Theology and Black Theology, thinkers have taken their insights to address the particular issue of class and economic exploitation. They highlight the centrality of class to not only our material reality, but the way in which we do theology. In emphasising the "ultimate concern" that is capitalist relations, these bring class to the forefront and highlight the importance of addressing this in order to achieve liberation.

Ali Shariati: The Ideologue of an Islamic Revolutionary Theory

Thousands of miles away, at a similar time to when Black and Liberation Theologies were emerging in the Americas, Iran, then ruled by the American-backed Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was on the precipice of insurrection and Ali Shariati (1933-77), one of the most prominent opponents to the Shah's despotic rule, was developing a uniquely revolutionary interpretation of Islam.

Shariati, born to a family of Islamic scholars, is considered by many as the "ideologue of the Iranian Revolution".[27] After completing postgraduate studies in France, he returned to Iran in 1964, which was incidentally a year after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who would emerge as the other primary leader of the revolution, was exiled to Iraq (and later France) for his role in the 1963 uprising against the Shah. He taught at the University of Mashhad in northeastern Iran before moving to lecture at the Hosseiniye Ershad in Tehran in 1967. The political nature of his lectures and their widespread popularity, combined with a burgeoning clandestine guerrilla movement, led to the Ershad being closed in late 1972 and Shariati going underground before he was imprisoned in September 1973. After eighteen months in solitary confinement, public and international pressure secured his release. Under heavy surveillance from the Shah's intelligence agency, SAVAK, however, he was politically paralysed and unable to lecture. Instead, he decided to leave the country under a fake name to continue his work and settled in Southampton, England. Shortly afterwards however, he died of a cardiac arrest under suspicious circumstances on 18 June 1977.[28]

Shariati's thought was a curious amalgamation of influences, which he was able to synthesise to give "full ideological expression to all the suppressed revolutionary potentials of Shi'ism" and transform it into "the triumphant site of ideological mobilisation against the Pahlavi

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[25] For more on Cornel West's thought, see: Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022). For a useful analysis of how Marxism influenced the writings of Cone and how it can be used to reconcile some of the contradictions between a structural and phenomenological understanding of Blackness, as well as his dedication to a Black *poor* theology, see: Derek Brown, 'Marxism and/as Black Theology: From Cone to West and Back Again', *Black Theology* 22, no. 1 (2024): 29–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2024.2318102.

[26] Derek Brown, 'Marxism and/as Black Theology: From Cone to West and Back Again', *Black Theology* 22, no. 1 (2024): 46, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2024.2318102.

[27] Ervand Abrahamian, ''Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution', *MERIP Reports*, no. 102 (1982): 24.

[28] For a detailed biography of Shariati's life and politics, see: Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*, New edition (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

regime."[29] These can generally be split into three trends. Firstly, during his time in France, he was heavily influenced by the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, which he lectured on when back in Iran. Second, also while in France, Shariati became immersed in the world of Third World nationalism and revolution, which was at the height of its power following the success of the Cuban Revolution and protracted liberation wars in Algeria and Vietnam (in which France was directly involved). Indeed, as a student activist, Shariati took part in protest movements to object to French actions in their colonies, and translated works such as Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* into Farsi for the first time.[30] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Shariati was influenced by what he perceived as the revolutionary potential of Islam, Shi'ism in particular. In a direct challenge to Fanon, he believed that traditional religions and the Third World's ability to regain these as part of their cultural identity was essential for their success.[31] This assertion can perhaps be explained by the fundamentally different political role that Islam played *vis-à-vis* imperialism compared to Christianity. While, as we have seen in the context of the Americas, the latter was used as the official religion of colonialism and genocide, Islam was always the Other against which Christian Europe defined itself. This has meant that Islam, at least in the modern era, developed an anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist impulse, which, understandably, many revolutionaries failed to see within the Christian context.

Turning back to Shariati's thought, while he covered a wide range of subjects during his time as a lecturer, the most important themes for our purposes regard his analysis of the sociology of religion, Islam in particular. He argued that religion had always had a dual role in society: on the one hand it could be used to uphold systems of oppression and the position of a powerful minority; on the other, it promoted a revolutionary spirit of equality and justice, which places power in the hands of the masses. This, he believed, was illustrated by the story of Cain and Abel, which, as a paradigm for the entirety of human history, "represents a great development, a sudden swerve in the course of history, the most important event to have occurred".[32] Shariati argued that this story was not mentioned in the Quran simply as a condemnation of murder, but rather:

> The wing represented by Abel is that of the subject and the oppressed; ie., the people, those who throughout history have been slaughtered and enslaved by the system of Cain, the system of private ownership which has gained ascendancy over human society.[33]

He continues:

> There has existed throughout human history, and there will continue to exist until the last day, a struggle between the religion of deceit, stupefaction and justification of the status quo and the religion of awareness, activism and revolution.[34]

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[29] Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 91–92.
[30] Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*.
[31] Abrahamian, ''Ali Shari'ati', 25.
[32] Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 103.
[33] Ibid. 108.
[34] Ibid. 109.

The system of Abel represents the true Islamic ideal and, according to Shariati is organised by *tawhid*. This, rather than just being a theological belief in the unity of God, has social implications and rejects all forms of hierarchy, whether they are based on race, class or gender.[35]

> This religion of monotheism, while it invites humanity to submit before God, in the same way and for this very reason, it invites humanity to rebel against anything that is other than He.[36]

The system of Cain, on the other hand, is characterised by *shirk* (polytheism), encourages social disparities, is "indifferent to the life situation of the people" and is used by the powerful to maintain their power.[37] It concerns itself primarily with political quietism, by encouraging religious asceticism and an overemphasis on ritual practice (a theme that will be returned to in later chapters).

Adapting Marx's philosophy of history into this paradigm, Shariati asserts that the slave, feudal and capitalist modes of production in fact are different manifestations of the same system: that of Cain. This is because they represent economic structures where individuals control society. Primitive communalism, socialism and communism, on the other hand, represent the system of Abel, since they allow people to be in control of their own destinies.[38] Since "the weapon of Cain has been religion and the weapon of Abel has also been religion", the history of humanity is defined by this historical battle between these two poles.[39]

Throughout his lectures, Shariati provides different case studies, or battles, in the war between Cain and Abel. Prophet Musa's confrontations with Firon, Qarun and Balaam;[40] Abu Dharr al-Ghifari's condemnation of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan; the Battle of Siffin between Ali ibn Abi Talib's and Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan;[41] Hussain's resistance to Yazid ibn Muawiya at the Battle of Karbala; and the struggles between "Red/Alid" and "Black/Safavi" Shi'ism are some of the key examples that he cites. Because of their importance in articulating the central thesis of Shariati's sociology of religion, these are worth expanding on.

Shariati exalts Abu Dharr, one of the Companions of the Prophet and a loyal supporter of Ali when his position as caliph was usurped (according to Shia beliefs), for his steadfastness in opposing the erosion of Islamic principles under Uthman. He criticised Uthman, and his governor in Syria, Muawiya, for turning religion into a show of external piety devoid of its social and ethical impulses. He argues:

> Abu Dharr was trying to develop the economic and political unity of Islam and the regime of Uthman was reviving aristocracy. Abu Dharr believed

[35] Although Shariati does acknowledge gender discrimination in passing in his writings, for example in his references to Hajar, the second wife of the prophet Ibrahim, he does not provide a nuanced gender analysis or acknowledge the need to challenge patriarchal gender roles. For more, see: Siavash Saffari, 'Tawhid Paradigm and an Inclusive Concept of Liberative Struggle', *Religions* 14, no. 9 (September 2023).

[36] Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 34–35.

[37] Ibid. 43-45.

[38] Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 111–15.

[39] Ibid. 107.

[40] For more, see: ibid. 116.

[41] For more, see: Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 63.

> Islam to be the refuge of the helpless, the oppressed and the humiliated people and Uthman, the tool of capitalism, was the bastion to preserve the interests of the usurers, the wealthy and the aristocrats.[42]

He interprets this moment in history as the counter-revolution of the aristocracy, who were dispossessed by the conquest of Makkah and victory of Prophet Muhammad's religio-political movement on the Arab Peninsula. Socioeconomic inequalities, such as between economic classes and tribes, began to re-emerge and were justified through the religion of the government.[43] Abu Dharr's rebellion, although unsuccessful, Shariati argues, was an attempt to reclaim Islam's *tawhidi* origins and a condemnation of a spirituality that was detached from the conditions of the masses:

> Poverty, humiliation and weakness, and with all of these, religion, spirituality and piety in one society? It is a lie! It is because of this that the Prophet of Abu Dharr is an armed Prophet; his monotheism is not a subjective, spiritual, individual philosophy. It is the inseparable support of unity of races, unity of classes and equity, every person according to his share and right, that is, the deterministic suprastructure of monotheism is not realised simply with the word; the sword must accompany the message.[44]

Similarly, Shariati saw Hussain's stand against Yazid at the Battle of Karbala, discussed in detail in chapter four, as "an eternal and transcendent phenomenon" that was part of the historical struggle of the Abrahamic faiths to create a *tawhidi* society that uplifted the deprived economic and social classes of society.[45]

Shariati's use of metaphors here was partly to inspire his Muslim audience to revolution in the context of severe repression. Rather than directly referencing the Shah, he used historical examples to connect the Iranian plight for freedom with the social objectives of an Islamic movement that ran throughout history and had divine sanction. He portrayed Shi'ism as a movement of protest for the dispossessed, an argument that has been taken up by thinkers such as Hamid Dabashi,[46] and criticised the *ulama* for abandoning this principle. In contrast to Sunni Islam, which, he argues, has always been the Islam of government, he argues that Shi'ism had the historical role of being a "revolutionary party" that promotes ideas of "revenge and revolt, faith in the ultimate downfall of tyrants" – Red Shi'ism.[47] Since the time of the Safavid Empire (1501-1736) however, when Shi'ism became the religion of the state, the scholarly class aligned itself to those in power and "the religion of martyrdom changes to the religion of mourning" – Black Shi'ism.[48] The latter no longer aligned itself with the marginalised, betraying its historical mission.

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[42] Ali Shariati, *And Once Again, Abu-Dhar*, n.d. 4-5.
[43] Ibid. 24-28.
[44] Ibid. 22.
[45] Ali Shariati, *Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness*, n.d., 2–5.
[46] See: Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*; Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[47] Ali Shariati, 'Red Shi'ism - Black Shi'ism', n.d.
[48] Ibid.

In a similar way to Latin American Liberation Theology, Shariati proposed an interpretation of Islam that aligned itself with the masses, who should be the subjects of history, and not a small elite. He notes that the Quran is addressed to *al-nas* (the people), which, grammatically, is a singular noun with the meaning of a plural. On the basis of this, he argues that, rather than referring to a collection of individuals, it has an identity that is independent of its constitutive parts.[49] Furthermore, as seen in Surah 114, entitled *Al-Nas*, God specifically aligns himself with this collective[50]:

> Say, "I seek the protection of the Lord of the people (*al-nas*), Sovereign of the people, God of the people, from the evil of the sneaky tempter who puts temptations into the breasts of humans, from among the *jinn* and humans." (114:1-6)

Whatever belongs to God, such as property, should belong to this collective and not to a small elite. To uphold the latter, for Shariati, is not just unjust but a manifestation of *shirk* and the system of Cain.[51]

God's explicit solidarity with the masses guarantees their success. He cites verse 28:5-6:

> And we desired to show favour to those who were abased[52] in the land and to make them leaders,[53] and to make them the heirs, and to establish them in the land.

This passage has become central to Islamic Liberation Theology and, for Shariati, like theologians after him,[54] guarantees eventual success for the oppressed and makes explicit Islam's socio-political objectives:

> The end of time will come when Cain dies and the "system of Abel" is established anew. That inevitable revolution will mean the end of the history of Cain; equality will be realised throughout the world, and human unity and brotherhood will be established, through equity and justice. This is the inevitable direction of history. A universal revolution will take place in all areas of human life; the oppressed classes of history will take their revenge. The glad tidings of God will be realised.[55]

Although alluding to the central Shia belief in eschatology and the return of the Mahdi, who will establish justice on earth, Shariati does not suggest that this allows believers to evade their responsibilities in the present or remain passive. He continues:

> It is the responsibility of every individual in every age to determine his stance in the constant struggle between the two wings we have described

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[49] Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 118.
[50] Ibid. 119.
[51] Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 53–55.
[52] *Ustudifu* has variously been translated as oppressed, deemed weak and suppressed by translators.
[53] Although Qara'i does not translate *imams* in the verse (likely due to his own baggage as a Shia translator), this has variously been translated as inheritors, successors, heirs and leaders by other translators.
[54] See, for example: Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*, Reprinted 2002 (twice) (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002).
[55] Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 109.

> and not to remain a spectator. While believing in a certain form of historical determinism, we believe also in the freedom of the individual and his human responsibility, which lie at the very heart of the process… We do not see any contradiction between the two.[56]

In many senses, Ali Shariati and Latin American liberation theologians mirrored each other's thought from within different traditions. Although it is unlikely that either knew of the existence of the other, their shared experience of capitalist and imperial domination led to them developing remarkably similar roles for religion in their societies. Islamic Liberation Theology is indebted to these theoretical foundations. Shariati's interpretation of *tawhid* as a social system has, for example, inspired Farid Esack's work on religious pluralism[57] and the feminist readings of the Quran by thinkers such as Amina Wadud.[58] Just as he urged, such thinkers have taken up the task of aligning themselves with the marginalised in their own contexts and challenging the power structures that prevent our collective liberation.

Liberation Theology: An Intervention into Marxist Theory

Marxism's worldview has heavily influenced both the founders of Latin American Liberation Theology and Ali Shariati. For both, the Marxist critique of capitalism was a fundamental part of their analysis of the status quo and theologies that upheld it. However, Liberation Theology also provides a critique of the Marxist approach to religion, which has generally seen it as an obstacle to revolutionary change. As Turner argues:

> Marx allows no exceptions to the proposition that *religiosity as such* has ever proved an obstacle to revolutionary progress… even when allied to politically revolutionary programmes, that alliance with religion had always in practice blunted the revolutionary edge of the politics, by converting a concrete historical practice of class struggle into idealistic utopianisms.[59]

Marx's most notorious critique of religion comes in his Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, where he states:

> *Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.[60]

This has led to many Marxists reproducing anti-religious sentiment, which can, at times, manifest in derision. Molyneux, for example, interprets Marx as calling for the abolition of religion, "the muck of ages", because they are an obstacle to a scientific analysis of society.[61]

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[56] Ibid.
[57] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*.
[58] Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Also see: Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed*.
[59] Denys Turner, 'Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, 2nd ed, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 235.
[60] Karl Marx, 'Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right 1844', accessed 15 November 2023, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm. Emphasis in original.
[61] Molyneux, *The Point Is to Change It!: An Introduction to Marxist Philosophy*, 118.

Further, he argues that religion is the "*illusory* happiness of the people" and to challenge it is to assert their "*real* happiness", which can be achieved only through changing their material conditions.[62]

Liberation Theology challenges these negative assumptions. In fact, their critique refers to Marx's understanding of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure. For Marxists, the latter, which includes social structures such as the state and law, are in service of the dominant mode of production. This is not necessary always a deliberate process, but the superstructure is inevitably bound up with the dominant social class, of which most would naturally not be subversive to their own economic interests.[63] This, rather than being interpreted as a crude economic determinism (since elements of the superstructure can have their own inner logic) simply means that the way people produce material life limits the superstructure and institutions that can be constructed. The latter is therefore not neutral or independent of productive forces. Thus, the superstructure is heavily influenced by class relations and interests, with the powerful being able to produce common sense, in the words of Gramsci.

Religious interpretation, liberation theologians argue, is not above this process and material conditions will determine which interpretations (accommodationist or revolutionary) are emphasised. Marxists therefore go against their own dialectic philosophy when they essentialise religion as an inherently reactionary force in society. Shariati agrees that the religion of Cain, in its various manifestations is:

> It is right that, "Religion is the opium of the masses of the people", so that the people surrender to their abjectness, difficulties, wretchedness and ignorance, surrender to the static situation which they are obliged to have.[64]

However, as we have seen, he also believes that true religion is a force for good, as it has been on many occasions historically – embodied in the system of Abel. Liberation Theology therefore cautions against the Marxist tendency to mystify religion, which often comes as a result of universalising the role of the Church in European history and sees this as contradictory to its own dialectic philosophy, which explains the relationship between the base and superstructure. Religion, as an embodied practice of socialised human beings, is not an inherently reactionary or revolutionary force. Rather, both exist in conflict with each other at any given moment, with class and power relations determining which will dominate.

Islam and Marxism: A Fraught Relationship

The coming together of Marxism and religion in Liberation Theology does not, however, negate the often tense relationship between the former and modern Islamic history. While it is beyond the scope of this study to detail the manifold reasons for this, it is worth acknowledging that Islam and Marxism "are generally thought so much apart, both in theory and practice, that any mention of 'Muslim Marxism' appears hopelessly oxymoronic."[65]

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[62] Ibid. 114. Emphasis in original.
[63] Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 75.
[64] Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 40.
[65] Vanja Hamzić, 'Mir-Said Sultan-Galiev and the Idea of Muslim Marxism: Empire, Third World(s) and Praxis', *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 11 (2016): 2047.

On an intellectual level, orthodox Islamic critiques of Marxism largely centred on its materialist philosophy, which was perceived as a threat to the spiritual integrity and worldview of Islam. For some, such an outlook was (incorrectly) conflated with atheism, leading to the argument that to accept Marxism was a form of apostacy, since materialist philosophy could not be reconciled with a religious worldview. For Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, one of the pioneers of the Islamic revival from the nineteenth century, for example, described materialists as anyone who sought to explain the world without taking the existence of a transcendent God into account.[66] Similarly, this philosophical approach was often conflated with materialism in the sense of an obsession with consumption and the temptations of the physical world. Thus, the Quran's frequent condemnations of those that prefer this life to the Hereafter,[67] become a condemnation of Marxists and other materialists also.[68]

Similarly, a book attributed to Ali Shariati, *Ensan, Marksism, Islam* (later translated into English as *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*) emerged in 1975, shortly after his release from prison. It provided an in-depth critique of Marxism and its materialist foundations, condemning the latter as a product of Western humanism, dating back to Ancient Greece, that perceived the relationship between God and humanity as hierarchical and oppressive, as opposed to the unified whole represented by the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*.[69] Although the authenticity of this text has been questioned by prominent historians of Iran,[70] it regurgitates many of the common tropes levelled at Marxism and materialist philosophy. Marxism (curiously unlike capitalism) was portrayed as a "complete" worldview, an indivisible whole, which could therefore not be mixed with other ideologies or beliefs (including Islam). The false claim that Marxism turned humans into *homo economicus*, a

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[66] Sheikh Jameil Ali, 'Sayyid Jamal Al-Din al-Afghani's "Refutation of the Materialists": An Approach', *Insight Islamicus*, 2001, 146.

[67] This is a frequent theme that is found throughout the Quran, for example in verse 2:86, 9:38, 14:3, 16:107 and 87:16-17. 14:2-3, for example, says, "And woe to the faithless for a severe punishment – those who prefer the life of this world to the Hereafter, and bar [others] from the way of Allah, and seek to make it crooked. They are in extreme error."

[68] Many unsophisticated examples of this tendency can be found across the internet. For example, 'Islamic Principles and Materialism', Road 2 Islam, accessed 3 September 2024, https://road2islam.in/islamic-principles-and-materialism.

[69] Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, Contemporary Islamic Thought : Persian Series (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980).

[70] Prominent academics, such as Hamid Algar, Ervand Abrahamian and Assef Bayat, have argued this based on the marked departure this book represented from the rest of Shariati's extensive collection of lectures and writings. Abrahamian, for example, argues that the Shah's government doctored one of his unfinished essays to create the false impression that Shariati had collaborated with his jailers in order to secure his release. In reality, as we have discussed above, Shariati had a complicated relationship with Marxism. As we have seen, he was heavily influenced by Third World revolutionary Marxists, such as Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon, and borrowed some key Marxist concepts, for example, class struggle and exploitation. However, he also was critical of Iranian communists, embodied in the Tudeh Party, for abandoning Islam as a fundamental part of their indigenous culture and ignoring its potential as an agent for social change. For more, see: Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, Contemporary Islamic Thought : Persian Series (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980); Ervand Abrahamian, ''Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution', *MERIP Reports*, no. 102 (1982): 24, https://doi.org/10.2307/3010795; Assef Bayat, 'Shari'ati and Marx: A Critique of an "Islamic" Critique of Marxism', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 10 (1990): 19–41, https://doi.org/10.2307/521715.

purely material, economic animal empty of any spiritual dimensions, allowed it to be presented as in complete contradiction to the spiritual imperatives of an Islamic worldview.[71]

Ayatollah Murtadha Mutahhari, a prominent Shia scholar of the 1970s and contemporary of Ali Shariati,[72] in his work *Society and History* produces a more sophisticated investigation, arguing "the logic of Islam and historical materialism are radically opposed to each other."[73] Beginning with an exposition of the theory of historical materialism, he argues that there is no historical proof that relations of production drive history. He also notes that it is unable to explain why ideas do not always comply with the interests of the dominant class.[74] On a philosophical level, he recognises that if the relationship between the base and superstructure is not linear, then it becomes one of "reciprocal causation", where the two influence each other in different moments. It is therefore arbitrary to prioritise one in this causal relationship as both can be considered governing principles in particular circumstances.[75]

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into a discussion on the various strengths and weaknesses of idealist and materialist philosophy (itself a topic that is worthy of discussion), as we have seen through the lessons of liberation theologians, Marxist materialist philosophy does not necessarily negate religious belief or faith. Marx's thought did not function on the abstract level and Marxist philosophy is opposed to removing ideas (including morality and religious belief) from their historical context.[76] It is therefore less about universal truths and the validity of theological beliefs, but the *social* role that religious interpretation plays within specific power and economic relations. These abstractions, as liberation theologians have also recognised, can serve to mystify material reality and obstruct historical change.[77]

While there may be some validity to some of the philosophical critiques presented by Islamic thinkers above (some of Mutahhari's are certainly convincing), they all essentialise religion and fail to acknowledge that religious practice and interpretation operates within a particular social environment.[78] Although it is easy to find flaws in a vulgar, scientific form of historical

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[71] Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, Contemporary Islamic Thought : Persian Series (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980).

[72] Mutahhari had a turbulent personal relationship with Shariati, who he initially invited to lecture at the Hosseiniye Ershad, an institution that he helped to set up in order to be a centre of contemporary religious learning. As a scholar he was strongly in favour of the clerical institutions taking a stronger political stance against the Shah's regime. Shariati's popularity, as well as his frequent condemnations of religious scholars, however, placed tension on their relationship and, by the time of Shariati's death, Mutahhari "spoke of him with great disdain, accusing him of dishonesty" and branding his followers as "deviationists." For more, see: Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*, New edition (London (GB): IB Tauris, 2014).

[73] Murtadha Mutahhari, *Society and History* (Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2014), 92, https://www.al-islam.org/society-and-history-murtadha-mutahhari.

[74] Ibid., 80-90.

[75] Ibid., 81-85.

[76] Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, Second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 99.

[77] Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, New and updated edition (London: Verso, 2017), 36.

[78] It is also worth noting that such materialist interpretations are not alien to Islam or the Quran. It is considered a truism for many Muslims that many of the earliest believers came from marginalised groups in society, drawing a explicit relationship between belief and class. Such observations are also made in the Quran, for example in verses 43:23-24: "We did not send any warner to a town before you, *but that its affluent elite said*, "We found our fathers following a creed and we are indeed following in their footsteps." [Each warner] would say, "What!

materialism, this has been addressed by many Marxist thinkers, Gramsci in particular. It also does not negate the fundamental insight that the theory provides, namely that material forces play a role in the development of ideas, morality and our understandings of religion.

Despite its potential utility, for many Islamic movements in the twentieth century, communism was seen as a greater threat to Muslim societies than capitalism because of its ability to fundamentally alter the moral codes of society.[79] These fears were exacerbated by the militant atheism of Marxist movements, which often showed a hostility towards religion. The so-called "Eastern Question" in the Soviet Union, which sought to deal with vast territories in the east, populated largely by Muslims of Turkic origins, created great tensions in the interwar years. Increased centralisation and Russian dominance under the then leader, Joseph Stalin, led to many Muslim intellectuals (many of whom identified with Marxism themselves, such as Mirza Sultan-Galiev) fearing for their position and religious freedoms – a fear that seemed to be justified with Sultan-Galiev's execution in 1940.[80] Elsewhere, to name a few, Cham Muslims were victims of purges by the Marxist Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in the 1970s and today, China is accused of genocide against Uyghur Muslims, resulting in the concerns over Marxism's hostility to Islam persisting to the present day.

Of course, it would be simplistic and false to suggest that Muslim opposition to Marxism was purely motivated by a selfless defence of the faith. Political calculations, as well as socioeconomic interests, often brought them into opposition and Islamic political movements often actively aligned with those in power to suppress the Marxist Left throughout the postcolonial period.[81] Most famously, anti-Marxist ideas were utilised heavily to motivate Muslims from across the world to join the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s and fight the Soviets, but smaller scale examples can be taken from Sudan, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere. This fraught history has led to mutual distrust between Marxist-inspired and Islam-inspired movements and severely damaged the perceived intellectual validity of the former as a tool of change in Muslim communities. Despite this however, throughout the twentieth century and until today, many Muslims have continued to identify with Marxism and, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it remains a vital tool through which to understand the workings of capitalism and reality of class exploitation.

A Theology of Praxis: The Centrality of Changing Material Conditions

The influence of Marxism on Liberation Theology extends further than its dialectic understanding of religion to a shared emphasis on praxis. As we discussed in the previous chapter, as central to the Marxist analysis of the capitalist reality is the notion of class struggle and the necessity for intellectuals to be integrated into political movements for change – "The

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Even if I bring you a better guidance than what you found your fathers following?" They would say, "We indeed disbelieve in what you are sent with.""

[79] Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[80] For a detailed analysis of Mirza Sultan-Galiev's relationship with the Soviet leadership, as well as the relative ideological influences of Islam and Marxism in his thought, see: Vanja Hamzić, 'Mir-Said Sultan-Galiev and the Idea of Muslim Marxism: Empire, Third World(s) and Praxis', *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 11 (2016): 2047–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1166048.

[81] Jean-Numa Ducange and Gilbert Achcar, 'Marx and the Prophet', 2018, https://jacobin.com/2019/04/marx-prophet-proletariat-muslim-fundemantalism-islam-socialism.

philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[82] Taking inspiration from this, liberation theologians have emphasised the need to not only develop a theology from the margins, but to change the material conditions that put people there. Indeed, the preference for the poor in Latin American Liberation Theology, racialised communities in Black Theology or the masses in the works of Ali Shariati can only be considered genuine if it challenges the social structures that subjugate these groups. The choice of theologians to side with the dehumanised is not simply an intellectual or rhetorical exercise, but speaks to a very real, material existence.

The notion of praxis is therefore central. Praxis is an ancient Greek word that refers to free, self-realising activity through which the world is transformed and, in ancient Greece, it signified any activity of the free man, as opposed to the slave.[83] Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968, develops a theory, inspired by Third World Marxism and the context of gross inequality in Latin America during this period, that embodies this definition. Freire affirms Liberation Theology's perspective that the process of humanisation is holistic, not just a patronising and empty verbal assertion. For Freire, it first comes with the acknowledgement that the oppressed themselves understand the nature of their oppression and necessity of liberation[84] and so, movements for change "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed".[85] He explains:

> No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.[86]

Freire's ideas, as well as his pedagogical methods, were extremely influential in Latin America and has had a lasting impact on Liberation Theology. Although practitioners have accepted his assertion that change should be achieved *with* the oppressed, there are different interpretations of what this means in practice. For Freire, praxis is a collective process of action and reflection on the world in order to transform it.[87] Clodovis Boff, building on this, proposed the hermeneutical circle.[88] Participation in the struggle is followed by socio-political analysis and then a hermeneutic analysis of the religious canon, which allows the theologian to answer how the Bible responds to the material reality. Finally, this is followed by more informed participation in the struggle, based on these social and theological reflections.[89]

For Boff, the analytical steps in this process were conducted by the theologian, while activism is a joint effort with the marginalised. Gerald West however, critiques this approach for reproducing a hierarchical structure through which the scholar reproduces the patronising attitudes against which a liberative praxis cautions. While Boff would follow Gramsci and

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[82] Karl Marx in Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 16.
[83] Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 81.
[84] Ibid. 19.
[85] Ibid. 22. Emphasis in original.
[86] Ibid. 28.
[87] Ibid. 52-59.
[88] See: Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Limited edition (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009).
[89] For a useful summary of Boff's hermeneutical circle, see: Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987); Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 32.

Freire in arguing that, because of the power of hegemony, the marginalised internalise their domination, West proposes an alternative. For him, building on James Scott's idea of hidden transcripts, the oppressed are freer on the level of thought than action and so, their independence is often expressed through more abstract cultural expressions, such as folktales and songs.[90] Through his contextualised Bible study, he proposes to "speak to/with", rather than "speak for/listen to" the marginalised, and recognises that different parties bring *different*, not better or worse, skills and resources to the interpretive process.[91]

Within the tradition of Islamic theology, praxis-based methodologies have been notably lacking. Sa'diyya Shaikh, in her book chapter entitled *A Tafsir of Praxis*, critiques traditional and feminist exegetes (such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas mentioned earlier) for taking an elitist approach, which ignores the "invisible community of the text".[92] Her embodied *tafsir*, on the other hand, engages with female victims of domestic violence and investigates how their experiences impact their understanding of gender ethics in Islam, particularly with reference to verse 4:34, which is often interpreted and translated to permit hitting one's wife:

> Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, caretaking in the absence [of their husbands] of what Allah has enjoined [them] to guard. As for those [wives] whose misconduct you fear, [first] advise them, and [if ineffective] keep away from them in the bed, and [as a last resort] beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course [of action] against them. Indeed, Allah is All-Exalted, All-Great.[93]

Her findings suggest that the reality of the marginalised and silenced is somewhere in between the positions proposed by Boff and West. While some had internalised patriarchal norms, others found the dominant interpretation irreconcilable with God's justice and religious norms.[94] This complicates their position and shows hegemony and complete agency to be a spectrum along which individuals are located.

Esack takes this praxis-based interpretation in a slightly different direction by emphasising the centrality of those that are involved in the struggle. For him, the gradual revelation of the Quran itself justifies this grounded approach. The gradual revelation (*tadrij*) of the text over

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[90] West, 'The Bible and the Poor: A New Way of Doing Theology', 165–66.

[91] Ibid.

For applications of West's contextual Bible study, see: Gerald O. West, ed., *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 62 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[92] Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community', in *Violence Against Women in Contemporary Religions: Roots and Cures*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 69-70.

[93] This translation from Qara'i reflects traditional exegetes and scholars of *fiqh* in giving permission to men to beat their wives, based on a particular reading of the verb, *idribu* (from the root *da-ra-ba*), which can mean "to beat/hit". Feminist interpretations have, however, challenged this reading by noting the various other potential meanings of the word in question, arguing that the mainstream reading is a reflection of patriarchal norms being inserted into the Quran. For more detailed discussions on this topic, see: Barlas, *'Believing Women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*; Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*.

[94] Shaikh, 'A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community', 79.

23 years (610-632 CE) in Makkah and Madina to the Prophet Muhammad, reflects a dialectic relationship between "the will of God, realities on the ground and needs of the community being spoken to."[95] Revelation therefore becomes the means through which God interacts with and shows his concern for humankind.[96] The principles of occasion of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and abrogation (*naskh*) within traditional Quranic sciences, points to this reality of the Quran as a contextualised text with universalist ambitions (at least in the view of Muslims). The former in particular, referring to the study of the events in which particular verses were revealed, illustrates God's concern for the community and provides a means through which the text can be historicised.[97] Rather than becoming exclusively a historical document however, Esack argues that the Quran:

> remains alive because its universality is recognised in the middle of an ongoing struggle to rediscover meaning in it. The challenge for every generation of believers is to discover their own moment of revelation, their own intermission in revelation, their own frustrations with God, joy with His consoling grace, and their own guidance by the principle of progressive revelation.[98]

Building on this to create a liberatory framework of Quranic interpretation, he argues that verse 29:69 promises divine guidance to the activist who is engaged in struggle to actualise the principles of Islam within their historical contexts – "As for those who strive/struggle for Us, We shall surely guide them in Our ways; and Allah is indeed with the virtuous."[99] His methodology in the seminal work, *Quran, Liberation & Pluralism*, involved analysing Muslim publications, speeches and activism, to produce a theology that promoted religious pluralism in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. For Esack, and liberation theologians generally, theological reflection is the "second act", which has to be preceded by involvement in the struggle. Although faith (in the sense of religious belief) is a necessary prerequisite, abstract interpretation contradicts Liberation Theology's central aim of achieving material change for the oppressed because it occurs independently of material reality. Petrella, in his critique of the historical trajectory of Latin American Liberation Theology, makes precisely this point. He argues that, over time, this revolutionary methodology was transformed into an academic exercise emptied of ideological content and detached from lived experience. In his attempt to reclaim its lost legacy, he emphasises the necessity for theology to be attached to a "historical project", which provides theologians with, at the very least, a general direction in which society should move, based on existing conditions.[100]

Conclusion

Liberation Theology, both within the Christian and Islamic traditions, agree on the central importance of changing the material conditions of the oppressed. This emphasis on praxis is

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[95] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 54.
[96] This concern is not limited to the Quranic revelation within the context of seventh century Arabia but extends throughout time and space. Indeed, the various forms of revelation to prophets can be interpreted as a reflection of God's involvement in human history.
[97] Ibid., 56-57.
[98] Ibid., 60.
[99] Ibid. 85.
[100] Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*.

a central tenet of a liberative framework, which opposes abstract readings that are detached from material reality. Building on the work of scholars such as Boff, West, Shaikh and Esack, this study will take an embodied approach to textual interpretation, relying on the readings of British Muslim activists who are involved in various iterations of class struggle. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I was able to "speak with" (in West's words) individuals and acknowledge their agency in producing religious knowledge. Also recognising, however, how social hegemony operates to make the dominated complicit in their own oppression, it was important to be critical by recognising that all of us are somewhere on the spectrum between complete mental colonisation and complete independence.

Chapters four to six will both be informed by the theoretical underpinnings of Liberation Theology outlined in this chapter and substantiate them through the eyes of British Muslim activists. Firstly, we will see how the "permanent struggle of history" between the religion of accommodation and revolution, in Shariati's words and as illustrated by Black and liberation theologians, manifests around the class question, with some readings of religion directly upholding or turning a blind eye to economic exploitation, while others look to tackle it. Secondly, we will see how it is only through a praxis-based methodology that religious interpretation can be connected to actual material change. By centring activists, this study is embedded in a particular context and follows the ways in which they negotiate these complexities to implement their understandings of the faith. Through this, it is not only possible to present a substantial Islamic reading but also an ideology that can be used to realise the goal of liberation for those that are exploited by the oppressive capitalist economic system.

3. Contextualising a Theology of Praxis: Britain and its Marginalised

> It wasn't just Grenfell that suffered mass victims
> Every single day we're seeing Grenfell killings.
> We suffer to corruption in a Grenfell system
> This isn't Great Britain; this is Grenfell Britain. – Potent Whisper[1]
>
> If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower. – Ben Okri[2]

Introduction

Before analysing how Muslim activists in London (re)interpret Islam to combat class exploitation and economic inequality, it is important to understand the context in which they operate. This chapter, although far from extensive, provides a brief discussion on two key themes which define modern day Britain and provides a substantive case study of some of the theoretical insights provided by Marxist political economy in chapter one – including the consequences of the primacy of the profit motive and the exploitation and racialisation of labour. The first section, in opposition to popular narratives that focus on the "white working class", highlights how race and class are mutually constitutive, with formerly colonised and enslaved peoples disproportionately represented among the country's exploited working class. The second theme, which mirrors international economic trends, is the hegemony of neoliberal orthodoxy from the 1980s. This has seen the rapid retreat of the state, which Keynesian economics[3] sought to use to contain some of the greatest ills of capitalism, and the domination of private enterprise. This has accelerated inequality and led to the racialised poor living an increasingly precarious existence. Muslims, as we will see, are one of many groups that suffer as a result and find themselves further marginalised because of a process of othering, which questions their loyalty and belonging in the UK. After exploring these themes, the chapter finally turns to the three case studies used in this thesis – Who Is Hussain, Sufra NW London (hereafter Sufra) and Nijjor Manush – and lay some key background for the rest of the study, exploring their origins, outlooks, and activities.

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[1] Potent Whisper, 'Grenfell Britain by Potent Whisper - YouTube', accessed 28 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGSK4NCwwVU.

[2] Ben Okri, 'Grenfell Tower, June 2017', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Press, 2019), xxvii-xxxi

[3] Keynesian economics is named after the British economist, John Maynard Keynes, who argued that total spending in the economy has a large impact on economic growth and inflation. It argues that a capitalist economy is inherently unstable and can be stabilised through affective government-driven fiscal and monetary policy. Although debate exists over the exact nature of Keynesian economics, generally it includes higher government spending and involvement in the economy. For more see: John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theoy of Employment, Interest and Money* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1936); Mark Skousen, *The Big Three in Economics: Adam Smith, Karl Marx and John Maynard Keynes* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015).

Grenfell Britain

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, during the month of Ramadan, a small fire, caused by an electrical fault in a refrigerator, spread rapidly along the outside of a tower block in West London's Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, one of the world's wealthiest areas, engulfing the entire building in an inferno. Grenfell Tower, which provided social housing for some of the Borough's economically disadvantaged and vulnerable, was, according to BBC Panorama, home to around 500 people.[4] Residents were told by emergency services to "stay put", which was in line with general guidance for fires in tower blocks, but based on the assumption that the proper fire safety procedures were in place. They were not. In fact, to cut costs during a 2017 refurbishment of the external face of the building (led by British firm, Rydon), flammable cladding, made by the firm Arconic, was placed on the building. This was in addition to insulation, made by Celotex, which burns when heated. When combined, this meant that the side of the building acted as a chimney through which the fire could rapidly spread upwards.[5] 72+ people, including eighteen children, were killed as a result.[6]

While the Grenfell fire is often termed a "tragedy" or "disaster", such words obscure the series of decisions, made over decades, that caused the fire. Indeed, "the causes of the causes have their roots in decisions taken years and sometimes decades earlier, many justified in terms of the neoliberal economic orthodoxy begun in the 1980s."[7] The outsourcing of council housing to Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs), such as Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), and the web of contractors they used for the refurbishment were driven primarily by profit, rather than safety. Perhaps most tellingly, Harley Facades Ltd, who were paid over £2.5million to provide and install the tower's cladding, opted against using the fire-resistant panels, which would have only cost an extra £2 per square metre.[8] Celotex meanwhile, knowingly missold their insulation, despite knowing that it had not passed the requisite safety tests when combined with non-fire resistant panels. This is particularly significant since most victims died of smoke inhalation from the cyanide fumes released by the insulation.[9]

This profit motive, when combined with the dehumanisation (particularly of the non-white) poor in Britain and beyond, meant that it was easy for stakeholders, including the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, to dismiss resident and community concerns. Hauntingly, this dismissive attitude led the Grenfell Action Group to write in 2016, a year before the fire:

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[4] Daniel Renwick, 'Organising on Mute', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 29.

[5] It is also significant that no working sprinklers were fitted during the renovation, there was no fire exit, access for fire fighters or working fire alarms in Grenfell Tower. See: Andrew Griffin, 'The Fatal Mistake Made in the Grenfell Tower Fire', The Independent, 14 June 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-fire-grenfell-tower-cladding-architects-firefighters-experts-reason-why-cause-a7789336.html.

[6] The use of the terminology "72+" or "at least 72" is deliberate and represents the lack of trust in official government narratives around the fire and the ongoing effects of those events. For more, see: Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany, eds., *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

[7] Dan Bulley, 'Everyday Life and Death in the Global City', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 10.

[8] Ibid., 9.

[9] Ibid., 10.

> It is a truly terrifying thought, but the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders.[10]

While the extraordinary scale of the Grenfell Tower fire is unique, the event embodies much of what it means to be poor in modern day Britain. It speaks to the "invisibility, denial and inequalities which still scar post-imperial Britain, and poses stark challenges to [its] post-racial pretensions."[11] It is a microcosm of many of the structural, or slow, forms of violence that remain prevalent and illustrates the barriers that prevent the poor and racialised from accessing legal and housing justice, and the means to influence how they are represented and spoken for.[12] Further, with many of the victims being Muslim[13] and over half of the adult victims arriving in Britain after 1990, it shows the disproportionate ways in which "racialised descendants of colonised and enslaved people" are affected by state-sanctioned neoliberalism.[14] The remainder of this chapter outlines how many of the underlying causes of the Grenfell Tower fire have been produced and reproduced throughout the history of modern Britain, and especially London, with violence continuously being inflicted on the poor and minoritised communities.

The Racialised Working Class

The first theme that the Grenfell Tower fire exposes is how race and class intersect in modern Britain to create a racialised underclass, which is disproportionately exploited by capitalist dynamics. This simple observation is particularly important in the current climate, where media coverage and political debates overwhelmingly focus on the disillusioned "white working class".[15] This term has little analytical value and the "white working class" does not face any form of structural discrimination that the working class collectively does not face.[16] Rather, historically the white working class, along with politicians and Trade Unions, have consistently strengthened and reproduced racial power structures.[17] It is this reality that makes popular discourses, even from those on the Left, that focus on the white working class problematic. For example, in the popular political commentary *Chavs*, author Owen Jones all

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[10] Grenfell Action Group in Monique Charles, 'ComeUnity and Community in the Face of Impunity', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 173.

[11] Claire E. Alexander and Bridget Byrne, 'Introduction', in *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*, ed. Bridget Byrne et al. (Bristol Chicago, IL: Policy Press, 2020), 3.

[12] Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany, 'Introduction', in *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*, ed. Dan Bulley, Jenny Edkins, and Nadine El-Enany (London: Pluto Press, 2019) , xiii.

[13] Although exact numbers are unknown, a large number of the victims have names of Muslim origin, and it is estimated that 80% of the tower's residents were Muslim. See: Katherine Hearst, 'Grenfell Tower Fire: UK Muslim Community's Questions Remain Unanswered after Five Years | Middle East Eye', accessed 22 June 2022, https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/uk-grenfell-tower-fire-muslim-community-questions-unanswered.

[14] Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany, 'Introduction', xix-xx.

[15] ESSL, 'Busting the Myth of the "White Working Class"', 16 August 2019, https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/news/article/1069/busting-the-myth-of-the-white-working-class.

[16] Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats* (London ; New York: Verso, 2019), 151.

[17] For a detailed discussion on this, see ibid.

but ignores the demonisation of the non-white working class. His narrative places great emphasis on the role of politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and New Labour in demonising and undermining working class progress in the UK, while ignoring how "Old" Labour and Trade Unions, were heavily complicit in preventing racialised groups from gaining equal treatment.[18] One commentator in *Race Today*[19] for example, accused the trade unions of being "the lieutenants of capital, more concerned with [non-white] people 'learning how things are done in a civilised society', than mobilising sections of the class for political change."[20] An accurate account of what it means to be working class in Britain today would therefore, by necessity, need to be intersectional and analyse how race and class intersect, both today and historically, to create particular dynamics of exploitation.

When analysing modern Britain, it is impossible to detach it from its colonial legacy, which continues to reverberate today. This is most clearly seen in the modern history of migration to Britain, which saw large numbers of people (and sometimes entire communities) relocating, initially mostly from South Asia and the Caribbean to cities across the country. Due to domestic labour shortages, demands for improved wages and working conditions and poor working conditions across the empire, migrant communities were, quite literally, shipped into Britain post-Word War Two to provide cheap labour.[21] New social services, particularly the NHS, reproduced colonial dynamics and, since its inception, have been deeply dependent on non-white labour. One author in *Race Today* for example, noted how colonial dynamics were reproduced in the British labour market:

> No woman is more identified with service work than black women, especially the black women with a slave or colonial past… in the head of the black nurse from the Caribbean is the echo of slavery; in the head of the Asian nurse is the servitude to Sahib and Memsahib.[22]

Newly arriving migrants, whether in the Nineteenth Century or post-World War Two, gravitated towards areas with greater job opportunities, which were predominantly in port cities, such as Cardiff and Liverpool, or industrial and manufacturing hubs such as Birmingham and its surrounds in the Midlands, Greater Manchester in Yorkshire or Glasgow in Scotland.[23] Long term patterns of deindustrialisation and the movement of manufacturing jobs to the Global South, however, meant that these industries were in decline and employment was precarious. Many Pakistani migrant workers, who are the largest working class, minoritised

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[18]Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* (London ; New York: Verso, 2020)..

[19] Race Today was a monthly British political magazine, launched by the Institute of Race Relations, between 1969 and 1988. It is a vital resource, inspired by Marxism and anti-racist politics, that documents the struggles of non-white, particularly Black and South Asian, in Britain. It is worth noting that their references to "Black" often refer to "political Blackness", based on the concept of shared interest and struggle among non-white people.

[20] Mala Sen, 'The Strike at Imperial Typewriters: July 1974', in *Here to Stay, Here to Fight: A 'Race Today' Anthology*, ed. Paul Field et al. (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 130..

[21] Paul Field et al., eds., 'Caribbean Women and the Black Community': Race Today Women, April 1975', in *Here to Stay, Here to Fight: A 'Race Today' Anthology* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 83.

[22] Paul Field et al., eds., ''Black Women and Nursing: A Job Like Any Other': Race Today, August 1974', in *Here to Stay, Here to Fight: A 'Race Today' Anthology* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 72.

[23] According to the 2011 census, 97.4% of Asians and 98.1% of Black people, along with 92.4% of mixed race people in England live in urban areas. See: "Regional ethnic diversity", *UK Government* (1 Aug 2018), https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest, accessed 8 Aug 2022.

group outside London,[24] made the "journey from 'textile mills to taxi ranks'", forced to find work in the high-risk service sector or through self-employment.[25]

London, due to its unique position as a port city, manufacturing hub and diplomatic centre, has always attracted a disproportionate number of migrants. According to 2021 census data, 42% of Londoners are non-white, making its white population the lowest in the country.[26] This migrant community is also more diverse than elsewhere in the country, with significant populations of Arabs, Turks, Bangladeshis and the largest proportion of the country's Black population.[27] Within this picture, Brent, a borough in outer northwest London, and Tower Hamlets, which borders the City of London to the east,[28] both are among the most diverse areas in the country and among the five boroughs with the lowest white populations.[29] Again, according to 2021 census data, the largest ethnic group in Brent is Indians, making up 19% of the population, followed by "White: Other" and White British, at 16 and 15%, respectively. "Black African" is next with 9%, followed by "Asian: Other", which includes a significant Iranian population, with 7%, followed by Black Caribbean (6%), Arab (5%) and Pakistani (4%).[30] Tower Hamlets in contrast is 34.6% Bangladeshi, making it the largest Bangladeshi community in the UK, both in terms of absolute numbers and proportion of the population.[31] It also houses a sizeable Somali community, estimated to be between 2 and 3% of the borough's population.[32] Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the multiple reasons for these migration patterns, it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of London in this regard

[24] According to the 2021 census, 2.7% of the UK's population is Pakistani, making them the second largest non-white ethnic group, after Indians, who make up 3.1% of the population but are generally wealthier. Just under 40% of Pakistanis reside in the West Midlands or Yorkshire and The Humber – 20.1% and 18.7%, respectively – with a further 18.3% in London. See: 'Population Estimates by Ethnic Group and Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics', accessed 28 November 2023, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/populationestimatesbyethnicgroupandreligionenglandandwales/2019; 'Regional Ethnic Diversity', 22 December 2022, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest#areas-of-england-and-wales-by-ethnicity.

[25] Ken Clark and William Shankley, 'Ethnic Minorities in the Labour Market in Britain', in *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*, ed. Bridget Byrne et al. (Bristol Chicago, IL: Policy Press, 2020), 129.

[26] The non-white population for England and Wales overall averages 18%. See: 'Population Estimates by Ethnic Group and Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics'.

[27] 7.9% of London's population is Black African, the largest non-white ethnic group, while the national average is just over 2%. See: 'Population Estimates by Ethnic Group and Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics'.

[28] Brent and Tower Hamlets are highlighted throughout this chapter because of the centrality of these boroughs to the work of Sufra NW London and Nijjor Manush, respectively.

[29] These five boroughs, in ascending order are Newham, with a white population of 29%, Brent, with 36%, Harrow with 42%, Redbridge with 43% and Tower Hamlets with 45%. Indeed, of the ten UK boroughs with the lowest white populations, nine are in Greater London, with the only exception being Leicester. See: 'Regional ethnic diversity', 1 August 2018, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest.

[30] 'Census 2021: Ethnicity in Brent', Brent Council, accessed 28 November 2023, https://data.brent.gov.uk/download/vq9nd/zsk/2021%20Census%20-%20Ethnicity%20in%20Brent%20-%20Final%20-%20AV%20-%2006%2001%2023.pdf.

[31] 'State of the Borough 2021', Tower Hamlets Council, accessed 28 November 2023, https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/State-of-the-Borough.pdf. 7.

[32] Exact numbers are unknown since the Somali category is included in the "Black African" and "Black: Other" ethnicities in collection data. See ibid., 9.

and the sheer number of racialised communities that struggle to make ends meet in the capital.

With the decline of manufacturing and the rise of the City of London, the capital's ubiquitous financial hub, from the 1980s, many of London's working class communities have become concentrated in precarious employment, particularly in the service and hospitality sectors. This has not only led to an increased divide between rich and poor, with the top 10% holding 42.5% of the city's wealth and the bottom 50% only 6.8%, but also increased poverty, with 28% of London's population in poverty – 6% higher than the national average.[33] As is the case elsewhere in the country, racialised communities are disproportionately affected by such trends, with 38% in poverty, compared to 21% of London's white population.[34] The Trust for London for example, found that, between October 2020 and September 2021, 39% of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, 34% of Black and 33% of mixed heritage people in the capital were unemployed.[35] Evidence also suggests that unemployment rates for non-white workers rise faster than the white majority during recessions[36] and strong evidence exists for an "ethnic penalty", where, after accounting for other factors, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black African and Black Caribbean groups are consistently paid less than white workers.[37]

These trends highlight how non-white populations in the UK are predominantly working class and among the most economically exploited groups. Byrne's et al. work, *Race and Inequality in the UK*, gives ample evidence to reflect how these inequalities operate in various sectors of society[38] and shows how racialised groups' concentration at the bottom of the labour market, along with low purchasing power, is a major factor in explaining their concentration in deprived neighbourhoods and increased health risks.[39] The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 exposed many of these dynamics and illustrated the precarious position of the racialised working class in modern day Britain. By May 2020 statistics showed that the poorest were twice as likely to die as the affluent[40] and, from early in the pandemic, questions were being asked as to why death and infection rates were higher in racialised groups. According to the Office of National Statistics, during the first wave, the rate of death for Black African men was 3.7 times higher than the White British group, with Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Pakistani men experiencing 3, 2.7 and 2.2 times higher death rates, respectively.[41] With

[33] 'London's Poverty Profile 2020', Trust for London, accessed 5 August 2022, https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/lpp2020/.

[34] 'Ethnicity, Poverty & Inequality In London', Trust for London, accessed 5 August 2022, https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/populations/ethnicity/.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Clark and Shankley, 'Ethnic Minorities in the Labour Market in Britain', 136.

[37] Ibid., 138-9.

[38] See Byrne, Alexander, Khan, Nazroo and Shankley (eds.), *Race and Inequality in the UK.*

[39] William Shankley, Tina Hannemann, and Ludi Simpson, 'The Demography of Ethnic Minorities in Britain', in *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*, ed. Bridget Byrne et al. (Bristol Chicago, IL: Policy Press, 2020), 29..

[40] Jones, *Chavs*, xix.

[41] Corresponding figures for women from these groups was lower but still consistently higher than that for the White British Groups: Black African, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Pakistani women had 2.6, 1.9, 1.8, 2 times higher death rates, respectively. See 'Updating ethnic contrasts in deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19), England: 24 January 2020 to 31 March 2021'. 26 May 2021, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvingthecoronaviruscovid19englandandwales/24january2020to31march2021#:~:text=The%20rate%20of%20death%20involving,2.2%20for%20males%2C%202.0%20for.

undertones of racial eugenics, some explained away these differences as biological, but evidence shows that, even when accounting for health factors, non-white peoples' economic position in the service sector, such as in healthcare and transport, meant they were at higher risk of infection, and therefore death, from Covid.[42]

Race and class should therefore be seen as mutually constitutive,[43] with racialised groups initially attracted to the UK because of economic and political trends in the Third World that can directly be linked to imperialism and ongoing neo-colonialism – as explained in chapter one on the link between race, class and colonialism. Once here, these groups overwhelmingly end up in densely populated "internal colonies" in Britain's cities.[44] In this sense, terms such as multi-ethnic, racialised, British Pakistani/Bengali or Black also usually imply a working class position. As Shilliam argues, "race is class… there is no politics of class that is not already racialised."[45]

The Triumph of Neoliberalism

Although, as we have seen, most racialised groups were always exploited and excluded from centres of power, the post-war period also saw the creation of a variety of state social welfare provisions, such as the NHS, social housing and benefits. Built on the principles of Keynesian economics and to ward off the threat of Marxist-inspired revolutions, such as occurred in Russia in 1917, this system sought to blunt the sharpest edges of capitalism, while popular worker struggles secured better wages and working conditions, which limited the power of capital. Naomi Klein, in her seminal work *The Shock Doctrine*, however, shows how this post-war consensus was slowly eroded by the onset of neoliberalism, inspired by the ideas of Milton Friedman.[46] Starting with the counter-revolution against the democratically-elected Marxist leader of Chile, Salvador Allende, neoliberal ideologues, supported by large corporations and powerful governments (particularly the US), pushed for the market to be given primacy and state involvement in the economy curtailed.[47] In the UK, it was the election of Conservative politician Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 that was the major turning point. Along with prominent members of her cabinet, such as Keith Joseph, Thatcher implemented a series of measures that cut back state provisions and allowed the private sector to encroach further into the economy. The subsequent New Labour government (1997-2010), Conservative-Liberal Democrats Coalition government (2010-5) and current Conservative government (2015-) all adopted this neoliberal worldview, adopting the tenets of unbridled capitalist and private sector led growth. Driven solely by profit making, "this model enables oligarchs and multinationals to use their capital and power to dictate the terms

[42] Nicola Davis, 'Higher Covid Deaths among BAME People "Not Driven by Health Issues"', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/16/bame-people-more-likely-to-die-from-covid-than-white-people-study.

[43] Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats*, 151.

[44] Charles, 'ComeUnity and Community in the Face of Impunity', 168.

[45] Robert Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit* (Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 180.

[46] Milton Friedman and other members of the Chicago School of economics, rejected Keynesianism and government spending. In contrast, he argued that it should be severely restricted – focusing solely on defence and policing – with primacy given to the market and private enterprise in all other aspects of economic life. For an extensive study of neoliberal economics and its socio-political effects globally, see: Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Pengion Books, 2008)..

[47] Ibid., 45-128.

for masses of people *and* the government",[48] widening the gap between rich and poor, with the latter increasingly exploited and struggling to survive.

The triumph of neoliberalism brought with it major changes in British society. The first was a systematic attempt to erase the concept of class, along with the collective forms of organisation that it encouraged.[49] Taking advantage of frustration towards trade unions because of the widespread disruption caused by strikes during the Winter of Discontent (1978-9), Thatcher's Conservative government systematically undermined organised labour, which reduced the power of manufacturing industries and shifted the economy towards the financial sectors concentrated in the City of London. In line with neoliberal ideas, Thatcher sought to elevate the individual – emphasising values such as self-enrichment and entrepreneurship. Famously, she once said "there's no such thing as society. There are [only] individual men and women and there are families".[50] This individualistic worldview made the poor responsible for their own poverty, since they lacked the will or natural ability to lift themselves out of their situation. Government decisions to cut taxes on the richest segments of society from 83% to 40%, undermine trade unions and collective bargaining and privatise or dramatically reduce social security provisions were completely obscured by this overarching narrative. New Labour continued in the same vain, and unionisation has consistently been declining since the late 1970s, when it was 50%, reaching a low of 23% in 2017.[51] Neoliberalism can therefore be framed as a class war, fought by the wealthy against the working class.[52] However, rather than focusing solely on *defeating* the latter, Thatcher and her successors aimed at *erasing* their very existence, forcing everyone to compete as individuals within a system stacked in favour of the wealthy.

The second major change which came as a result of the neoliberal consensus from the 1970s, and already alluded to earlier, is the scaling back of government services and increased dependence on the so-called free market. A continuous trend that is visible within this economic model is the punishment of poor communities. The 2008 global economic crash intensified this and unleashed new violence on the country's poor as politicians implemented austerity measures to further scale back government services. Although caused by private greed, the crisis provided an opportunity to deepen the neoliberal consensus and the narrative quickly came to focus on supposed uncontrolled public spending. Funding for services formally provided by the state were either cut or privatised, leading to non-government organisations (particularly charities) increasingly becoming responsible for public welfare and corporations in control of basic human rights, such as housing. While government funding for tax credits, social welfare, disability benefits, legal aid, universal credit, etc. continue to be eroded, the 1,000 wealthiest Britons saw their wealth double within the first eight years post-2008.[53]

Perhaps the starkest change has come in the rapid increase in the number of food bank users since 2008. Rather than providing all its citizens with the means for food security (According to the government, there are at least 2,200 food banks in the UK, with the Trussell Trust, which

[48] Charles, 'ComeUnity and Community in the Face of Impunity', 170. Emphasis in original.
[49] Jones, *Chavs*, 47-8.
[50] Margaret Thatcher in ibid., 47.
[51] Clark and Shankley, 'Ethnic Minorities in the Labour Market in Britain', 130.
[52] Jones, *Chavs*, 40-58.
[53] Ibid., xxi-xxxi.

runs 1,300 of them, providing 2.5 million three-day emergency food supply parcels in 2020-1, a number that has been exponentially increasing since 2011.[54] Figures from 2021 show that 15% of the UK population (excluding Scotland) is food insecure, including over one-fifth of children, with the number likely to continue increasing due to rising energy prices and cuts.[55] In London the numbers are even more worrying, with 21% of Londoners suffering from low or very low food security and more food bank distributions occurring in London, proportionally, than elsewhere in the country.[56] As we will see, this trend is particularly relevant in the case of Who Is Hussain and Sufra, who both, on different scales, address the issue of food insecurity in London through their initiatives.

Another trend, which perhaps has a clearer historical genealogy, is the commodification of housing, which began with Thatcher's decision to sell huge stocks of social housing. It meant that, rather than being a human right and accessible to all, housing was dictated by demand and supply in the capitalist market. As part of her push to remove the "lazy" poor's reliance on government handouts, councils were prevented from replacing housing sold off, which created longer waiting lists and increased prices, leading to homelessness rising by 38% between 1984 and 1989.[57] With the increased concentration of job creation in London, the longerm effects of these policies are felt especially strongly by working class communities in the capital. The cost of living here is between 15 and 58% higher than the rest of the UK, with housing costs making up 56% of net income for London's residents, compared to 37% for the rest of England.[58] To meet this increasing demand, whole neighbourhoods are undergoing regeneration, which inevitably becomes a euphemism for gentrification. This is "where an area rapidly changes its population, caused by an influx of wealthier households, which can cause a displacement of the previous population due to increasing unaffordability of rent and local services provided, resulting in the breakup of established communities and social networks."[59] Inner London areas in South and East London, either neighbouring the City of London (such as Tower Hamlets to the east and Southwark to the south) or with good transport links (such as Woolwich, Hackney and Stratford) are particularly prone to this process.[60] Tower Hamlets in particular, which borders the City of London and contains Canary Wharf, another financial hub, experienced the highest level of gentrification of any London borough from 2010-6.[61] Here, as elsewhere, increases in rent prices threaten the local community, which, as we have seen, is heavily racialised and poor. Areas of outer London are also experiencing gentrification but at a slower rate. A 2021 report by the Runnymede Trust

[54] Gloria Tyler, 'Food Banks in the UK', 14 July 2022, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8585/.

[55] Miranda Bryant, '"We'Re Terrified at What We're Seeing": Food Banks Tell of Soaring Demand', *The Observer*, 6 February 2022, sec. Society, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/06/food-bank-donor-to-to-user-soaring-demand-for-aid.

[56] 'London's Poverty Profile 2022: COVID-19 and Poverty in London', Trust for London, July 2022, 11–18, https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Londons_Poverty_Profile_2022_report_150dpi33_copy_4VN0wdD.pdf.

[57] Jones, *Chavs*, 62.

[58] This is despite wages also being proportionally higher in London also. See: 'London's Poverty Profile 2020'.

[59] 'Gentrification across London | London's Poverty Profile', Trust for London, accessed 30 November 2023, https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/gentrification-across-london/.

[60] Ibid.

[61] 'Shoreditch: How One of London's Most "gentrified" Areas Has Transformed - MyLondon', accessed 30 November 2023, https://www.mylondon.news/news/east-london-news/shoreditch-how-one-londons-most-21069280.

and Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS), found that Brent was experiencing "spillover" gentrification as wealthy residents from Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham, Camden and Ealing were priced out of those areas.[62] Although regeneration often comes with a commitment to build "affordable" housing, this is often vaguely defined and fails to benefit working class communities, who become displaced in the process. Indeed, a report by Brent council found that 80% of market rent in London was not affordable for those it is intended for.[63] Working class communities in the capital, like elsewhere, therefore find themselves threatened by the commodification of housing, which is rooted in the UK's shift towards neoliberal economics.

Steeped in upper class and post-Cold War triumphalism, this consensus has seen the return of unbridled capitalism, which Keynesianism sought to contain. The working class, which, as we have seen, often intersects with racialised social marginalisation, has not only proliferated but find themselves disproportionately affected by these currents. Economic exploitation and inequality, as Marxists have explained as the inevitable consequence of capitalism's classed system, has resulted in the marginalised poor being victims of a socially engineered forms of violence and dehumanisation, so starkly exemplified in the Grenfell Tower fire.

British Muslim Experience

A History of Migration

The history of Islam and Muslims in the British Isles is replete with theological, racial and socio-economic contestations. While the Tudor queen, Elizabeth I, established relations with the Ottoman Empire in 1578 (much to the horror of other Christian rulers in Europe at the time) and there is some evidence of a Muslim presence dating back to this period,[64] it is with the expansion of British colonialism into the Muslim world from the late Eighteenth Century CE, particularly in India, but also parts of East and North Africa, that a substantial Muslim presence can be traced. These early migrants can broadly be divided into four categories:

1. Lascars, from the Urdu *lashkar*, meaning army or *lashkari*, meaning soldier, was a term given to sailors from the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, British Somaliland and Yemen, who were employed to man European ships. Demand for their services increased as white workers rejected the dirty, dangerous and tiring work on coal-powered ships and was encouraged by their relatively low wages, which was between a third and quarter of what British seamen earned.[65] Poor conditions however, meant that many "jumped

[62] Adam Almeida, 'Pushed to the Margins: A Quantitative Analysis of Gentrification in London in the 2010s' (Runnymede Trust & Centre for Labour and Social Studies, June 2021), 23, https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Pushed_to_the_Margins_-_Runnymede__CLASS_report_June_2021.pdf.

[63] Ibid.

[64] The topic of conversion from Christianity to Islam appeared in theological writings in this period and the Spanish word *renegado*, which refers to this process, first entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 1583, suggesting this was a social reality (or at least concern) at the time. There are no statistics however, to back up this anecdotal evidence. See: Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13–20.

[65] Ibid., 30.

ship" and chose to settle in Britain, mostly in port cities such as Cardiff, Glasgow and London. The majority of those that settled were Arab, especially Yemeni.[66]

2. Trade between Britain and various Muslim lands went back centuries. However, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, fuelled by slavery and the UK's colonial exploits, this increased in intensity. Subjects of the Ottoman Empire in particular settled as traders. For example, from the 1830s, various Arab communities settled in Manchester to take advantage of its position as a trading city and exported cotton goods back to their home countries.[67]
3. Domestic servants, both of officials of the East India Company and later the British Raj, also came to Britain in large numbers. These individuals, who were more likely to be Muslim than Hindu, were often maltreated and, if they lost employment, would be left destitute and stranded. Indeed, by 1890 an Ayahs' Home was set up in East London to accommodate around 100 maidservants from India annually.[68]
4. The final group to come to Britain in significant numbers were elites and intellectuals from Muslim lands and particularly northern India. Scottish universities, perhaps because of the significant proportion of the Indian Civil Service manned by Scots, were particularly popular. Prominent individuals included the two founding fathers of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who studied law at Lincoln's Inn in 1892, and Muhammad Iqbal, who studied at the University of Cambridge from 1905-8.[69] While many of these elites returned to their homelands after education, a significant number stayed behind to occupy professional jobs in Britain.

Although in the period before World War Two the British Muslim community can be described as being in its embryonic stage, there were still around 10,000 Muslims in Britain by 1900.[70] It was, however, post-1945 that their numbers significantly increased. The presence of so-called pioneers, along with the attractive prospect of employment in the post-war boom, meant that significant numbers of Muslim migrants came to Britain, particularly from newly independent Pakistan. Indeed, according to Ansari, the NHS would not have been economically feasible without the presence of workers from India, Pakistan, Morocco and other parts of the Middle East who, in addition to being doctors, were concentrated in its poorly paid sectors.[71] Although, as mentioned earlier, racialised people were often exploited, the economic prospects of migration for many still outweighed staying at home, where political instability and low wages were commonplace. For example, by the 1960s, labouring jobs in the Britain offered salaries around thirty times higher than similar jobs in Pakistan.[72] It is no surprise then that when 100,000 people in Mirpur, Pakistan, where the average weekly wage was roughly 37 pence, were displaced by the Pakistani government's decision to build the Mangla Dam in 1960, many used this money to obtain passports and one-way tickets to the UK.[73]

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[66] Ibid., 32.
[67] Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 38.
[68] Ibid., 37.
[69] Ibid., 35-6.
[70] Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 32.
[71] Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, 166.
[72] Ibid., 169.
[73] Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 45–46; Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800,* 169.

From the 1970s, civil unrest and persecution meant that the nature of Muslim migration changed, particularly since various bills were introduced in parliament to limit the flow of people from colonies and the Commonwealth.[74] East African Indians (Khojas), fleeing persecution from newly independent African states such as Kenya and Uganda; Kurds, fleeing persecution in Iraq and Turkey; Afghans, fleeing war from the 1980s; Somalis fleeing civil war and famine from the mid-1980s; and Iraqi Shia in the 1980s, and in greater numbers from 1991, were some of the main groups to arrive, with many settling in London.[75] Many of these later arrivals came from middle class backgrounds (since the costs of migration were unaffordable for the poor) and, while some (notably the Khoja community) were able to translate this into middle class status in the UK, others became a part of the expanding, racialised working class.

London, since the days of empire, has held a unique position when it comes to the migration of Muslim communities. Drawn to the capital for the same reasons others were, London today is roughly 15% Muslim and houses 37% of the UK's Muslim population.[76] As early as the 1600s, the influence of Turkish culture could be seen in the city, when its first coffee house, selling what detractors called "Mahometan gruel" or the "drink of Satan", opened.[77] The aforementioned lascars and traders also came to London in great numbers, while others worked in services, hospitality and catering. The city's first iconic 'curry houses' opened in the 1920s and, by 1946, there were twenty, mostly Sylheti-owned, Indian restaurants in London.[78] While elsewhere in the UK Muslims with Pakistani heritage often dominate, this is not the case in the capital. Rather, there are sizeable Bangladeshi, Arab, Turkish and African communities, making religious experience and exposure more varied. This unique mix is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Brent and other parts of north and west London, which Bowen dubs the "Shia Triangle".[79] She notes how the area became the hub for Iraqi and Iranian Shia Islam in the country, housing several of the key institutions associated with Ayatollahs Khamenei, Khoei and Sistani.[80] When this is combined with the significant Shia Khoja presence in areas such as Stanmore,[81] this triangle becomes the only place in the country where Shia institutions are not vastly outnumbered by Sunni ones.[82]

This multifaceted history of migration and settlement, in many ways, mirrors broader migratory patterns mentioned earlier. It is important to note therefore that Muslims were driven by the same factors as other communities coming to the UK and referring to a homogenous Muslim identity is further complicated by differences in age, gender and

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[74] For more on this topic, see: Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment.*

[75] 15,000 Somalis came as refugees from the mid-1980s; there were around 70-80,000 Iraqis in the UK, with 50% in London, by the early 1990s; 15,000 Turks arrived to Britain in the 1980s and 1990s of which 95% were Kurds. The UK government also agreed to settle 28,6000 of the 80,000 Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin in 1972 and although the majority were Hindu, there was also a sizeable Muslim contingent. For more see: Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 50–51; Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, 177–82.

[76] Across the UK, Muslims make up around 6.5% of the total population, up from 4.8 in 2011. See: 'British Muslims in Numbers', 22–25; 'Census 2021 First Look'.

[77] Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 16.

[78] Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, 53.

[79] Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2014), 135.

[80] Ibid., 139-46.

[81] It is from this community that both Who Is Hussain and Sufra NW London emerged.

[82] Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*, 135.

historical experiences of migration.[83] What it means to be Muslim in Britain is therefore malleable and constantly changing in response to wider social dynamics and does not develop in isolation, nor is it reducible to religious belief.

A History of Othering and Marginalisation

Despite this, it is possible to extract two broad themes, which have been a constant for the majority of Muslims in Britain. Firstly, since the inception of Islam, European Christian responses saw Islam and Muslims as the antithesis to their way of life and the enemies of Christians (and later, a mostly undefined Judeo-Christian civilisation). While this was partly influenced by imperial rivalry between various Muslim and Christian empires, there is evidence of anti-Islam prejudice dating back to eighth century England.[84] Muslims, whether migrants or converts, were treated as the enemy within and their loyalties were questioned. For example, despite establishing diplomatic relations with Muslim peoples, Queen Elizabeth I expressed her concern for Muslim migration to England in January 1601, saying she was "highly disconcerted to understand the great number of Negroes and Blackamoores which are carried into [the] realm… the most of them [being] infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel."[85] Indeed, misconceptions or stereotypes about Muslims articulated in one area of social life would often be reproduced elsewhere.[86] While the context has significantly changed, many medieval stereotypes endure today and Muslims' loyalty and their compatibility with so-called British values continues to be questioned. This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in post-2001 policing and securitisation, which treats Muslim communities as suspects. The 2006 introduction of the Prevent Duty was a watershed moment in this regard and allowed authorities to police behaviours and beliefs that, although not criminal themselves, could indicate a disposition for extremism. Based on a conveyor belt theory, which suggests that there is a direct link between conservative Islamic views and extremism, Prevent looks to intervene in this process and promote a version of Islam that is more in line with (often undefined) British values.[87] The Prevent Duty was expanded in 2015 with the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which obligated all employees in public institutions, including schools, to refer those they considered prone to extremism. This encouraged citizens, who themselves would often harbour anti-Muslim prejudices, to police other marginalised citizens. The effects were immediate, with referrals increasing by 75% in 2016 compared to the previous year.[88] This process, which places Muslims as the natural 'Other' and inherently incompatible with Britishness, continues to define Muslim experiences in Britain today, and has led to their further marginalisation and mutual resentment.

The second factor, which has been explored in detail above, is the reality of poverty and economic exploitation, which defines the lives of the vast majority of British Muslims. Although exceptions have always existed historically, such as the north Indian elite students, and today, with more Muslim millionaires in the UK than at any point in history[89] and a small minority of wealthy Arabs from the Gulf, the majority continue to belong to the racialised working class. Early migratory communities, such as lascars who jumped ship, settled in areas

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[83] Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, 3–5.
[84] Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 3.
[85] Elizabeth I in Ibid., 14.
[86] Ibid., 3.
[87] Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, xxv-xxvii.
[88] Ibid., xxviii.
[89] Ibid., xx.

inhabited by the poor, who were not considered a part of the "civilised" English nation and were treated as a threat to social order.[90] Entering into precarious employment and facing discrimination, which combined racial, religious and gendered dynamics, Muslims are disproportionately represented in indicators of socio-economic deprivation. For example, 40% of Muslims reside in 20% of the most deprived local authorities in England and Wales (which includes eleven from London, such as Tower Hamlets and Brent), a real increase of nearly 500,000 individuals since 2011,[91] and, in London, unemployment rates are highest for Muslims, with 44% of those that are employed paid below the London Living Wage.[92]

Such statistics illustrate the extent to which poverty is an everyday reality for many British Muslims. Therefore, when trying to understand what it means to be a Muslim in Britain today it is important to consider several interlinked factors, which interact within the context of neoliberal hegemony. These are their overwhelming presence in the racialised working class, which finds itself fighting to stay afloat through dwindling welfare support and precarious employment, and a socio-political climate in which they are othered and their loyalty and belonging in Britain continuously brought into question.

Interlocutors' Class Positioning

The social positioning of my interlocutors in Who Is Hussain, Sufra and Nijjor Manush generally reflected these broader trends of othering and marginalisation within the British Muslim population. They generally came from three distinct ethnic backgrounds: second or third-generation South Asians (mostly Bangladeshi or Pakistani); second-generation Arabs or Iranians or second-generation Khojas.

As we have seen, the majority of South Asians come from working class backgrounds. Khalid, for example, describes a relatively typical experience when describing his upbringing:

> We were from a working class family; my dad did well for himself for periods, you know, he worked in restaurants, ended up owning a small restaurant in Skipton for a bit; and my mum worked for a bit in various places in a clothes shop. Oddly enough, now, I think, while I've managed to achieve a certain level of social mobility, I think my family are probably more impoverished than when we first came here. I work as one of the main providers for my family now even though I don't live with them.[93]

While many of these South Asians would come from working class communities back in their home country, this contrasted with migrants of Arab and Iranian origin. They would generally come from positions of relative wealth, with professional jobs, but the degree to which this translated into success in the UK varied. Ameen, for example, describes the difficulties that his parents faced when leaving Iraq:

> Both have degrees in engineering but they've always done working class jobs in the UK, which has put a little bit of a pressure on me, because we [also] grew up working part-time, receiving benefits, that sort of stuff. So

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[90] Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction*, 17.
[91] 'Census 2021 First Look'. 12.
[92] Vizard, Suh, and Cunliffe, 'Inequalities and Disadvantage in London'.
[93] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

> very much in a working class environment and although I wouldn't say [it was] to an extent where we had to go to food banks, but it was a month by month struggle to actually get things in place. So, [for example], a lot of the toys that we had growing up with were donated toys, or given from family, or things like that.[94]

Similarly, Layla describes coming from "humble beginnings" because her father had to "give up his career for the war [in Iraq]",[95] while Sukayna describes her family "building from nothing".[96]

The Muslim community however is not monolithic in this sense and there are certainly those that come from more comfortable economic backgrounds, with varying levels of wealth. Several South Asian participants described themselves as coming from middle class backgrounds, with parents in professional jobs.[97] It was the Khoja community,[98] however, which was prominent in both Who Is Hussain and Sufra, which perhaps represents the wealthiest Muslim community in the UK (alongside Arabs from the Gulf region). Muntazir, describing the Khoja experience, explains how they have always been "entrepreneurial" and so enjoy greater economic success.[99] Generally, therefore, it is common for Khojas have some degree of wealth, often breaking with the norm of economic marginalisation experienced by other Muslim migrant groups.[100]

Despite this variance in class background, all the participants had achieved some level of social mobility through university education (which all had received) and working in so-called professional jobs. This is not an unfamiliar trend among British Muslims and has, perhaps, in part led to the acceptance of neo-liberal myths of social progression and the power of hard work – themes we will return to in later chapters. Despite this progress, however, the experience of my interlocutors highlights the importance of taking a relational approach to economics and class. While, according to social stratification models, many Muslims would now be considered middle class (due to their university degrees or job titles such as lawyer, doctor, academic, etc.), this masks a reality of economic exploitation. This disconnect was perhaps most apparent for Maya, an academic:

> People assume things about having this many degrees and having one of the highest degrees, and therefore it must mean you have accumulated

[94] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.
[95] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.
[96] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.
[97] Amena, interview with author, 26 November 2021; Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[98] Khoja refers to particular groups of Indian Hindus that converted to Islam from the 13th Century onwards. While some remain in the subcontinent, many also migrated to Zanzibar from 1840-70, settling in various parts of eastern Africa. When then President of Uganda, Idi Amin, ordered the expulsion of the country's Asian minority (which included many Khojas) in August 1972, just under 30,000 moved to the UK. Historical ties to the Agha Khan and trade means that Khojas generally have a higher degree of economic power and capital than other South Asian Muslim groups.
For more, see: 'The Khojas – History and lineage', accessed 5 July 2022, https://www.hujjat.org/blogs/blog-the-khojas-history-and-lineage/; 'Khoja', accessed 5 July 2022, https://www.everyculture.com/South-Asia/Khoja.html,.
[99] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.
[100] As we will see later in this chapter, the wealth of this community has been utilised by groups such as Who Is Hussain and Sufra.

assets and wealth and actually no, I haven't. I've accumulated a lot of jobs with precarious contracts.[101]

Despite this social mobility, in a similar manner to Maya, very few Muslims become owners of capital. Here, it is worth invoking Rieger's distinction between privilege and power, which he argues is essential to understanding our social and economic reality. While the reality of social mobility may translate into receiving some social privileges, he argues, this does not necessarily result in power. The continued precarity of middle class existence and lack of wealth means that, in fact, their reality is closer to that of the working than capitalist class.[102] Therefore, although material conditions have certainly improved for many Muslims, they remain among the poorest groups in British society and social mobility has not guaranteed economic stability. This experience has had an impact on British Muslim culture, political sensibilities and religion – something explored in later chapters.

Case Studies

It is within this context that the three case studies – Who Is Hussain, Sufra and Nijjor Manush – being used for this study operate. Although varying greatly in their outlooks and activities, all three organisations, in some way, focus on tackling class and economic inequalities in the London context. By speaking with Muslims in these organisations, later chapters will explore how they use and interpret religion to negotiate the social needs of their communities and challenge structural issues. Before doing this, however, it is important to understand who these organisations are. Using open-source research (such as the organisations' websites, social media pages and articles written by or about the case studies), oral histories and semi-structured interviews, this preliminary section provides a contextual overview of the three organisations' origins and activities, outlining the various means through which they seek to tackle socio-economic problems in London.

Who Is Hussain

Who Is Hussain is an international charity that launched its first campaign in the Islamic holy month of Muharram, November 2012. Each year the month is commemorated, particularly by Shia Muslims, for the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali (d. 680 CE), the third Shi'a Imam and grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who refused to pledge allegiance to the caliph of the time, Yazid ibn Mu'awiyya. While today the event is predominantly marked by lectures by Islamic scholars [*majlis* pl. *majalis*], lamentations and processions, throughout Islamic history it has also periodically inspired political resistance. As Ali, who is a part of Who Is Hussain's core team, noted, "whether you were pro the Iranian Revolution [of 1979]… or affected by Saddam Hussein [referring to the 1991 and 1999 uprisings in southern Iraq], you knew there was a power in the *hussaini* message, which was central to both these events".

Who Is Hussain was born from a frustration with the way in which Hussain's legacy was "kept in the four walls of the Shia *masajid* and *husayniyyas* [buildings that hold Muharram *majalis*]",

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[101] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

[102] For more on Rieger's discussion on the difference between privilege and power, see: Joerg Rieger, 'Instigating Class Struggle? The Study of Class in Religion and Theology and Some Implications for Gender, Race, and Ethnicity', in *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagaments after a Long Silence*, ed. Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity*, Dispatches (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).

according to Ali. A group of young men from the Khoja community in northwest London, mostly concentrated around the Khoja mosque in Stanmore, discussed ways in which this could change. They decided to develop a website, www.whoishussain.org, which would make Hussain's story easily accessible to an English-speaking audience. Additionally, they raised the funds for campaign posters to be placed at 25 Underground stations and sixty buses in London between 14 November and 28 December, 2012.[103] Who Is Hussain claim to have "no religious, political, or monetary aspirations" but only to "inspire you to become a better person, using the eternal example of Hussain."[104] However, the campaign quickly "spiralled out of control" when people from across the world contacted the team to ask if they could use the organisation's material and open their own chapters.[105] As Ali reflects, "We did not expect this to happen… we did not have any aspirations at that time."[106] In this formative period, as well as for future organisational expansion, the founders were able to utilise the economic resources of their Khoja community, which supplied them with the financial resources necessary to maintain momentum.[107] In this regard, the Khoja diaspora's historical and contemporary links to trade in eastern Africa and South Asia has given them greater wealth and capital than many other Muslim communities in the UK. This is worth highlighting as, in contrast to others, the founders of Who Is Hussain were able to take advantage of a stronger class and economic position to develop the organisation.

The first few years saw Who Is Hussain rapidly grow to become an international presence, particularly during the annual Muharram mourning period. It officially registered itself as a charity in the UK in 2016 and today, has fifty teams across six continents (Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, Oceania and South America), including three in the UK: London, Birmingham and Leicester. The London office, located in Harrow, West London, furthermore, still acts as its international headquarters but, despite being rooted in the Shia community of north and west London, has core team members and volunteers from across Greater London.

Following its launch in 2012 it quickly expanded its focus and transformed into "a social justice movement… trying to build a more compassionate and caring society with justice and dignity for all… inspired by the timeless legacy of Hussain."[108] Ali summarised this shift, explaining, "we no longer need to be people who just talk the talk, we need to walk the walk."[109] Indeed, it was this praxis and explicit stance, rather than solely the information sharing, which connected the organisation to Hussain's movement. Rather than focusing on one issue, however, Who Is Hussain teams undertake a range of activities to tackle local issues. Ameen, a long serving volunteer, explains this approach:

> It's not the most traditional charity… it wants to live the values of Imam Hussain within the struggles that are currently happening in that certain

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[103] 'WHO IS HUSSAIN?', Your Local Guardian, 27 November 2012, https://www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/youngreporter/10073975.who-is-hussain/.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] 'Our Story', *Who Is Hussain*, 17 November 2023, https://whoishussain.org/about/story/.
[109] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

area at that certain point and simultaneously support wherever is required.[110]

These multifarious activities include organising blood drives every Muharram; providing life-saving surgeries to Iraqi children;[111] planting trees to tackle climate change in Karachi, Pakistan;[112] and providing 30,000 bottles of water in Flint, Michigan during the 2016 water contamination crisis.[113] The organisation emphasises water distribution in particular by connecting the immorality of denying anybody water to the story of Hussain, where he, his family and his followers, were denied water for several days by Yazid's army.[114]

Like their international activities, their UK activities have also been designed to tackle local issues. The London chapter has an active contingent of volunteers and organises food drives each Saturday at 5pm near Charing Cross Station in Central London. Starting in 2015, these food drives have become a permanent fixture and, in July 2020, reached a landmark 250 consecutive weeks.[115] Despite this, Layla, who has been volunteering with Who Is Hussain for over a year, downplayed their achievements, highlighting the ever-increasing need for food drives: "It is saturated. There are so many charities doing [what we are doing] but clearly there isn't one doing it [on] Saturday at 5 o'clock! What I'm trying to say is there's never enough."[116] Indeed, as mentioned earlier, over one-fifth of Londoners suffer from food insecurity (nearly two million people), making the demand for initiatives such as these far greater than anything that one organisation can meet.[117]

The food drive, which runs for an hour, attracts around eighty to one hundred people from the homeless community per week. Many of these "guests", as the volunteers refer to them, are regulars and recognise the Who Is Hussain members by face.[118] In addition to providing free food and drink, they provide a variety of other services. One service, which went viral online, was when volunteer barbers, Hussain Jamali, who had been homeless himself, and Andy Sarsby, cut hair for food drive guests. As then events coordinator, Shah Abbas Mir, explained, "It's not just about cutting hair for free, but about… making people feel good and empowered."[119] Furthermore, each week a mental health trained guest relations team is

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[110] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.

[111] Ayaz (Who is Hussain), 'Who Is Hussain's #GIVE Campaign Saves Life of 4 Young Iraqi Children', *Who Is Hussain* (blog), 18 March 2017, https://whoishussain.org/updates/who-is-hussains-give-campaign-saves-life-of-4-young-iraqi-children/.

[112] Ayaz (Who is Hussain), 'Mission Green: Reps in Karachi Plant 550 Trees', *Who Is Hussain* (blog), 1 May 2016, https://whoishussain.org/updates/mission-green-reps-in-karachi-plant-550-trees/.

[113] 'American Muslims Donate 30,000 Bottles of Water to Help Ease Michigan Federal State of Emergency | The Independent | The Independent', accessed 30 November 2023, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/american-muslims-donate-30-000-bottles-of-water-to-help-ease-federal-state-of-emergency-in-michigan-a6818486.html.

[114] Ibid.

[115] 'Westminster Homeless Charity Reaches Milestone with 250th Food Drive', *South London News* (blog), 28 July 2020, https://londonnewsonline.co.uk/westminster-homeless-charity-reaches-milestone-with-250th-food-drive/.

[116] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.

[117] 'London's Poverty Profile 2022: COVID-19 and Poverty in London', 11–18.

[118] Amena, interview with author, 26 November 2021.

[119] Ayesha Ghani, 'This Muslim And Jewish Duo Cutting Homeless People's Hair For Free Will Give You Life', Buzzfeed, accessed 30 November 2023, https://www.buzzfeed.com/aishagani/muslim-and-jewish-barbers-cutting-hair?utm_term=.heldmXMyd#.mcL407Ob4.

present to speak to "guests", support them and provide help where they can. Layla, a member of this team, explains that the team comes from "educated, economically privileged backgrounds so we all utilise our skills: we have a pharmacist, for example, a lawyer."[120] In this sense, the Who Is Hussain team seeks to provide more holistic care for the community it serves. On one occasion where I attended the food drive, for example, a recently made homeless Muslim man was provided with a prayer mat after complaining to the team about the difficulties of praying while homeless.[121] While the team has maintained a consistent presence in Central London, preliminary plans are in place to expand and set up two further food drives. The hope is that these will be in more residential areas, potentially allowing for guests to attend more regularly and encourage a sense of community.[122]

As an organisation, Who Is Hussain grew organically out of a desire to share the story of Hussain with a wider audience and inspire people towards good deeds in their communities. This desire, as well as the outpouring of support for the initial campaign, however, led the organisation in a new direction, emphasising the importance of action.

Sufra NW London

Sufra is a food bank founded in October 2013 on St. Raphael's Estate in Brent, northwest London, by Mohammed Sadiq Mamdani, who is also from a Khoja background. A social entrepreneur who has done extensive charitable work in the British Muslim community, Mamdani set up the Muslim Youth Helpline in 2001 to provide counselling services to Muslim youth;[123] the Ansar Youth Project (AYP) in 2005 as a youth club for disadvantaged young people in northwest London;[124] and Al-Mizan Charitable Trust in 2010 to provide small grants to people facing financial difficulties.[125] Akbar, a friend of Mamdani's who has worked at Sufra since its formation, says, "Sufra was [already] in his [Mamdani's] head" while he was director of Al-Mizan and running AYP.[126] Experience in those other organisations highlighted UK poverty to Akbar and Mamdani, bringing them "out of this mindset about poverty being something foreign." Akbar explains, "OK, these kids don't have swollen bellies or flies going around them, but it does not mean that it's not poverty."[127] AYP was a particularly eye-opening experience for the founders of Sufra. Akbar explains:

> there were kids at the youth club that were caught stealing food from the shops and the reason they were [doing this] was because there was no food in the house. Their mums were crying and they were 12-year-old kids that were feeling helpless. That highlighted a problem [to us].[128]

Feeling helpless because they could not individually help each child and seeing how little food aid was available in Brent, a borough in which 20% of children in 2013 depended on the one

[120] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021
[121] Participant observation, 30 October 2021.
[122] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021
[123] 'About Us', *Muslim Youth Helpline* (blog), accessed 6 February 2022, https://myh.org.uk/about-us/.
[124] 'How It All Began – Meet Kumayl – Ansar Youth Project', *Ansar Youth Project* (blog), 11 November 2021, https://ansaryouth.org.uk/how-it-all-began-meet-kumayl/.
[125] 'About Us', Al-Mizan Charitable Trust, accessed 6 February 2022, https://www.almizantrust.org.uk/gallery.
[126] Akbar, interview with author, 4 November 2021.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.

free meal they received at school and would go to bed hungry, led to the creation of Sufra.[129] Reflecting its roots in the Muslim community, *sufra* literally means "dining table" in Arabic.[130] However, since its inception it has been conscious to stay away from confessionalism, welcoming volunteers and guests from any religious or non-religious background.[131] Indeed, this is partly linked to feedback they received from the community about The Trussel Trust,[132] which was the only organisation providing food aid in Brent pre-2013. As Akbar explains, they were

> not meeting the needs of the local community… the feedback from people that used it was that they were not comfortable – it's missionary work. The Trussel Trust is declared as a Christian organisation… you have to go there and listen to them talk about Jesus… in an area heavily populated by Muslims.[133]

Sufra therefore was born to fill a gap and support diverse communities that were struggling under the weight of poverty and austerity measures in Brent.

It took Mamdani and the small initial group of volunteers only a month to realise "that [the need for Sufra] was so much bigger than we'd ever imagined."[134] While it initially aimed to simply provide food parcels, this quickly developed into a food bank, which continues to expand its services. Indeed, they no longer focus solely on food aid but look to create "a community united to address the causes and consequences of poverty."[135] With a certain "boldness in its messaging", Sufra is very clear that it exists as a result of the government's failure to pursue policies that promote equality and poverty alleviation.[136] In this context, it takes its responsibilities seriously as a grassroots charity

> embedded in the local community… committed to remaining responsive to the changing needs of those [they] serve, representing their voices and engaging them in the decisions that affect them.[137]

This outlook has meant that they continue to adapt in response to the changing demands of the poor in Brent. For example, Sufra's Refugee Resettlement Programme started quite organically, as Zehra, an employee at the organisation, explains:

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[129] Ibid.
Today around 32% of Brent's residences and 36% of children live in poverty, with unemployment at just under 7%. See: 'Poverty & Inequality Data Brent', Trust for London, accessed 30 November 2023, https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/brent-poverty-and-inequality-indicators/.
[130] 'About Us - Sufra NW London', 4 December 2015, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/what-we-do/about-us/.
[131] Ibid.
[132] As mentioned earlier, The Trussell Trust is the main food aid distributor in the UK, running around 1,300 food banks.
[133] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.
[134] Ibid.
[135] 'About Us - Sufra NW London'
[136] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.
[137] 'Statement of Principles - Sufra NW London', 17 August 2021, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/what-we-do/statement-of-principles/, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/what-we-do/statement-of-principles/.

> Sufra started off addressing hunger and poverty in St. Raphs [St. Raphael's Estate] and then the council approached Sufra and said "We're sponsoring this many Syrian refugees, would you be interested in filling in the gaps where we can't support them?" which meant getting things like bedding, necessities, picking people up from the airport, helping them settle in and put on events for them… We really just had to create the role.[138]

This fluidity has led to the charity providing a number of services. Currently Sufra addresses the needs of the community through the following programmes:

- *Food Bank:* Sufra provides emergency supplies of essential food and toiletries to individuals and families in need of support. Working with a large number of referral agencies across Brent, people are able to collect food parcels from three separate locations across the borough: Sufra headquarters on St. Raphael's Estate (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11am and 3pm); The Pakistan Community Centre in Willesden Green (Tuesdays, 11am to 4pm); and Ansar Youth Project in Wembley (Fridays, 9am to 12 noon).
  A team of volunteers puts these parcels together at Sufra five days a week, with the food parcels varying in size according to family size. Parcels include pasta, rice, grains, beans, biscuits, sweet treats, toilet roll and a variety of other products[139] that are donated to the food bank by members of the community and businesses.
- *Fresh Meal Service:* This is designed for guests in financial crisis that, due to a lack of facilities or health conditions, cannot collect or prepare food and entails delivering nutritious meals every Friday for six weeks – a mix of fresh and frozen to last the week. It is supplemented by easy-to-eat basics, such as teabags, soups and snacks.
- *NHS Project:* Working in conjunction with registered NHS departments, Sufra provides pre-packed non-perishable parcels to hospitals, health centres and community-based nursing teams to distribute to patients that are at risk of malnutrition once discharged, living alone, unable to travel to the food back or face difficulties purchasing food. These parcels are distributed at the discretion of healthcare staff, not Sufra itself.
- *Community Kitchen:* Initially served every Friday in Sufra's office building, the community kitchen now serves two or three course meals every day at different locations across northwest London. All are welcome to attend, particularly the homeless, families in food poverty and socially isolated individuals. It serves up to ninety guests each day and provides a space for community building, as well as a meal. Younger volunteers also run a nursery during the dinner to give parents the flexibility to attend and enjoy themselves. In addition to weekly dinners, themed dinner nights, for example at Christmas, Diwali and during Ramadan, are also used to celebrate the local community's diversity.[140]
- *St. Raphael's Edible Garden:* was developed from a food growing project for the community and transformed an abandoned space on the estate into a garden. In addition to providing fruit, vegetables and eggs for the Community Kitchen, it also provides a range of education courses, vocational training and volunteer

[138] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.
[139] Observation, 15 November 2021.
[140] 'Community Kitchen - Sufra NW London', 19 March 2018, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/get-involved/community-kitchen/, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/get-involved/community-kitchen/.

opportunities. These include a Beginners Woodwork Course, which gives the "foundations of how to DIY" and a Nature Kids Club, where children can "garden, chat and share experiences". Additionally, it also runs a Garden Market every weekend, where visitors can pay what they like for fresh fruit and vegetables. In the past, it also hosted a weekly Chicken Club, an educative course for families to learn about chickens; Forest Academy, a six week course where seven to sixteen year olds develop knowledge and skills (such as building outdoor shelters and cooking on campfires); Artisanal Workshops; and Tipi Reading Time, where bedtime stories are told to children.

Sukayna, who volunteers in the garden, describes it as "a very crucial location" that has developed a "sort of food activism" at Sufra.[141] She also describes how it has created a supportive, "healthy community", which brings people together.

- *Advice Services:* These are designed to help those guests that need assistance in navigating the benefits system or are facing other poverty-related issues. Sufra provides face-to-face guidance on issues including benefits, housing and employment, as well as a drop-in service every Tuesday and Thursday.
- *Food Academy:* This six-week course, targeting eleven to eighteen year olds, was developed in response to the lack of basic cooking skills and knowledge about health and nutrition among young guests. It is an AQA accredited course[142] that gives young people a qualification in food preparation, kitchen skills and healthy eating. Additionally, it supports them with literacy, numeracy and CV writing where necessary. It is currently on hold. In the past Sufra has also run a Food Academy Plus course, which was a four week intensive programme for adults to secure employment in the catering industry. It combined business and catering skills training with personal development opportunities. Participants were also confirmed an interview with one of Sufra's business partners in the industry.
- *OpenARMs Programme:* As mentioned above, this programme developed in response to an influx of Syrian refugees, which Brent Council asked for help in assisting. Since its inception as the Refugee Resettlement Programme, it has been rethought to more accurately represent the work that Sufra does with asylum seekers, vulnerable EU migrants and other people with precarious immigration status, in addition to refugees.[143] It provides a tailored Personal Support Plan to each guest to identify their particular needs and goals. In addition to accessing Sufra's other services, they provide Free conversational English classes, coffee mornings and Supper Clubs, which allow refugees to share their culture through a curated menu in order to raise money from donors. In the past, they have also organised life skills workshops, a women's support group, children's homework club and regular outings for refugees to learn more about UK life and culture and to support them in integrating into society.
- *Community Wellbeing Project*: A new project that has been piloted in 2023, individuals are given access to £25 worth of shopping from the Community Shop, free snacks from the Community Café, free hot meals at the Community Kitchen twice a week and a range of welfare advice and social activities for a £4 weekly membership fee. Based in

[141] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[142] AQA is one of the largest awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and offers vocational qualifications in addition to holds exams in various subjects at GCSE and A-Level.

[143] Zehra, interview with author.

- Harrow, northwest London, this service is designed to provide necessary services and create a friendly community atmosphere.
- In addition to these substantial services Sufra also provides a range of volunteering opportunities for the wider community and a Directory of Services, which collates information about a variety of specialist services in and around Brent and nationally.[144]

This extensive list shows how seriously Sufra has taken its mission to tackle the causes and consequences of poverty and, from its humble beginnings and objectives, been required to expand to tackle an ever-growing number of issues. It also speaks to the impact that neoliberal politics has had on Brent in particular and the severity and range of issues that regular people face. Since its founding in 2013 it has become embedded in the local area and a hub through which a sense of community has developed. Their current use of the hashtag #MoreThanAFoodBank on social media certainly rings true from speaking to volunteers and members of the community. Sukayna summarises the importance of the organisation, saying, "If Sufra didn't exist there would be a whole cohort of people really struggling… things like food, school uniform, refugee resettlement. There's a huge gap there that Sufra is addressing."[145]

Nijjor Manush

The final case study reflects a different approach to engaging questions of poverty and class inequality. While Who Is Hussain and Sufra employ the institutional models of the modern NGO, Nijjor Manush is a more fluid, grassroots organisation of activists. It was formed at the beginning of 2018 by a group of Muslim Bengali activists that wanted to reclaim and revive the radical activism of British Bangladeshis in the 1960s and 1970s. Like Who Is Hussain and Sufra, its formation was organic, coming out of a series of online conversations, first between four individuals and eventually a group of ten.[146] Although the organisation is not explicitly religious nor draws heavily on religious motifs, Islam plays a key role in the praxis of many of the individuals involved.[147] Maya explains how they took inspiration from groups such as the Bangladeshi Youth Front and British Black Panthers (which had several prominent South Asian members) and the mass mobilisations by Bengalis in the 1970s.[148] Of particular importance in the organisation's discourse is the anti-racism struggles, led by groups such as the Anti-Racist Committee for Asians in East London, to combat 'Paki-bashing' by Far-Right groups, and housing rights groups, such as the Tower Hamlets Squatters Union and Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG).[149] The Battle of Brick Lane in May 1978, where 10,000 marched to Downing Street to protest against the racially motivated murder of 24 year old Altab Ali is also

[144] A full list of Sufra's services can be found on their website: 'Home - Sufra NW London', 9 November 2023, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/, https://www.sufra-nwlondon.org.uk/.
[145] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.
[146] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
[149] For more on these mobilisations, see: Paul Field et al., eds., *Here to Stay, Here to Fight: A 'Race Today' Anthology* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

considered a key watershed moment.[150] Maya describes feeling "deflated" that, from the 1980s,

> South Asians took a backseat and… became very inward looking… [It] resembled what you hear about the model minority complex… South Asians feeling like we fought for our basics, we're no longer Pakis, we're going to make it work, we're going to put our heads down and get on with it.[151]

Shelly echoed this frustration, noting that there are many Bengali cultural groups, particularly around east London, but "no agitation or political movement." Further, most of these groups are very secular, patriarchal, monolithic and run exclusively by people from Dhaka, while the majority of British Bengalis are Sylheti.[152] The group agreed that there was a need for something on the Left, which could continue the legacy of Bengali political mobilisation and fight for the issues that mattered. Shelly succinctly summarises this desire:

> I wanted to organise, I wanted to agitate, I wanted to get people riled up about things that they need to be riled up about instead of just celebrating cultural stuff all the time.[153]

Nijjor Manush describes itself as an "independent campaigning group that aims to educate young Bengalis in the UK to challenge issues facing women, working class communities and people of colour today."[154] The name, which means "our own people" in Bangla, and the organisation's logo, which is in the colours of the Bangladesh flag, reflect Nijjor Manush's roots and main constituency. However, the founders are very clear that they are "not using the identity politics that other groups were".[155] Rather, Maya explains the ethos behind the name in the following terms:

> when we coined that together as a group, "our own people", we coined it to reflect the communalism, the collective that we believe in. People might assume, when they see the Bangladeshi flag and think this is a nationalistic project, which it isn't… As much as we're about the Bangladeshi community, it's about linking it to various other communities in the UK and their struggles also.[156]

This perspective is reflected in their two key areas of activity. Firstly, they look to educate people, particularly Bengalis, on their radical histories and the contribution that the diaspora has made towards resisting oppression in Bangladesh and elsewhere. This was an important consideration for the founders from the outset and during formative discussions about the scope of the organisation, where they chose to target the Bengali rather than wider South

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[150] Salma Haidrani, '"The Fight Still Isn't over": Remembering the "Battle of Brick Lane" 40 Years On', Time Out London, 27 July 2018, https://www.timeout.com/london/news/the-fight-still-isnt-over-remembering-the-battle-of-brick-lane-40-years-on-072718.
[151] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
[152] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021. The divide between people from Dhaka and Sylhet has economic connotations as people from the former are generally from more wealthy, urban class backgrounds.
[153] Ibid.
[154] 'Who We Are - Nijjor Manush', accessed 9 February 2022, https://nijjormanush.com/who-we-are/.
[155] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[156] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

Asian community. Feeling like "a minority within a minority",[157] they were aware that Bangladeshis needed a safe space in which they could reconcile with their own past, particularly the events of the 1971 Liberation War.[158] Nijjor Manush organised an event, entitled "Bangladesh at 50", on 26 March 2021, where fifty to sixty attendees, including elders who had lived through the war, spoke about their experiences and their memories of discussions surrounding the events of 1971.[159] In addition to coming to terms with this history, they have also organised several cultural events, particularly around upholding a connection between the diaspora and Bangla and Sylheti language.

In keeping with Nijjor Manush's outlook, events around history and culture are intended to have a political impact, rather than simply being a celebration of an abstract culture detached from the realities of the diaspora. This is perhaps most clear in their Bangla Fora campaign, launched in November 2021. *Bangla fora* is a colloquial term, popularised in the 1970s and 1980s, referring to children's educational programmes that would connect Bengali youth to their community and culture.[160] The organisation's take on this practice aims to develop participants' skills as community organisers and activists, grounding them in the wider context of Bangladeshi activism in the UK. It mixes educational activities about the history of the diaspora with modern methods of anti-racism activism, digital campaigning and community outreach.[161] The first batch of workshops consisted of eight sessions, which took place between November 2021 and November 2022. The first session, entitled "A People on the Move: The Rise of Asian Organising in Britain", discussed the emergence of Bengali political consciousness, exploring the diaspora's involvement in the 1971 Liberation War and emergence of Britain's Black Power movement, which incorporated the Asian community. The second session, entitled "Remembering Resistance", was an exploration of Bengali resistance against the British and, later, the Pakistan state. It assessed their various tactics and lessons that could be learnt from it for activism today. The third session, "Beymani: Navigating the British Political System", focused on developing community organising skills in the context of power relations, using examples such as the Farmers Protests in India and Kill the Bill campaigns in the UK, to extract lessons on how to build effective campaigns. The fourth session, "Khobor aar Kichcha: Shaping the narrative for campaigns in the media", discussed how to gain publicity and coverage for events, with a particular focus on how to engage with the media. The fifth session, which was the first to happen in-person, focused on how to build relationships, power and diverse campaigns. Session six was a book launch for Nijjor Manush co-founder, Azfar Shafi's, *Race to the Bottom: Reclaiming Antiracism*, which was co-authored with Ilyas Nagdee.[162] It focused on the rise and fall of radical antiracism and how the

[157] Ibid.

[158] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September, 2021; Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021. Systematic discrimination by the Pakistani government, dominated by West Pakistan, since Partition in 1947, and the refusal to accept the election victory of East Pakistan-based Awami League in December 1970, led to calls for self-determination by Bengali nationalists. The West Pakistani establishment's subsequent repression, particularly the Pakistani army's infamous Operation Searchlight, which began in March 1971, led to the death of up to 3 million Bengalis and mass rape of Bengali women. The Liberation War ended on 16 December 1971 with the Pakistani Army surrendering and Bangladesh seceding from Pakistan.

[159] 'Events - Nijjor Manush', accessed 30 November 2023, https://nijjormanush.com/events/.; Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Shafi and Nagdee, *Race to the Bottom*.

movement was co-opted. Session seven, entitled “Hot Strike Summer”, took place in the context of a wave of industrial action in the summer of 2022, and focused on how to organise in the workplace. Session eight, the final in the series, entitled “Here to Stay, Here to Fight!”, after the aforementioned collection by Race Today, recounted the history of resistance to anti-immigration measures in the UK. Amrit Wilson, a prominent campaigner in the 1970s spoke at the event, along with members of the Tower Hamlets Anti-Raids Network, which organises community campaigns to stop immigration officials from arresting migrants deemed to have entered the country illegally.[163]

Bangla Fora is a bridge between Nijjor Manush’s first campaign area – radical histories – and their second: critical interventions. This aims to organise the community around domestic and international issues that affect them, such as poverty, gentrification and state violence. To date, the majority of their activism has been centred around the Save Brick Lane campaign, which looks to resist gentrification in the Brick Lane area, which “represents centuries of struggle by migrants [including Bangladeshis] coming to build a life in Britain.”[164] As mentioned earlier, this gentrification has had adverse effects across London, particularly in inner-city boroughs. Located just east of the City of London, the capital’s financial hub, the borough of Tower Hamlets has faced particularly large pressure by developers to regenerate, which has a detrimental effect on local communities. The owners of the Old Truman Brewery, who own significant amounts of land in the area, are proposing to build a shopping mall with four floors of corporate offices on Brick Lane, which campaigners say threatens the cultural quality of the area and ignores the needs of local residents, such as affordable housing and workspaces.[165] Furthermore, they accuse the City of London of land grabs and Truman Brewery of using intimidation to force businesses on land they own to agree to the plans. Home to the country’s largest Bengali community, which is also overwhelmingly Muslim, Nijjor Manush has been instrumental in the resistance, leafleting local businesses and residents,[166] organising protests and fundraising to legally challenge the council’s approval of the regeneration plans. Reflecting its ethos of working with other communities, they work with other local groups on the campaign, and connect with other similar struggles across the country, such as the Save Latin Village campaign in Seven Sisters, north London. Through their involvement, they have become embedded in the local community, earning the trust of many, and revived some hope among the community that they can protect their interests and be listened to.[167] At the time of writing, a legal appeal had been launched against the Tower Hamlets Council’s decision to approve the Truman Brewery’s proposal and public consultations were taking place.

Nijjor Manush is a unique organisation that seeks to “continue the radical legacies of [Bengali] communities that fought fascists, who fought state violence and to continue to uphold the principles of anti-racism.”[168] Built on top of a frustration with the lack of political agitation in

[163] For more information on the Bangla Fora, see: ‘Bangla Fora - Nijjor Manush’, 31 October 2021, https://nijjormanush.com/bangla-fora/; ‘Nijjormanush (@nijjormanush) • Instagram Photos and Videos’, accessed 28 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/nijjormanush/.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] According to Maya Rajina, a member of Nijjor Manush, they collected 550 signatures from residents and 140 from local businesses. (Subaltern London: Neighbourhoods of Resistance and Care event, 17 November 2021)
[167] Ibid.
[168] ‘Who We Are - Nijjor Manush’.

community groups, they recognise "the space for a radical, diasporic voice that is political, educative and supportive."[169] Addressing the needs of the British Bengali community, which is disproportionately represented in the racialised working class, they are a radical voice that challenges the status quo.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined some of the most important contextual points that underpin this study and life in modern day Britain. Two themes are particularly important in this regard, namely, the presence of a racialised working class and emergence of neoliberal hegemony. The latter, which has resulted in the rapid scaling back in government services and primacy being given to the market, has meant that, while the rich get richer, the country's poor are increasingly dependent on an ever-contracting pool of jobs and resources to survive. Racialised communities, due to a wide array of factors, including deliberate and calculated exploitation of their labour from the days of empire, are particularly at risk in this milieu. Consequently, it is essential to see race and class as mutually constitutive in Britain today. Muslims, making up a significant portion of these minoritised groups, generally share in this experience of marginalisation. This is, however, compounded further by a process of othering, which questions the loyalty of Muslims and places them in opposition to British society.

The three organisations – Who Is Hussain, Sufra and Nijjor Manush – signify a small but impactful sample of Muslim groups, networks, and individuals seeking to navigate these interlinked dynamics in London and beyond. Although greatly varied and representing different ideological positions, they are united in their praxis, which looks to combat class inequality and create a more equal society. The remainder of this thesis builds on in-depth interviews with participants to understand how their religious beliefs inform, shape and change as a result of their activism. This in turn lays the foundations from which a new, liberative theology to combat class exploitation and economic inequality is developed – embedded in the British context, it responds to its material conditions of the economically marginalised and looks to change their lived reality.

[169] Ibid.

PART II
The Theological Imperatives of Economic Liberation

4. Religion's Different Faces: Competing Islams and the Karbala Paradigm

> Looking at life from the underside of history, liberation theology is in some ways an attempt to retrieve authenticity from the victors, to free it from the notion that it is irrevocably tied to the powerful… Given that the focus of liberation theology is the 'non-subjects' of history, the marginalised, they [are] the determiners of authenticity based on their interests. – Farid Esack[1]

> Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala. – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini[2]

> It is in this period that 'dying' for a human being guarantees the 'life' of a nation. [Hussain's] martyrdom is a means whereby faith can remain. It bears witness to the fact that great crimes, deception, oppression and tyranny rule. It proves that truth is being denied. It reveals the existence of values which are destroyed and forgotten. It is a red protest against a black sovereignty. It is a shout of anger in the silence which has cut-off the tongues. – Ali Shariati[3]

Introduction

One of Liberation Theology's most important insights is that religion cannot be essentialised to mean one thing. Rather, various contexts and power and social relations will produce diverse interpretations and lead to particular readings dominating. Just like intellectuals, such as Ali Shariati, discussed previously, British Muslim activists showed an awareness of various trends of religious thought that were present in their communities. They were critical of apolitical readings which, although not explicitly, refuse to engage with politics in anything more than a superficial manner and therefore do little to challenge the overall political structure. In contrast, reactionary trends explicitly align with oppressive power structures, naturalising and justifying them through religion. Activists elucidated an alternative, liberative religion that was in opposition to both of these. It emphasised the necessity of combining worship with social action and critiques the mystification of religion in apolitical and reactionary trends. It seeks to intervene in history in favour of the oppressed and marginalised, consequently challenging the existing system and seeking to build an alternative.

This chapter begins by asking the question – who has the authority to produce religious knowledge? – showing that defending the agency of activists or the oppressed is essential to challenge interpretations of Islam that serve the interests of the powerful. After this, the chapter outlines the activists' critiques of apolitical and reactionary religion, with a particular

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[1] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 86.

[2] *Everyday Is Ashura, Every Land Is Karbala | Imam Khomeini (R)|||| #Wilayit_Media ||||*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzHlJHFdVEQ.

[3] Shariati, *Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness*, 39.

focus on how this manifests itself in the economic sphere with regards to class exploitation and inequality. After doing so, it explores how they lay the intellectual foundation for an alternative, which contests mainstream interpretations of the texts and history, while emphasising different principles and meanings. It ends by discussing how the story of Hussain ibn Ali (d. 680), the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and third Shia Imam, who, despite the existence of apolitical and reactionary trends, took the path of liberation, praxis and revolutionary change. For many of the activists in Who Is Hussain and Sufra, his example embodies a religion that combines worship with social action. Today, it can be used as a paradigm by liberation theologians to illustrate the validity and necessity of walking in his path to combat the various forms of oppression that still exist.

Questions of Religious Authority

Who Can Make Religious Knowledge?

Religious authority is a deeply contested topic among Muslims, with questions regularly being posed, particularly in minority contexts, over the role of the *shaykh*, *imam* or *ustadh*.[4] Issues such as the generational gap between older, first generation immigrants that hold positions of leadership and a younger audience; the continued dominance of foreign-educated scholars; and regular scandals involving prominent figures[5] has, to some extent, undermined the authority of traditional institutions.

This contestation was visible among activists, who reflected the various views and approaches to religious authority that exist in wider society. While the sample size is not large enough to put too much weight on quantitative patterns, it was noticeable that questions surrounding religious authority were more prevalent among Shia participants, who were located in Who Is Hussain and Sufra. Perhaps this can be partly explained by the centralised institution of *taqlid*, which requires all believers to follow a *marja*, who has studied the Islamic sciences in a traditional institution and is considered to be qualified to derive Islamic laws through the process of *ijtihad*.[6] *Taqlid* places great power in the hands of a scholarly class, who become the representatives and gatekeepers of the "true" Islam that laypeople are expected to follow.

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[4] *Shaykh* and *imam* are often used interchangeably in Sunni circles to refer to a religious leader or scholar with official training in Islamic sciences. An *imam* is often associated with a particular mosque, while *ustadh* refers specifically to a teacher. While *shaykh* and *ustadh* have similar meanings in Shia Islam, *imam* predominantly appears as a proper noun (with a capital I) that suffixes the names of the twelve Imams of the Prophet's Household (*ahl al-bayt*) – some scholars, most recently Ayatollah Khomeini, are however given the title *imam* as a sign of deep respect and, often, as recognition of their impact on the trajectory of Shia Islam.

[5] There has been a growing discussion, particularly among Muslim women, around sexual abuse allegations and male religious leaders abusing their power and violating their ethical responsibilities and the trust that the community places in them. For example, the prominent scholar, Tariq Ramadan (formerly an academic at the University of Oxford) has faced several allegations of sexual violence in France and Switzerland, which he denies, and has admitted to several extramarital affairs. In North America, the Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) organisation was formed to hold Muslim leaders to account and has created many in-depth reports to address allegations against prominent figures.

[6] *Taqlid* also exists in a more diluted form within Sunni Islam, with followers expected to seek the guidance of a trained scholar. With the exception of Sufi *tariqahs*, this structure is rarely as hierarchical and centralised as the Shia equivalent. It is worth noting that for the latter however, *taqlid* is only performed on legal rulings, which includes some rulings on social interaction. The individual is still responsible for their theological beliefs (*aqida*) and ethical outlook (*akhlaq*).

It takes literally the hadith, "Scholars are the inheritors of the prophets"[7] and implies that to disobey the scholar is to disobey God and go against the religion. In its most extreme iteration, therefore, the person who does *taqlid* (the *muqallid*) is absolved of the personal responsibility and agency to discover and establish religious principles, instead outsourcing this to the scholarly class.[8] While the majority of activists did not take this position, this was visible in Ali's views of religious authority. When asked about whether in his time at Who Is Hussain he has ever felt like there was a clash between their pursuit of social justice and the guidance of scholars, he responded:

> I think there lies… an issue with the question and that is, when we say do we feel as though Islam or Islamic rulings… are not being conducive to our operations, that means that we have a desire to do something that is, perhaps, selfish – our goal, maybe differing, or maybe, surpassing the goal or the true aim of Islam itself… We can't sit here today and say, "But I think that this is what is important", even if Islamically it's not the right thing… I have not been through formal studies, so I don't have the right to say that… If you ever went to a doctor and said to a doctor, "Listen, I really want to eat these foods, I think it'd be good for me." But the doctor and all the doctors and the principles of medicine say to me, "This is not the way to achieve success." But you say, "Oh, you're not being conducive to my desires, my success", you'd be foolish.[9]

Here we see an explicit conflation between Islam and scholarly knowledge production. The comparison to the medical profession is particularly notable as it implies that Islamic law can be derived through the same process of hypotheses testing as the natural sciences. It ignores the influence that social relations may have (which of course the natural sciences are also not immune to). As someone with decision making power within the organisation, this attitude can perhaps go some way to explain the importance that Who Is Hussain places on following the *sharia*, as interpreted by the scholarly class. For example, Amena noted that they have an unofficial hijab policy, which requires any women who is featured in the organisation's advertising materials, whether in print or online, to have their hair covered – a decision that has led to some tension among volunteers.[10]

For other activists, the perceived hegemony that the scholarly class had over religious knowledge production created a tension. Some, recognising that their views may not agree with mainstream scholarly views, would question the Islamic validity of their own. For example, Aqeel, citing his lack of knowledge, said that he would "tend towards orthodoxy" on

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[7] For more on this hadith, including its chain of narration, grading and various interpretations, see: Faraz Rabbani, 'Is the Hadith: "The Scholars Are the Inheritors of the Prophets" Authentic? If so, What Does It Mean?', *SeekersGuidance* (blog), 14 March 2011, https://seekersguidance.org/articles/general-artices/is-the-hadith-the-scholars-are-the-inheritors-of-the-prophets-authentic-if-so-what-does-it-mean-faraz-rabbani/.

[8] The process of *taqlid* does not however completely remove agency from the *muqallid*, who is responsible for selecting the *marja* that they wish to follow. In this regard, considerations such as how strict their rulings are can often be a consideration. For example, until his death in 2010, the Lebanese cleric, Sayyid Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah was a popular choice for many Muslims because of his perceived leniency and open-mindedness in comparison to other *maraja*. Furthermore, as an alternative to *taqlid*, Shias are allowed to perform *ihtiyat* (precaution), where they survey the rules of each scholar and follow the most restrictive.

[9] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

[10] Amena, interview with author, 26 November 2021.

day-to-day practices.[11] Similarly, he acknowledged that his "politics isn't strictly by the book… [and] there are points where I unknowingly, maybe, [am] on the borderline on some issues."[12] Here, Aqeel perceives the fault to be with his views rather than with the institution, again, reflecting the power they have over knowledge production. This reluctance to challenge religious authority manifested elsewhere, when activists showed a reluctance to portray their views as Islamic, even if they were informed by the religion, because they were unsure about what the official position of scholars was – "I'm a bit conflicted… because, if I'm honest, I don't know much".[13]

Although many did not see themselves as properly qualified to interpret religion, unlike Ali, most were still willing to challenge scholars to varying degrees. Layla, for example, who identified as someone who does *taqlid* of Ayatollah Sistani – the most widely followed *marja' al-taqlid* in the Shi'a community, based in Najaf, Iraq – criticised people for idolising scholars too much, particularly when they had not lived and experienced what life is like in the West.[14] Similarly, Ameen stated:

> I don't think the scholars have all the answers. As much as I have respect for many of [them] who've dedicated their entire life to religion, I don't necessarily think everything is always accurate, because they are not infallible.[15]

Rather, he believed, it is the individual's responsibility to use their own logic to decide between right and wrong.[16] Importantly, this assertion of agency in and of itself is a form of knowledge production as it makes a value claim on what true Islam is, what should be emphasised and what the parameters of orthopraxy are. The reluctance of some to see it as such, perhaps, speaks to the soft power that the scholarly class holds over not only what is seen as correct Islamic interpretation but, more fundamentally, valid knowledge production. Nevertheless, as we will see later in the chapter, the assertion of this agency allowed activists to challenge mainstream interpretations of Islam and opens possibilities for the development of a liberative alternative.

Religious Authority and Gender

A noticeable theme that came up repeatedly in interviews with female participants was the treatment of women within Muslim communities and traditional circles of knowledge. This perhaps goes some way to explain why the women interviewed were more likely to have developed a critical attitude towards religious authority.[17] Activists noted how patriarchy manifested itself through Islamic law, for example in the constant attempts to police women's

[11] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.
[14] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.
[15] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.
[16] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.
[17] Again, without drawing too many quantitative conclusions from the data, the vast majority of women interviewed were sceptical of religious authority in some way, with several bringing up the treatment of women without prompt. Although many male activists also were critical, only two brought up issues related to gender in their answers.

bodies through the emphasis placed on the practice of *hijab*.[18] Even more worrying than this trend however, was the regular sexual violence scandals related to respected religious figures and explicit move towards an anti-feminist intellectual trend.[19] Sukayna, for example, notes:

> I remember being quite obsessed with [one particular *shaykh*] when I was young. Now, he just chats nonsense all the time and some of it is anti-feminist… I think that the woman thing especially, it's just been such an eye opener when all these kinds of scandals have happened amongst spiritual figures… I mean there's a crisis right now; women leaving their faith because of this. And I think as women [it's also] understanding your position in the Muslim community means they're not always going to have your back. That's been such a heart breaking experience, but it's really transformed the way we look at community, as if it's some tight fit thing. I don't see it that way anymore.[20]

Maya gave a specific example of when she was targeted online for saying that Muslims need to be cautious of who is invited into the community and seen as an "official representative" of Islam in the wake of the scandal surrounding Fatih Seferagic, a German Quran reciter (*qari'*) of Bosnian descent, who was accused of a range of sexual abuses.[21] Maya described how the experience of Muslim men coming to Seferagic's defence reinforced the sense of injustice she felt Muslim women endured from their male counterparts.[22] Similar to Sukayna, she did not see the allure of the Muslim community or trust in the religious authorities that, in many cases, take an explicitly anti-woman stance. Rather, she says:

> I've just sought out sisterhood with other women that I know are in a similar boat or women, you know, even women who, even if they are *hijabi*, but they understand that struggle as a woman of how we're treated. So, for me, the alternative spaces have been with other women where I have found my comfort zone.[23]

The question of gender, therefore, exacerbated the existing tension between participants and religious authority figures. The very real experience of oppression that Muslim women felt

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[18] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021; Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021; Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

[19] In recent years, online spaces have given room for various anti-woman pseudo-intellectuals and movements, which exacerbate already extant patriarchal attitudes, to take hold among Muslim men. In the context of alienation and increasing economic uncertainties, these men blame Muslim women and their embrace of feminism (as well as other "woke" ideologies such as socialism) for society's ills. Asserting an Islamic form of masculinity, ironically often informed by Islamophobic tropes, is seen as the way to push back against his and for Muslim men to reclaim their rightful position. This has led to a worrying convergence between these misogynists and right wing figures, such as Jordan Peterson, which targets feminism and, by extension, women for the perceived demise of society. For more on the rise of this phenomenon and its effects on Muslim women, see: 'The Rise of the Muslim Incel: Ideological Victim Blaming and Its Harm to Muslim Women and Men', Amaliah, accessed 14 November 2023, https://www.amaliah.com/post/66016/muslim-incel-mincel-red-pill-ideology-islam.

[20] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[21] For more on the accusations, see 'Fatih Seferagic', FACE, accessed 28 August 2023, https://facetogether.org/investigations/fatih-seferagic.

[22] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

[23] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.

was perpetrated by the scholarly class, both through their patriarchal interpretations of religion and regular scandals, as well as their treatment within the community at large, pushed activists to challenge religious authority and seek refuge in third spaces with allies. Communities of activists rather than the mosque or other religious institutions, became the alternative means through which some could pursue Islam's social goals and practice their religion away from the patriarchal gaze (at least to some extent).

As discussed in chapter one, social reality is not only determined by economic relations, as some Marxists have implied, but a variety of social forces. The importance of the gender struggle for female participants highlights the importance of acknowledging that. While we discussed some of the flaws of the intersectional politics of identity in chapter two, here we are observe the ubiquity of power, which manifests through a variety of social relationships, including gender and race. As the example of the women participants shows, acknowledging these is vital in explaining individuals' experiences and explaining their political trajectories and worldviews.[24]

On Agency and Liberation

The sometimes divisive role that religious authority has within Muslim circles, as reflected by the views of research participants, has implications for a praxis-based Liberation Theology. As we have seen, a scholarly class can use the institution of *taqlid* to assert power, both spiritual and social, over believers, who are stripped of agency as a result. This gives a mostly straight male religious elite the right to dictate what constitute orthodox beliefs and practices: the boundaries of right and wrong, what is important and who is a "true" Muslim – something that can have particularly detrimental effects for Muslim women. Activists grappled with their own positionality in this regard and their authority (or lack thereof) to interpret Islam in their context. For some, their lack of traditional education meant they had no right or lacked the confidence to take on this task.

As Ken argues in his work on Ali Shariati, however, such a hierarchical structure contradicts a liberative ethic, which is based on the premise that individuals should be given the capacity and capability to determine their own life.[25] Some activists reflected this by taking responsibility for themselves and using their experience and knowledge to understand what Islam requires in their contexts. Rather than making the scholarly class irrelevant, this creates a more horizontal relationship between them and regular believers. This allows the latter to exercise agency and the responsibility to establish the Islamic worldview and principles to the best of their ability. Only through this assertion can a praxis-based theology be possible, since without agency, liberation becomes unattainable.

[24] This observation is independent from theories of intersectionality, discussed and critiqued in chapter one. While these analyse the way in which various identities *intersect* to shape social reality, here we are looking at the way one such identity, namely gender, and the discrimination associated with it, influence women's perceptions of religious authority.

[25] Teo Lee Ken, 'Ali Shariati and Ethical Humanism: Conceiving a Perspective of Liberative Social Ethics', in *Ali Shariti and the Future of Social Theory: Religion, Revolution, and the Role of the Intellectual*, ed. Dustin Byrd and Seyed Javad Miri (Leiden ; London: Brill, 2018), 128–57.

The Path of Spiritual Retreat: A Critique of Apolitical Religion

Activists exercised this agency when critiquing various trends that they saw present within Muslim communities and Islamic thought. The first of these is a retreat from politics and defining religiosity exclusively in terms of individual ritual practice. Maya critiqued an "assimilationist" Islam that, in many ways, imitates the integrationalist attitude of first-generation immigrants, who feared to become involved in politics.[26] This reluctance reflects Muslims' (and indeed other racialised communities') conditional acceptance as "British", which is predicated on being a "good citizen" who does not cause trouble or challenge the status quo, instead showing gratitude for the perceived benefits and compassion shown by their British (read: white) hosts.

This desire to "keep your head down" has been exacerbated in the post-9/11 era, which has been accompanied by the securitisation of society and hyper-surveillance of Muslim communities. This manifested in the UK through the government's CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy, first introduced in 2003 and revised periodically over the next two decades. The strategy's Prevent duty is particularly controversial as it attempts to identify individuals who are vulnerable to being radicalised, using what have been criticised as unproven, Islamophobic and arbitrary markers.[27] The 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act expanded this surveillance further by requiring all civil servants, including doctors and teachers, to report anyone they thought was at risk of radicalisation.[28] Shelly outlines the effect this environment has had on the British Muslim psyche:

> We live in a world where Muslims aren't safe… they can't be radical or anything because you get called terrorists and all that – you know, there's Prevent and all that… I think a lot of Muslims will normally stay away from being political now because of the current climate we're in.[29]

On a social level, this apolitical Islam manifests itself in a very narrow scope of political activity, which primarily centres around charity. Khalid notes:

> [There's been] this retreat from politics and the only way that you engage in what you might understand as politics is through, you know, *zakat* and *sadaqa*. I think that's a very, very neoliberal understanding of the faith.[30]

Religious spaces and institutions were therefore seen as failing to protect the Muslim community's worldly, as well as spiritual, wellbeing. Shelly observes that religion and politics are "almost seen as two entities instead of one thing"[31] and that mosques' political outlooks are limited to fundraising for particular causes (often abroad), but without asking "why are we fundraising… what else do they need?"[32] This approach does very little to threaten power

[26] Maya, interview with author, 17 November, 2021.
[27] The UK-based advocacy organisation, CAGE, has been at the forefront of the resistance to the surveillance regime that has been put in place to target Muslims during the War on Terror. For more on their work regarding Prevent, see: 'Abolish Prevent', accessed 29 August 2023, https://www.abolishprevent.com/.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[30] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[31] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[32] Ibid.

structures and reflects the desire to play it safe. Indeed, this was even reflected in the attitudes of some activists, who felt limited in what praxis they could undertake. On the topic of government spending, for example, Layla said:

> Obviously, I don't agree with where all the tax goes, but unfortunately, we can't control that. *We have to follow and abide by the laws of the land*, you know. I don't feel comfortable that my tax goes towards bombing Yemen but unfortunately, I can't really do that much about that.[33]

The need to abide by the laws of the land is a particularly significant statement, notably also used in Salafi and neo-traditionalist circles to uphold support for regimes such as in Saudi Arabia or the UAE.[34] It presents the law as a neutral entity, prioritising order over justice and limiting the scope of activism to activities such as charity, which, as will be discussed in chapter six, do little to get to the root causes of economic exploitation and inequality.

Activists noted how this failure to address political topics in any substantial way has also contributed to what is perceived as religious, with emphasis placed on ritual practice and individual acts of worship. Muslims are "fixated with having a checklist ticked": performing their prayers, paying *zakat*, going to the mosque, etc.[35] While these ritual practices were seen as important – indeed, many of the activists would be considered practicing in this conventional sense – it was the emphasis placed on them at the expense of social concerns and ethics that was seen as problematic. The rituals were expected to have a transformative effect on the individual, leading to them treating others with justice and compassion – "religiousness is how you treat people".[36] Akbar summarised this problem:

> [If we only] pray because God told us then you're not going anywhere deeper than the surface. It must have something that benefits you and your *nafs*. It does not benefit God in any way whatsoever. Therefore, look at what it's doing for you.[37]

Several participants, however, cited examples of individuals that were dishonest in their everyday dealings but were considered religious in their communities, for example because of the number of times they attend the mosque or have been on *hajj*, *umra,* or *ziyara*.[38] This selective reading of texts and religious obligation, has political implications too, as Zehra identified:

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[33] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021. Emphasis added.

[34] For examples, see: Walaa Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodox, Spirituality and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

[35] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.

[36] Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.

[37] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

[38] Ibid.; Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021; Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021; Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022. *Hajj* and *umra* refer to pilgrimages to Makkah (present day Saudi Arabia). The *hajj* takes place annually in the Islamic month of Dhul-Hijjah and is compulsory for all believers who have the means to complete it once in their lives. *Umra* is an optional pilgrimage, which can be made at any other time of the year. *Ziyara* is a visitation, often by Shia or Sufi Muslims, to the shrines of pious figures. For Shia Muslims, this is generally to sites in Iraq, Iran and Syria where members of the *ahl al-bayt* are buried. It is worth noting that due to restrictions imposed by the Wahhabi doctrine, *ziyara* to such sites in Saudi Arabia, many of which have been destroyed, is strictly forbidden – a source of great resentment for many Shias.

> I think we fixate on daily practices and we cherry pick the things that we think superficially are “Islamic” and we push the things that don't fit in with our lifestyle, or with our ambitions, our desires to one side. You're not gonna get an *imam* in a mosque saying it's *haram* to work in venture capitalism or in banking, because you know, these banks are funding wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But you will get them saying it's *haram* to show your hair and you have to pray five times a day, that sort of thing.[39]

This powerful quote from Zehra highlights the varying degrees of importance placed on different elements of religion. As she observes, the mosques place more emphasis on ritual practices such as prayer and *hijab*, while all but ignoring the broader socio-political implications of questions such as employment. Indeed, on the latter issue, Islam is generally portrayed as being neutral to different forms of employment, as long as Muslims refrain from engaging in interest (at least to some extent) and theft, or selling alcohol.

This apolitical trend within Islamic thought and Muslim communities encourages an individualist approach to religion, where believers are pushed to focus on their own salvation through worship. While these acts have their place, it was the disproportionate emphasis placed on them, often at the expense of social and political praxis, that was seen as problematic. Akbar summarised this problem through a powerful analogy:

> We're just so focused on basic rulings… you must pray, you must do this and [that]… it's such a hindrance that it stops you from behaving appropriately. For example, in our families where this one person is such a pious child… prays, takes him two hours, you know, he prays for two hours *ma sha Allah*. Look at the reality: it's time for *maghrib*, *maghrib* is at 7, you have dinner at 6.30, 6.30 you sit down with your family, the mother's cooked a meal, she's worked hard, sweated, cooked that nice meal so you can all sit at the table at 6.30. Seven o'clock, you're like, "Ah, time for *maghrib*". Okay, you got this good child, amazing child, has taken two hours to pray, nine o'clock he's finished praying, yeah. What has the mother done? The mother has prayed three *rakat*, stopped, come down, all that food is on the table, she needs to put that food in the kitchen, pack it into containers, put it in the fridge, all these pots and pans and dishes… she needs to wash it out. So *ma sha Allah* the son is praying for two hours [while she does this]… in my opinion, the son who prays his three *rakat*, comes downstairs, tells his mum, "You go and sit down and put your feet up and have a cup of tea…Let me deal with this." Yeah, that is a son you say *ma sha Allah* to, the other one is selfish and all he cares about is his prayers. But his prayers is to get him in [to heaven]. But if you're gonna say, "Well, no, but I pray for everyone else." Again, that's the problem. “I pray for everyone else.” Stop praying for everyone and do something. Prayers is not sitting on a mat, going up and down and saying words, you know, what's the point of going to pray like, "Allah help these poor people, please give them food." There's a food bank on your road, go and volunteer there for two hours. Yeah. *What does that prayer mean if it doesn't move you to actually do something with those words?* …Yeah, but

[39] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.

> "God, all those who are hungry, please provide them with food." There's the food bank, go drop some food off… go, if you don't have enough money or food, go volunteer for an hour or two, you've got that time. Cut your prayer short, yeah, pray for one hour, go volunteer for one hour.[40]

As Akbar argues, true religiosity is holistic, with ritual practice becoming embodied in the way that a person acts. It manifests not only in acts of worship, but also the way that they treat those in their immediate circle, such as family and friends, and how they engage with wider society.

Liberation theologians have highlighted the dangers that such apolitical religious tendencies pose. Rahemtulla, for example, argues, "the claim to be apolitical, and thus to allow one's passivity to justify the existing status quo, constitutes the very foil of liberation: a theology of accommodation."[41] Although in the British context, where Muslims are a marginalised minority, this apolitical Islam is rarely attached to power, it nevertheless chooses not to protest or tackle issues such as capitalism and racism in anything more than a superficial manner and does not address the root causes of class exploitation and economic inequality. In doing so, it does not threaten oppressive economic power structures but, rather, becomes a distraction, or, as Marx put it in his famous statement, "opium",[42] that insulates individuals from their social reality and detaches religion from the domain of politics.[43]

The Path of Oppression: A Critique of Reactionary Religion

While some look to separate politics from religion, activists also identified another intellectual trend, which overtly aligns with the status quo, using religion to justify it and espousing the virtues of existing exploitative social relations. Aqeel remarks on the presence of:

> influential figures in the Muslim community, who don't know what they're talking about at all, they know nothing about race, nothing about feminism, nothing about socialism, but they are… just repeating the words of right wing ideologues.[44]

As he observes, these reactionary and oppressive views are not limited to questions on the economy and, as discussed earlier, the use of religion to justify patriarchy was central to the majority of female activists' concerns. On the question of economics, however, Aqeel further notes how capitalist principles become accepted within an Islamic framework:

> Often in passing, what are deemed to be authoritative Muslim public figures basically naturalise capitalism as if we can't question that. It's just natural

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[40] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.
[41] Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed*, 22.
[42] Marx, 'Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right 1844'.
[43] Quisay provides an in-depth critique of what she has termed the neo-traditionalist trend in contemporary Islam, personified by the scholars Hamza Yusuf, Abdal Hakim Murad and Umar Faruq Abd-Allah. She explores how these scholars present an anti-modernity discourse in defence of their construction of "the Islamic tradition" and, in so doing, reproduces reactionary stances on political issues such as race and gender. For more, see: Walaa Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodox, Spirituality and Politics* (Edimburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).
[44] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.

> and always existed, even in the Prophet's time. [And so,] the economic question, they just put it away and they deal with social and cultural questions [instead].[45]

Arguments that Islam allows private property and trade and, therefore, is closer to capitalism than socialism, or that prophets, some prominent Companions of Prophet Muhammad and Imams were merchants and entrepreneurs for example, embody this position.[46] For example, Sukayna notes how Prophet Sulaiman's wealth and kingdoms are used as justifications for pursuing riches.[47] Such simplistic arguments, which are based on a superficial understanding of both the socioeconomic relations at the time of revelation in seventh century Arabia and contemporary capitalism are used to dismiss systemic critiques and questions around the way society is structured, and reinforce the capitalist mode of production, which lies at the root of class and economic inequality. Furthermore, alternatives, communism in particular, continue to be attacked as ungodly, anti-religion or theologically contradictory to Islam because of its dependence on materialist philosophy.[48]

On a granular level, and in a similar way to apolitical trends, this reactionary tendency embraces individualism. However, it differs from the former by encouraging Muslims to pursue material wealth and be unconcerned with broader questions around social inequality. Rather than viewing these as the result of structural issues, as we have seen, this ethic encourages an entrepreneurial spirit and blames inequality on a lack of individual will or ability to succeed.[49] Sukayna notes the pervasiveness of this wealth aspiration in wider society, where "a whole army of defenders" on social media support billionaires such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos.[50] Similarly, Sumaira, who works as a teacher in a state school in inner-city London, wrestles with how she uses this aspirational politic to motivate pupils to work hard and escape from their poverty, while recognising the problematic individualism it encourages.[51]

Activists were somewhat sympathetic to the prevalence of this individualism within Muslim communities, where public sector and trade union racism, severe economic exploitation and widespread poverty push people towards establishing a solid economic foundation for themselves.[52] However, they were also critical, stating that it manifests in a particularly

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[45] Ibid.

[46] This narrative will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. However, it is worth noting that such mythologies are commonplace in Muslim communities. For example, Ali Salman, in a pamphlet entitled 'Rediscovering the Capitalist Tradition of Islam', published by New Direction, a think tank founded by Margaret Thatcher, cites that the Prophet was a trader for forty years and claims that he allowed trade even with enemies of Islam and said, "Welfare and blessedness is composed of ten parts, nine-tenths of which is attained through trade." See: Aminah Koshul et al., 'Rediscovering the Capitalist Tradition of Islam', New Direction, accessed 16 November 2023, https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-report-Islam1-preview%28low-res%29.pdf.

[47] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[48] Charles Tripp, in his book *Islam and the Moral Economy* (2006), illustrates how this tendency is not new. Rather, many leading Muslim intellectuals, such as those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, were as, if not more, concerned with the potential threat that communism posed to Islamic societies because of its ability to reshape, not just material conditions, but beliefs.

[49] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*; Jones, *Chavs*

[50] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[51] Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

[52] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021; Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

capitalist iteration of Islam, which emphasises wealth accumulation over socio-political equality and justice. Maya highlights this trend:

> I feel like Muslims, from having grown up in this [society], are very much soft capitalists… They very much aspire towards having capital, access to capital and climbing up the class hierarchy… That's not to say there aren't Muslims who aren't… invested in that, but overall, I don't think that's a priority for Muslims, to overturn these inequalities because the focus is very much on the self… and acquiring assets and commodities to basically live what they deem, I guess, a comfortable life.[53]

This quote provides a sharp assessment of dominant attitudes within Muslim communities and shows how Islamic thought has embraced the neoliberal ethics that is promoted within society at large.

This type of theology not only accommodates oppressive power structures but actively upholds them. The 1985 Kairos Document notes how such theology "blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy."[54] Islam, and as a consequence God, is portrayed as being capitalist. In explicitly aligning the religion in such a way, the line between capitalist and Islamic values is blurred and aspiring for wealth and economic progress within the system is not only accepted but to be encouraged.

Activists, therefore, find themselves challenging not only an apolitical Islam, but a reactionary and openly oppressive Islam also. These dominant trends either tell Muslims to keep their heads down and focus on their personal ritual practice or encourage them to embrace capitalist individualism and work hard within the system to pursue wealth and improve their condition. Such Islams are either indifferent or actively opposed to structural change and critiques that address economic exploitation and combat capitalism.

The Path of Liberation: Foundations for an Alternative

Implied within activists' critiques of these prevalent Islamic interpretations is the recognition that a radical alternative reading is also possible. Although it was noticeable that several members of Who Is Hussain held views that overlapped with the apolitical and reactionary views above (something which will be tackled in the next chapter), the vast majority of those interviewed were proponents of an alternative. Although only one explicitly cited Liberation Theology as an influence, activists reflected the latter's assertion that religious knowledge is influenced by power relations and "orthodox" interpretations will reflect the experiences and interests of the powerful.[55] Interpreters are therefore required to acknowledge their individual positionality and social context to resist the temptation to essentialise Islam. As Khalid put it:

[53] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

[54] Gary S D Leonard, ed., 'The Kairos Documents' (Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, 2010), 49.

[55] The use of orthodox here, and elsewhere, is not based on a normative prescription of the term but, rather, is based on what the participants perceived as the apolitical or reactionary standard that dominated Islamic discourse around them.

> This is not to say that there isn't… a perfect text [the Quran] right, but that [it] is the perfect text that's been interpreted by historically constituted beings and so their understanding of this perfect text is always going to be limited.[56]

Khalid further noted the influence of Ali Shariati, a foundational figure in Islamic Liberation Theology, who highlights the existence of different religions, which either support or oppose oppression.[57] As we have seen, Shariati takes a materialist view of religion and, using metaphors such as the struggle between Cain and Abel, or Red versus Black Shi'ism, recognises the impact that material interests have on religious thought.[58] Indeed, several activists cited the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as an example of Islam being used to resist oppressive power structures and affect social change.[59] Despite the subsequent distortions in the revolutionary process, the entirety of Shariati's thought was designed to inspire resistance to the Shah's regime, often using metaphors to avoid severe repression. Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini, the other key leader in the revolution, was critical of the quietist *ulama* for neglecting their political responsibilities. Indeed, his series of lectures on *wilayat-e-faqih*, were fundamentally a critique of this trend, instead arguing for the *ulama's* direct involvement in politics.[60] Furthermore, during the revolt against the Shah's rule, religious institutions, the mosque and seminaries in particular, and rituals, such as Ashura and funerals, were used to organise protests and build revolutionary momentum.[61] These events provide a great example of how Islam can be used to challenge oppressive structures, produce radical change and, in the process, inspire subsequent generations to identify it with liberation.

Turning the focus to our contemporary times and the economic, however, the influence of capitalism over Islam is particularly relevant. As we have seen, exhorting wealth accumulation and an individualist ethic have become part of mainstream Islamic thought today, reflecting the values promoted by neoliberal economics. As Shelly says, it is important to recognise

> the way we view religion is going to be influenced by capitalism as well, because it's a system. Religion isn't just here, it's gonna be influenced by every single thing that affects the world. It's not in a vacuum.[62]

This materialist approach to religious knowledge resists the hegemonic claims of a capitalist Islam and allows for the possibility of a liberative alternative to be produced. Echoing Shariati's claim that a revolutionary religion for the marginalised has always existed, activists believed

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[56] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

[57] Ibid.

[58] For more see: Shariati, 'Red Shi'ism - Black Shi'ism'; Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*.

[59] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021; Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

[60] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Governance of the Jurist: Islamic Government*, trans. Hamid Algar (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2002). For more on the intellectual influence of Islam, and particularly Shariati and Khomeini, see: Abrahamian, ''Ali Shari'ati'; Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London ; New York: I. B. Tauris, 1993); Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York ; London: New York University Press, 1993); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[61] For more, see: Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (London: Westview Press, 1988).

[62] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

the foundations of this alternative were visible within Islamic intellectual history itself. Of particular importance, as noted by several members of Nijjor Manush, was the development and attempted implementation of Islamic socialism in many parts of the Muslim world through the twentieth century. While its limitations were acknowledged, particularly in its application, this school of thought was a source of hope for several activists that an alternative to a reactionary, capitalist Islam was possible. Aqeel, for example, believed that it can be used to overcome the "intellectual… backwardness that Muslims find themselves in, especially in the West."[63] Several figures were mentioned, such as Haji Misbach (1876-1926), a communist activist in the Dutch East Indies, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (1892-1940), a Tatar Bolshevik revolutionary (discussed in chapter three), Tan Malaka (1897-1949), an Indonesian Marxist philosopher and Ihsan Eliacik (1961-), a Turkish theologian and socialist. However, it was Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880-1976), also known as the *Laal* [Red] Mawlana or Mao-lana, whom members of the organisation mentioned the most often. Born under the British Raj, Bhashani's political career spanned over eight decades in British India, post-partition Pakistan and independent Bangladesh. He was a staunch anti-imperialist, proponent of Third World solidarity and advocate for the rights of the poor, whom he wanted to offer spiritual and material emancipation through his brand of Islamic socialism.[64] As Maya explains:

> Maulana Bhashani did this phenomenal thing [in] the way he organised the peasant class of Bangladesh, and in particular, how he utilised very leftist politics with religion… And what was phenomenal about that is because, in contemporary times, people always think socialism and Islam can't go hand in hand, and Mawlana Bhashani is literally the epitome who… [embodies] socialist Islam, or [an] Islam that is socialist.[65]

While the context in which these trends of Islamic Socialism developed varied greatly from London today, their importance comes in their inspiration and ability to present an alternative to the apolitical and capitalist Islams that activists inevitably clash with and look to challenge. Both sides invoke history to provide legitimacy to their perspectives. For accommodationist trends, the image of the Prophet Muhammad, his wife, Khadijah, or other prominent Companions, as merchants and the apparent existence of a free market during his time justify a capitalist Islam.[66] Further theological and legal justifications – for example, a defence of private property – are built on this foundational reading of history. For activists, history, albeit a different narrative was also fundamental. Whether it was Ali Shariati's mentions of Abu Dharr's revolutionary politics, the Iranian Revolution or more recent references to Islamic Socialists, they also invoked the past to justify their stance. This highlights the role that human agency, context and power relations play in our understandings of Islam. By acknowledging the historicity of the hermeneutical process, activists contest interpretations of Islam that are essentialist or seek to be hegemonic and, in turn, pave the way for a liberative Islam that addresses the exploitation at the heart of the capitalist system.

[63] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.

[64] Layli Uddin, 'Remembering Red Maulana: Mao-Lana Bhashani of Assam/Bengal/ Pakistan/Bangladesh', Raiot, 20 September 2018, https://raiot.in/mao-lana-bhashani-of-assam-bengal-pakistan-bangladesh/.

[65] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.

[66] Koshul et al., 'Rediscovering the Capitalist Tradition of Islam'.

The Karbala Paradigm

Both sides' invocation of the past shows the weight that history and the so-called tradition has in Islamic knowledge production. While the centrality of the canonical texts, and especially the Quran, are accepted by the majority, their meaning is mediated through selective readings of what has come before – for some, this produces a pro-capitalist Islam and, for others, the opposite. As we have seen, liberation theologians do not claim to be above this process but rather, make their preference for the marginalised explicit.

Whether it be in the sphere of economics or elsewhere, liberation theologians and others searching for an emancipatory version of Islam, will inevitably have to combat reactionary and apolitical trends. Activists in Sufra and Who Is Hussain invoked the Battle of Karbala in 61 AH/680 CE and martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali, which can be a reference point in this regard.

With the ascension of Yazid ibn Muawiyya to the caliphate, despite his father and the previous caliph, Muawiyya, agreeing to pass the institution back into the hands of the Prophet's family, a monarchical structure was introduced into Islamic governance. This was made worse by the opulence and blatant disregard that Yazid showed for Islamic laws and principles. Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, refused to pledge allegiance to the newly appointed caliph because of this and set out for Kufa, in modern day Iraq and the seat of his father and the third caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib, where his supporters said they would back his claim to the caliphate. After severe repression from Yazid's governor, Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, Kufan support for Hussain began to dissipate and his caravan was ambushed by Yazid's army at Karbala, also in modern day Iraq, massacring him and all his male companions, except for his sick son – Ali Zayn al-Abidin, who would become the fourth Shi'a Imam.

While these events are central to the Shia imagination, Rahemtulla argues that it could also be used as a paradigm for Islamic Liberation Theology as a whole.[67] As mentioned earlier, Ashura processions became a means to mobilise against the Shah during the Iranian Revolution[68] and Hussain was transformed into a revolutionary who was willing to give his life for his cause rather than accept injustice – a potent symbol in the wake of a repressive regime. Ideologues encouraged Iranians to be willing to give their lives for their cause, connecting them to the legacy of the Shia Imams (all of whom were martyred) and the Shah to Yazid and the enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*.[69]

Elsewhere, in Lebanon, Karbala became a paradigm through which groups such as Hizbullah framed their resistance to Israeli occupation (both of Lebanese lands and historic Palestine). Saad-Ghorayeb notes how an Israeli desecration of an Ashura ceremonial procession in

[67] Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed*. 72-75.

[68] Despite bans on demonstrations during Muharram, one million people turned up to protests in Tehran alone in December 1978 on the 9th Muharram, with the numbers doubling the next day on Ashura. See: Mohammad Amjad, 'Shiism and Revolution in Iran', *Journal of Church and State* 31, no. 1 (1989): 35–53.

[69] Ali Shariati, for example, told his listeners, "Die, so others may live!" and Ayatollah Khomeini urged Iranians to "water the roots of the tree of Islam with their blood." Quoted in Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 164; James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 239, respectively. For a detailed look at the theological formulations of Iranians during this period, see: Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York ; London: New York University Press, 1993).

Nabatieyyeh, southern Lebanon, in 1983 was a "milestone in the Islamic resistance" and led them to identifying themselves clearly with Hussain and Israel with an aggression akin to Yazid's.[70] Yearly processions became acts of defiance and a means for political mobilisation. Indeed, in 2011, Hizbullah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah made a rare public appearance on Ashura as a symbolic "act of courage" in the face of credible fears of assassination by Israel, reflecting Hussain's bravery in Karbala.[71] As a military organisation whose primary objective is to resist American imperialism and Zionist aggression and settler colonialism, the theme of martyrdom is potent in Hizbullah's discourse. As Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem explains:

> A society nurtured with the exemplary story of Imam al-Hussain (pbuh)… understands the importance of confrontation even with no hope for victory, realising that grand objectives require high levels of sacrifice without anticipation of compensation… Since the choice that was limited to either victory or defeat, combat or martyrdom, was sealed in favour of martyrdom, what then could be a possible justification for his nation's present-day succumbing to oppression and submission to tyranny?
> We have learned through Imam al-Hussain that the love of martyrdom is part of the love for God. We have learned to glorify *jihad* for the sake of Islam. Generations after al-Hussain's resurgence in Karbala, we still learn from the magnificent accomplishments that materialised through his martyrdom. His vision was not momentary or restricted to the battle: it was directed at the future of Islam and of Muslims.[72]

For activists in Who Is Hussain and Sufra who were inspired by the example of Hussain, remembrance of the tragedy is meant to encourage transformation, both of the self and society. As Ali says:

> We need to walk the walk if we truly believe and love this man. Real love is something that is transformative… [It's] not just meant to give you an ideology that you stick to, an identity, or a label… You're meant to change, you're meant to change yourself… you're meant to better society.[73]

In a similar vein, Akbar explicitly criticises those that limit their remembrance to mourning, while engaging in immoral and unjust activities themselves. He says:

> You're gonna go there [to *majalis*], you're gonna cry. It's pointless unless you inspire change and it makes you do something… How can you call yourself a follower? All you do is go and cry once a year and then get on with caring about money and materialism and your business and stabbing your own brother in the back and doing this, that and the other. You don't walk in his

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[70] Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, 1. publ, Critical Studies on Islam (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 11–12.
[71] Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 5. print., and 1. paperback print, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 67–68; Sarah Marusek, *Faith and Resistance: The Politics of Love and War in Lebanon*, Decolonial Studies, Postcolonial Horizons (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 98–99.
[72] Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, trans. Dalia Khalil (London; Saint Paul: Saqi Books, 2010), 104.
[73] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

path, you're not doing what he's asked you to do… You're crying and crying and crying over him but you're not changing yourself. You're not honouring his memory and that's a disrespect.[74]

Being a true follower of Hussain and honouring his memory, therefore, requires transformation of the self, through perfecting the morals he stood for, and standing up to oppressive power structures, no matter the personal consequences. As Who Is Hussain's free Information Pack emphasises, it is this praxis that connects individuals and groups today to Hussain's movement:

> In the last moments of his life, after all his family and friends had been killed one by one, Hussain roared "Is there anyone left to help me?". This final act of Hussain, has been widely understood to be a rallying cry against oppression for every era, and has inspired millions from all corners of the world who respond to his call by standing for justice, equality and humanity.[75]

The transformation of society, however, is not necessarily something that can be achieved immediately and, often, requires constant struggle over generations to succeed. Hussain's example provides a lesson for activists today in illustrating the relationship between faith and praxis. The Umayyad dynasty outlasted the Battle of Karbala and Yazid's rule, continuing for another 71 years, until it was overthrown by the Abbasid Revolution in 132 AH/750 CE[76] which, in its sharply anti-Umayyad discourse, was about seeking revenge and justice for the family of the Prophet. The foundations for resistance to their rule, however, were laid in Karbala. Akbar, cites the famous saying of Hussain's sister, Zaynab ibn Ali, "I saw nothing but beauty", which he argues represents her foresight:

> She didn't [just] see Imam Hussain's head being chopped off and her kids being killed, she saw the purpose behind that. She saw what was actually going on and that they just saved the world… The thing that has just happened has just saved humanity, just saved the religion… they've just lost a battle, but they've destroyed the disease. Losing this battle… is going to bring down the caliph.[77]

While of course this should not be used to justify reckless behaviour and does not exclude the necessity of being tactical, it does emphasise the importance of the struggle itself, rather than seeing the end results. Zaynab shows the importance of having this faith, born from a belief that God is allied to the oppressed. Indeed, Sukayna took this as an explicit lesson from these events:

> I think also about how each person went through struggles, but they didn't really expect to see the outcome of their struggle. Like even Imam Hussain, the most devastating ending, but it's having the vision beyond that. I think,

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[74] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.
[75] 'Hussain: Reviving Hope in Humanity – Who Is Hussain', 10.
[76] Although the Umayyads lost the majority of their land to the Abbasids by this stage, they continued to control lands in the West and a dynasty that claimed to descend from them maintained control of southern Spain (al-Andalus) until the Spanish *reconquista* in 1492.
[77] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

> especially in our society now, we are so obsessed with the results, we're so obsessed with seeing change. And I know after the Jeremy Corbyn debacle,[78] so many people were just disappointed, didn't know what to do, felt hopeless… But I think understanding the value of the process, *understanding the value of the struggle, regardless of what happens next.* And that's, that's really, I think, one thing that I've taken from early Islamic history.[79]

For activists, the Battle of Karbala carried deep meaning that could inform their praxis-centred worldview, which encouraged spiritual and collective transformation inspired by faith.

This, as well as the activists' insights into apolitical, oppressive and liberative trends explained in this chapter, echo Shariati's analysis of Ashura, which divides the Muslim community into three groups. The figure of Yazid, and Muawiyya before him, represented a counterrevolution, which transformed Islam into a religion for the powerful, personified in the monarch.[80] Hussain first and foremost sought to challenge this reactionary trend and re-establish the revolutionary Islam of his grandfather, which challenged hierarchical structures and social injustices. In turn, this has inspired generations of Muslims, across various contexts ranging from the Iranian Revolution to Who Is Hussain's praxis in contemporary London, to work towards establishing a more just society.

Shariati argues that it is not just against a blatantly reactionary form of Islam that Hussain rebelled against, however. Occurring just fifty years after the Prophet's death, many of his younger companions were still alive at the time of the battle. Shariati notes how many of these, most prominently Abdullah ibn Umar,

> retreated into a quiet corner… [and] instead of seeking heaven on the battlefields through the ranks of *jihad*, they strive for it in retreat through ascetic disciplines… They commit suicide at the feet of the oppressor.[81]

Hussain's actions are an implicit critique of this group also, displaying to them that staying neutral and focusing on spirituality is not an option in the face of oppression, no matter the personal consequences. This is particularly important to emphasise today in the context of surveillance, showing that doing what's right can never be conditional. As Ameen argues, Hussain's sacrifice "was very much about standing up for what's right, regardless of the consequences."[82]

Shariati's analysis of the three religious trends present at the time of the battle mirror those identified by activists today; namely, religious quietism, oppression and liberation. The events surrounding Ashura, therefore, can provide Islamic Liberation Theology with a paradigm through which to frame a liberative Islam and analyse the state of religion in different times

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[78] This is a reference to the events leading to the 2019 election, which saw the socialist leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, being comprehensively defeated by the Conservative Party, through a combination of tactical errors and a smear campaign from his political opponents, within Labour and elsewhere, as well as the media.

[79] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021. Emphasis added.

[80] Shariati, *Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness*.

[81] Ibid., 11-12.

[82] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.

and contexts. In the first instance, Hussain becomes the embodiment of a movement that opposes both apolitical and reactionary trends of Islamic thought, which serve to uphold the status quo and, as we have seen, dominate Muslim communities and intellectual circles today. In its place, his example proposes an alternative, revolutionary Islam that centres a form of praxis that is emboldened by faith in God's preference for justice. This alternative, which continues to exist on the margins, has weaved its way through Islamic history, inspiring movements, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran and Islamic Socialism, that stand up to power and look to create a more just world. By invoking the example of Hussain, liberation theologians can access this rich tradition and, in the context of competing readings, give preference to his version of Islam, which emphasises the importance of the marginalised and combatting oppression.

5. Challenging Hegemony: Developing Liberative Economic Goals

> Without a revolutionary theory, there can be no revolutionary movement. – V.I. Lenin[1]

> The more the people understand, the more watchful they become, and the more they come to realise that finally everything depends on them and their salvation lies in their own cohesion, in the true understanding of their interests and in knowing who are their enemies. The people come to understand that wealth is not the fruit of labour but the result of organised, protected robbery. Rich people are no longer respectable people; they are nothing more than flesh-eating animals, jackals and vultures which wallow in the people's blood. – Frantz Fanon[2]

> I think that there are absolutely seeds of a much more abolitionist, anti-systemic politics of Islam but I think it's contingent on how you read the text and how you read the text, I think, is contingent on where you're reading it from. And if we as Muslims are trying to bring people to the cause of Islam that we understand as socialist or communist in [the sense of] abolishing the police and abolishing class relations, then we've got to offer a reading of the text that captures those so that… even though it is counter hegemonic in a sense… it's actually seen as fully within the spirit of the text. It's got to be uncontroversial to say that people within the classic canon, like the Prophet, like Khadija, like Imam Ali… it's got to be uncontroversial to say that they had an anti-capitalist politics. – Khalid from Nijjor Manush[3]

Introduction

Liberation Theology, rightly, emphasises praxis and the need to create real material change for marginalised social groups. For this to be successful and coherent, however, the goals towards which it is directed must be clearly defined. This gives activism an end towards which it is directed and a means through which current conditions can be interpreted and tactics decided. In other words, this overarching ideology is essential for giving praxis a trajectory. The task for liberation theologians, therefore, is to, in conjunction with activists on the ground, substantiate this, which is the topic of this chapter.

We have seen how different readings of Islam compete for position within a given social context and this was visible in the activists' understandings of Islam's economic goals. Various pro- and anti-capitalist positions were present and, although not all of them could be reconciled into a liberative reading of Islam, they informed this task. Based on the views of research participants, this chapter centres around questions of how Islam approaches class

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[1] V. I. Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 70.
[2] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 154.
[3] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

differences – is it accepted as a social reality to be managed, or is it a social relationship that needs to be abolished? For some, it was the former, however, as the majority of activists recognised, liberation could only be achieved by removing the class relation that is fundamentally exploitative and working towards building an alternative where the masses control wealth for the collective good.

The chapter starts by outlining the ways in which some activists reproduced views that upheld capitalism. This was done primarily by emphasising individual ethics through, what I have termed, a theology of examination. This justifies wealth accumulation and turns class inequality and the marginalised poor that it creates, into a means through which the rich are tested. After critiquing this reading for upholding an unjust status quo, the discussion shifts to whether an anti-capitalist Islam that recognises the exploitation that is inherent in class relations seeks to manage or abolish class differences. The former is essential within the context of manifest inequality but is insufficient as a long term goal. Indeed, as activists recognise, the emphasis on justice as a normative aspiration, as well as a clear hostility towards wealth accumulation and the integration of mechanisms for redistribution, all point towards the latter being the ultimate goal of a liberative alternative towards which praxis should be directed. After substantiating this and differentiating between these short and long term goals, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion about Khadija bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and attempts to reclaim her as a paradigm for a theology of class struggle.

Internalising Hegemony: Individualised Ethics and a Theology of Examination

In the previous chapter, we saw how different versions of Islam compete, with those readings that support the interests of the powerful often dominating the theological landscape. This dynamic was apparent when speaking to activists, who reflected a broad spectrum of views, including a pro-capitalist Islam, which saw no problem in wealth accumulation and class difference.[4] Several activists saw how such readings could emerge from the canonical texts, even if they did not ascribe to them personally. For example, Khalid recognised:

> You can also make reasonable arguments that what Islam is about is a fairly kind of tempered capitalism… a kind of Keynesian welfare capitalism, where we redistribute surplus value among the working class.[5]

Similarly, Zehra observed:

> Islam, and forgive me if I'm wrong, but the idea that I have is that there's kind of an idea of a trickle down economy, where if you're rich, you pay *zakat* and that is supposed to, you know, trickle down to people who are poorer and that's supposed to… basically creates a bigger middle class, which is a very socialist principle. I don't know, I personally, I'm not a huge

[4] These interpretations were noticeably only present in Who Is Hussain, which is perhaps unsurprising given the structure of the organisation, which most closely resembles a neoliberal charity. They primarily react to socioeconomic problems and shy away from any structural or strong political critiques. As we will see however, more radical views on questions of political economy are also present within the organisation.

[5] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

> fan of the idea of a trickle down economy, but I think if, if there was a religious system that does implement it effectively, I'd say Islam is the one, because you can't get away with not paying *zakat* and it's part of your duty and it's quite strict.[6]

This quote from Zehra is interesting because while she identifies that Islam has been interpreted to be a trickle-down economy, her experience suggests that this method simply does not work to redistribute wealth. She reconciles this by suggesting that, perhaps, within an Islamic framework, the results would be different. This provides a stark example of the hegemonic power that religious authority has, as discussed in the previous chapter, since, although she recognises its flaws, she is reluctant to challenge its validity by instead trying to resolve the contradiction by appealing to an abstracted possibility. Similarly, this quote exposes the need for a grounded view of Islam that truly interrogates the material impact of particular interpretations. Yes, an argument can be made for a trickle-down economic system, but is this sufficient to achieve the goals that it claims to?

The Keynesian and trickle-down models identified by Khalid and Zehra, respectively, accept the basic capitalist structure. In the former, redistribution is achieved primarily through government intervention, while in the latter, it is claimed that, as the rich get richer, the standard of living and wealth of everyone in society will also improve. Within the Islamic framework, and particularly in the absence of some form of Islamic governance, as Zehra alludes to, the emphasis is placed on individual responsibility to pay *zakat* as the primary means of redistribution. This response reflects a particular trend within Islamic political thought, which identifies the absence of a moral core (informed by religion) as the primary cause for society's ills and, consequently, its revival as the means to social (and spiritual) salvation.[7] Drawing on a tradition of Islamic natural philosophy, society is described as having a God-given order, which includes hierarchies of power and status.[8] As a result, individuals have different tests, determining their faith and level of obedience. Ali reflected this outlook:

> I think wealth is good. Wealth is a blessing from God. In fact, there are traditions that talk about how the, the sustenance of the poor is in the favour and the blessing of the wealth of the rich. And everybody has a different test, a different responsibility in society.[9]

The language of tests is key to this philosophy and is used to justify social inequalities as the means through which God judges the virtue of an individual. More specifically, with regards to class, Ali continues:

> When we stick to these classes, and believe that we are unable to, or we should not mingle, if you like, especially those in higher classes are reluctant to break barriers with those people in low classes. This is where the greed has kicked back in and we believe in a level of entitlement. There will always be people that will be richer and some that will be poorer and that's

[6] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.
[7] Theoretical manifestations of this are discussed in more detail later in the chapter.
[8] Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 20.
[9] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

absolutely fine… However, it's the ability for people to be able to break those divides and help one another. And this is why if you look at the beauty of Islam, you look at the best people in the society of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family), were the people, you know, he had uncles who were the most noble and… [the] wealthiest, and they were unable to mix and sit with people who were from the lower class. They were people who would frown on people, as one of the verses of the Quran describes, there were people who would feel as though they would almost catch, quote unquote, the disease of poverty, if someone mingled with them or sat on their garments by accident. And you look at the Prophet, he was known to sit with the people… and the Prophet would enjoy spending time with those of the low class because he was a man of all statuses, of all people. And again, he didn't believe in equality, but rather in equity because he didn't neglect the rich, nor did they neglect the poor.[10]

Here, Ali refers to the first ten verses of Surah ʻAbasa (80:1-10), which describe an interaction through which a blind man, said to refer to Abdallah ibn Umm Maktum, was ignored in favour of the more prestigious tribal elders of the Quraish.[11] He draws a moral lesson from this, calling on those of a higher social status to not look down on those below them but, rather, treat them with respect and dignity. Furthermore, rather than being seen as mutually exclusive, this ethical treatment within an unequal social reality is seen as a sufficient alternative to systemic change. Anna echoes this view:

I think Islam has done a great job to create a balance, but it hasn't completely eliminated it [class differences]. But it does give a great balance in terms of… not to look down on those who are below you and not be too envious of those who are above you.[12]

Both Anna and Ali depict an order where, as a result of an ethical imperative that is informed by Islam, individuals of different socioeconomic classes are able to live in harmony. Tripp notes in his work *Islam and the Moral Economy* that this reflects the view of many theorists from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who saw Islam as a means to safeguard virtue and proper conduct in property relations.[13] For example, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) spoke of a brand of Islamic socialism organised by brotherhood and social solidarity rather than egalitarianism or political change.[14] Similarly, Sayyid Qutb, in his commentary on verses 2:261-86, explains that Islam

is a system based on social cooperation and welfare through the established financial obligation of *zakat* and other unspecified voluntary contributions and donations. We learn in this passage that, in contrast to the system prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia, the Islamic socioeconomic system is

[10] Ibid.

[11] According to Sunni exegetes, the man who is rebuked for turning away from the blind man in these verses is the Prophet himself, while for Shia *mufasirun* it is said to refer to another Muslim (the view reflected by Ali here). For more see: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015). 1474-5.

[12] Anna, interview with author, 21 February 2022.

[13] Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism*. 29-30.

[14] Ibid., 34.

> fundamentally opposed to usury and encourages fundamentally different financial dealings. Thus, the sūrah speaks of a proper method of charity, denounces usury and outlines the Islamic principles of lending and trade which complement the social and economic principles according to which Islamic social life is organized and conducted.[15]

A Theology of Examination

This moral order centres on the individual and how they respond to their given social position: the wealthy are tested by what they do with their wealth, while the poor are tested by their poverty. The only condition on accumulation in this schema is whether the owner is too attached to their wealth to give back to those in need or whether it gives them a false sense of grandeur – questions of how this wealth is accumulated, except for a very narrow definition of theft and usury, are irrelevant.[16] As Ameen argues:

> I don't think religion by any means says that don't obtain wealth. I think obtaining wealth and generational wealth is absolutely encouraged as long as you give back. And I think that is a very much socialist ideology, by those that are more supportive, should help those that are poor. But that doesn't suggest a suddenly communist society whereby everyone needs to earn the exact same money.[17]

Research participants cited various examples of prominent figures in Islamic history who justified this worldview and allowed for unlimited accumulation. Both Ameen and Ali mentioned Khadija,[18] the wife of the Prophet, to whom we will return later, while Ali also mentioned Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, the eighth Shia Imam, and Prophet Yusuf, who rose to a position of political and economic authority in Ancient Egypt.[19] Although not mentioned by any of the participants, the Prophet's Companion Abdurrahman ibn Awf is often cited in a similar manner by Muslims who seek to justify wealth accumulation. Believed to be one of the ten Companions to be promised Paradise by Sunni Muslims, Abdurrahman was known for his wealth and entrepreneurship, as well as his generosity. These figures' elevated status in the Islamic canon is extrapolated to be an implicit approval of their worldly lifestyles, wealth accumulation in particular. What they all have in common is that, despite their material success, they were not greedy but gave freely. In them, Muslims who see nothing wrong with

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[15] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Quran (Fi Zilal al-Quran)*, vol. 1, trans. Adil Salahi (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2003), 366.

[16] Abu Ala Mawdudi, a prominent modern South Asian Islamic scholar, outlines thirteen economic activities that are prohibited in the Quran: bribes; forcible acquisitions; fraudulent payments with private or public money; stealing; appropriating the orphan's wealth; selling or buying using the wrong measurements; spending on indecent things; earnings from prostitution; wine and other intoxicants; gambling; the manufacture, buying or selling of idols; a business based on astrology, foretelling, etc.; and, finally, usury. For a more detailed look, see: Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi, 'Economic and Political Teachings of the Qur'an', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, vol. 1 (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 2015), https://www.al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-1-book-2/chapter-9-economic-and-political-teachings-quran.

[17] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth highlighting the distorted perception of communism that Ameen exhibits. In keeping with capitalist propaganda, communism is often portrayed as an economic system that is primarily concerned with appropriating peoples' personal goods and income, rather than the means of production through which wealth is produced.

[18] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021; Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

[19] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

wealth accumulation find respected sources of emulation through which they can justify their worldview.

This theology of examination, where the individual is judged on what they do with the relative bounties that they receive,[20] has several implications. It removes agency from those that are not recipients of these blessings, such as the economically marginalised. The latter become objects on which the wealthy act and the means for their salvation. Conversely, the poor are tested through their patience (read: passivity) and faith that God (who in this scenario works through the wealthy) will give them the means of survival. Built on a natural philosophy that justifies the hierarchical structure of society, this theology is a prime example of the readings of religion that liberation theologians critique. Rather than interrogating the reasons that class inequalities exist, it naturalises them and provides a means through which it is justified and ordered. It organises individuals according to their relative positions and prescribes duties on them, which inevitably favours those that benefit from the status quo and emphasises social order, while silencing any calls for systemic change.

In our contemporary time, this theology speaks to a particular subjectivity, which centres those blessed with *rizk* (sustenance) and renders those without as invisible. This is exemplified through popular portrayals of Ramadan as a means through which people can empathise with those who do not have enough food on a daily basis. Anna, for example, noted how it is a time of comfort for the poor (since others are also experiencing what they do) and a time of reflection for the rich.[21] This interpretation of Ramadan treats the poor with a patronising benevolence and assumes the subjectivity of those that enjoy a level of economic comfort, where food security is not a concern. As we have seen however, this is not the reality for the majority of Muslims, either in the UK or globally. Indeed, in 2022, as the cost of living soared, the prominent Muslim charity, Islamic Relief, said that half of British Muslims would struggle to feed themselves during Ramadan. Beyond this, 19% of Muslims relied on food banks throughout the year 2022, a number that is likely to have continued to rise.[22] The question therefore arises, if we fast to feel how the poor feel, why do the poor majority themselves have to fast?[23] Esack, in his reflections on the month of Ramadan, echoes these sentiments and expresses an unease with this discourse and asks us:

> Does it mean that we think of Muslims as wealthy or, at least, self-sufficient? Who shapes this discourse whereby the wealthy are the subjects of religion

[20] Ali made a distinction here between wealth and *rizk*, often translated as sustenance or blessing. Although the latter includes wealth, it is a broader term that encompasses all of God's blessings on an individual with which they are tested, such as health, time, education and resources. (Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.)
[21] Anna, interview with author, 21 February 2022.
[22] Islamic Relief UK, 'Half of Muslims in the UK Will Struggle to Feed Themselves This Ramadan as the Cost-of-Living Soars', Islamic Relief UK, 1 April 2022, https://www.islamic-relief.org.uk/half-of-muslims-in-the-uk-will-struggle-to-feed-themselves-this-ramadan-as-the-cost-of-living-soars/; 'Food Bank Britain: A Third of Muslims Missed a Meal to Afford Bills Last Year', 21 December 2022, https://muslimcensus.co.uk/foodbank-britain-a-third-of-muslims-missed-a-meal-to-afford-bills-last-year/.
[23] Although the Quran speaks about fasting as a means of attaining God-consciousness (*taqwa*) (2:183) and showing gratitude for the gift of guidance and the Quran (2:185), the belief that it is also to empathise with the poor is widely held among Muslims, despite the lack of textual evidence for this view.

> and poor its objects and we, even if unwittingly, suggest that they do not fast or do not have to fast?[24]

This theology of examination, as I have labelled it, is the opposite of liberatory, since it turns the economically marginalised into passive objects with which the wealthy are tested. In promoting it, several activists laid the foundation for an Islam that naturalised capitalism and economic hierarchies, which, as we have seen, are built on the exploitation of the majority. Although it would be patronising to explain these participants' views simply as something that is externally imposed, Gramsci's concept of hegemony can certainly, in part, explain how this brand of theology has seeped even into activist circles. As we have seen, Gramsci was concerned with how the ruling classes obtained the consent of subordinate groups in their own domination. Rather than relying on force to maintain their supremacy, ideas that support the status quo are presented as "common sense" and are internalised by the masses.[25] By seeing wealth simply as a test, this theology reflects the economic reality of inequality (which has existed throughout Islamic history) and takes it as a given. It fails to identify the structural reasons for poverty and economic exploitation, which are associated with a classed society. Indeed, as Maya noted, this "soft capitalist" attitude dominates Muslim communities,[26] which naturalises and reacts to the existing economic reality without creating the long term means through which it can be changed. Therefore, the task remains, as Gramsci would say, to create a counter-hegemony that addresses these broader systemic questions and provides the means for change. The remainder of this chapter illustrates activists' views that lay the foundations for an alternative theological understanding that can aid in this task.

Believing the Impossible: Managing Class Differences and the Prospect of Change

While a minority of activists followed a hegemonic, capitalist reading of Islam, the majority saw a fundamental issue with the class inequality that was manifest under a capitalist system. However, there was still disagreement on whether Islam seeks to abolish or manage class differences. For those that believed the latter, they argued that Islamic texts recognised the existence of class differences and so, gave a means to manage them. Maya, for example, asserts:

> I don't think within Islam in general there's the idea of abolishing of this particular structure [of class] because I feel like inherently there's a recognition that this will exist. But it wants to be able to create a society where people can live with dignity.[27]

She continues:

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[24] Contemplating on the practice of charity, particularly the mandated *sadqa al-fitra*, Esack notes that Ramadan is, aside from an exercise in self-discipline and spiritual development, a reminder of Muslim "responsibility to those around us." At the same time, he expresses an underlying discomfort that acts of charity and kindness "imply that the poor will always be with us and that we need the poor for our own purification." – a theme discussed in detail here. For more on his reflections on Ramadan, see: Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 34.

[25] McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*. 200-3.

[26] Maya, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

[27] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.

> it recognises that okay, those of you who do have wealth, this is how you need to practice your life in relation to your wealth. This is how much you are required to distribute, this how much you are required to give. So, I feel like there's like an equitable distribution in that sense.[28]

Although there is some overlap between this interpretation and the aforementioned theology of assessment, Maya's commitment to an anti-capitalist politics allows her to emphasise redistribution as opposed to accumulation, fundamentally changing the end goals. Furthermore, the emphasis on dignity shifts the focus to the marginalised and raises deeper questions on how this can be achieved – something we return to in the next chapter.

Even if these activists recognised the potential benefits of abolishing unequal class relations, the primary stumbling block was the perception that it was not realistic. As Maya argues:

> Now with relation to class, I don't think that is a possibility like to do with alcohol of an outright abolishment, because you would have to radically restructure society from scratch… So, I think the idea of completely abolishing a structure like that is simply not possible in the human world… So, this is why I think there is that recognition within Islam, you know, and within Islamic theology, that we do what we can in making sure everyone has access to that dignity, access to food, access to health care, access to those things. So yeah, in that sense abolishment, I think is near impossible if we wanted to speak in very realistic, tangible terms.[29]

Sukayna echoed this view:

> These kind of social issues [have almost] existed through time and the Quran acknowledges that and finds ways to deal with it, but not necessarily to the point of eradication. I don't know if I think a lot of people believe that before the Day of Judgement [and the arrival of the Mahdi] there will be an eradication on that and that there will be complete peace restored on Earth.[30]

For Maya and Sukayna, the perceived immutability of social structures such as class introduced a level of fatalism into their readings of Islam's economic goals. Sukayna's invocation of the Mahdi furthermore, points to why many liberation theologians have a critical view of eschatology, which they see as deferring liberation to an unspecified point in the future, either in this world or the next. Interestingly, Sukayna implies that the Mahdi, who Muslims believe will come to Earth at the end of times, will create a classless society. The success of this project however is predicated on his presence.[31]

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.
[31] Seen another way, this eschatological belief can have revolutionary implications for Muslims in the here and now. While liberation theologians are rightly critical of the way in which it is operationalised to encourage the marginalised to focus on an abstracted future where their oppression no longer exists, this is not the only use it has. Rather, a politico-theological formulation of what the Islamic utopia that the Mahdi will create can supply Muslims today with an indication of the socio-political goals towards which they should work (such as a classless society). It is perhaps for this reason that eschatology has inspired not only political quietism, but revolutionary

Nevertheless, although both Maya and Sukayna identified as anti-capitalists and saw capitalism's class relations as one of the root causes of today's exploitative status quo, they were unconvinced that Islam would call for a completely classless society. Indeed, the durability of classed societies (which have prevailed in some form for much of human history, including at the time of the Prophet) and power concentrated in the hands of the capitalist class creates a level of inevitability, which can limit people's imaginations of the future. From a theological perspective, this pessimism can be critiqued as turning social structures into idols with the same status as God by making them necessary. By challenging capitalism, it is exposed as contingent, rather than a unified and omnipotent system. Building on this, from a theological perspective, no social structure, whether positive or negative, is inevitable or necessary. Belief in the possibility of changing the class structure therefore becomes not only a political necessity but a means to uphold the fundamental Islamic principle of *tawhid* and avoid *shirk*.[32] Furthermore, the Karbala paradigm, developed by activists in the previous chapter, illustrates, whether a goal is realistically achievable within our lifetimes or not should not prevent individuals from acting towards them – a point Sukayna herself explicitly recognised. To restrict Islam's economic objectives to providing dignity to the lower classes within a classed society would limit Muslim praxis and result in it perpetually reacting to the material conditions imposed from outside. However, an anti-capitalist politics and theological imperative to uphold *tawhid* and combat social idols, requires an optimism that structural change is, not only necessary, but attainable.[33]

Towards Economic Liberation: Abolishing Exploitative Class Relations

For other activists, Islam's economic goals were more far-reaching and called for the abolition of class differences. Shelly, for example, believed that Islam calls for "the overthrow of everything that we know",[34] while Akbar simply argued that "Islam, in its true form, abolishes class."[35] Khalid, recognising that Islam could be interpreted in various ways, used less definitive language, but maintained:

> even if it doesn't definitively make that argument for the demolition of class, could one make a reasonable argument that it calls for a classless society?

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change. In recent times, the Mahdiyya movement in Sudan, which resisted Ottoman and British imperialism, in the late 1800s, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 are potent examples of revolutionary movements influenced by eschatological themes.In the latter's case, Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly critiqued politically quietist trends that had been prevalent in Shi'ism that detached the *ulama* from politics and left this domain to the Mahdi.

[32] This argument builds on Ivan Petrella's critique of the first generation of Latin American liberation theologians. For Petrella, the abstraction of capitalism as a unified system holds Liberation Theology back and prevented the first generation of liberation theologians from recognising the multiplicity of opportunities to work within the system for change. Rejecting the dichotomy between revolution and reaction, he proposes the path of revolutionary reform as a means to exploit the "gaps" within the system and work towards meaningful change – a theme we return to in the British Muslim context in the next chapter. For more, see Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*. – Particularly chapters four and five.

[33] It is worth noting here that I am not condemning activists for a literal form of *shirk*, nor engaging in the process of excommunication (*takfir*) in the way that has been operationalised by many Salafi groups to justify violence against other Muslims. Rather, this follows the symbolic dichotomy between *tawhid* and *shirk* that has been illuminated by scholars such as Ali Shariati, discussed in chapter two.

[34] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

[35] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

> And I think… there's some really, really interesting things there, that you could almost see as heirs to ideas like the dictatorship of the proletariat.[36]

Khalid here, just like with his statement above regarding Islam being interpreted in a Keynesian manner, recognises that it is impossible to essentialise Islam, since it has various manifestations in any given social context. Although he acknowledged the presence of other interpretations, along with other activists, he believed in class abolition as the ultimate goal of Islamic praxis.

Justice as a Guiding Principle

The most fundamental justification given for this interpretation by activists was Islam's emphasis on justice. This began with providing a theoretical understanding of class, how it operates within our current capitalist system and through which mechanisms people are made poor. Khalid asserts:

> it's incumbent upon us to understand how people are made poor because people aren't made poor because of some kind of pathology or biology right. But Islam, clearly, I think, you know, mandates us to understand… what are the background conditions that make people poor?[37]

This approach prevents Islam from becoming static and allows it to adapt to different conditions. It is no longer enough to rely on abstract arguments such as that poverty, wealth accumulation and inequality were present at the time of the Prophet and therefore are acceptable realities today. Rather, judgement is based on the material conditions to which people are subjected.

The centrality of justice and clear injunctions against its opposite, oppression (*zulm*), in the Islamic canon means that these principles were a litmus test against which the question of class abolition was judged. Shelly, for example, notes that "Islam is a religion for the oppressed. It always will be… God is always with the oppressed."[38] Supporting this, Maya argues, "justice is central to being Muslim and practicing Islam".[39] Zehra relates this explicitly to the issue of economics:

> I would say, the core principle of Islam is justice, for me. I wholly believe Islam is rooted in justice, just like a lot of Abrahamic faiths, and wealth disparity is unjust, and one of the biggest signs of injustice. So, you know, I think from that perspective, Islam… would be able to address wealth disparity. If we can establish that this is unjust, then what can we do to overcome that injustice?[40]

As Zehra highlights, the key question to consider is whether class and economic inequality exists because of injustice or not. Aqeel reframes this insight by making a distinction between poverty and exploitation, arguing that the focus should be on the latter:

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[36] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[39] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[40] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.

> I think, for me, there's a clear, quite explicit injunction in the Quran and hadith against exploitation in the abstract… I think that's the question we're dealing with – how do we move towards, in the course of building something Islamic… how in doing so [do we] create conditions whereby exploitation is negated or no longer allowed, and therefore any sort of distinction between the rich and the poor become one, drastically limited… undercutting the root of inequality. So again, the main point, I think, is a distinction between rich and poor, and exploiter, exploited.[41]

This grounded approach to economic issues requires a theoretical understanding of class and how it operates. Theoretical knowledge, combined with their experience as activists, led to the majority identifying with some form of anti-capitalism and seeing capitalist class relations as the root cause of contemporary economic exploitation.[42] For example, Adam believes:

> Capitalism is the root of all the problems that we have in our society today. And… we tried to reform capitalism in many ways, but it's not been a very good attempt so far and I think reforming is only simply putting a plaster on a bigger problem.[43]

Others drew more explicitly on Marxist theory to explain the mechanisms by which class relations and inequalities develop. Indeed, Khalid was adamant of Marxism's utility in helping us understanding our contemporary state:

> I've spent, you know, fifteen odd years thinking, writing about this stuff, organising around this stuff, and to date, the best understanding of the world that we live in, that we can call this kind of capitalist totality, is Marxism, with all of its faults, and there absolutely are faults with [the] orthodoxies in Marxism, but that has provided the best understanding. And so, someone would respond to [me] and say, "You're a Marxist", [and I would say], it's the tools that Marx gives us to understand the world that I think at the moment are the most helpful.[44]

Speaking about class in particular, Aqeel, said, "class is about demarcating the relationship to the means of production",[45] while Sumaira noted that it is about who "controls the means of exploitation."[46] This was expanded on by Khalid:

> Capitalism as a system is necessarily predicated on an idea that people who sell their labour power… so that the capitalist is the one who's in control of the means of production has to, in order for the capitalists to survive, they have to obviously acquire the surplus value from the work of the worker. And the structural imperatives on the capitalist is, in order to maximise their

[41] Aqeel, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[42] Activists came from a wide range of academic backgrounds and presented varying degrees of theoretical knowledge with regards to the topics discussed. With the exception of Amena, Ameen, Anna and Ali from Who Is Hussain and Tayyaba from Sufra however, all activists explicitly identified with some form of anti-capitalism. Some would go further to describe themselves more explicitly as socialist, anarchist or Marxist.
[43] Adam, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
[44] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[45] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[46] Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

> surplus value, to build and grow their business, they have to look at ways in which they can further exploit the worker and so that can be through, you know, working them literally to the bone through longer working days, or finding more innovative ways of exploiting their labour through technological and manufacturing processes. So, these are what Marx calls absolute and relative surplus value. And therefore, there is a fundamental, there's a structural inequality between those that work, and those that don't work, the owners of the means of production. That poverty and inequality is not something that someone is born into but is part of a structure that creates a class relationship between a worker that can only survive by having to sell their labour power, and a capitalist that has to find more and more ways to acquire more and more surplus value through the exploitation of the worker.[47]

These activists take the more general anti-capitalist critique further and articulate it in an analytical manner, like the conceptual understanding of class developed in chapter one. It goes beyond recognising class differences and explains why they exist and how they operate within the contemporary system. Indeed, the exploitative relationship that allows a minority to extract surplus labour from the majority, which is necessary to capitalism and all other classed societies, suggests that class inequality is inherently unjust. In order to take God's affinity to the oppressed and injunctions to establish justice seriously, therefore, requires dismantling class relations and creating a classless society where these economic hierarchies do not exist. Common ownership of the means of production, which shape the economic system, becomes the means to achieve this. Interpreting verse 4:126 – "To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth" – through this lens establishes the earth as

> part of the global commons that we all have access to, that we can all use, that we can all live off. And ideas of enclosure, private property, are an anathema to the idea that this is God's property.[48]

Here Khalid brings a contemporary social meaning to a verse that has primarily been interpreted in a metaphysical sense and to address issues such as belief, hypocrisy and idolatry.[49] Abul Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979), an influential South Asian political and religious leader, vehemently opposed attempts to regulate property in such a manner, arguing that it distorted Islam's economic system and imposed unsubstantiated restrictions on property ownership. For him,

> The economic scheme presented in the Quran is based entirely on the idea of individual ownership in every field. There is nothing in it to suggest that a distinction is to be made between consumption goods and production

[47] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

[48] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

[49] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 248.

> goods (or means of production) and that only the former may be held in private ownership, while the latter must be nationalised.[50]

He refuted, for example, opinions that interpreted 4:126 or 41:10 as justifying public or collective ownership.[51] Indeed, the canon does seem to recognise some form of hierarchical relationship between the worker and their employer. Verse 43:32, for example explicitly states:

> Is it they who dispense the mercy of your Lord? It is We who have dispensed among them their livelihood in the present life, *and raised some of them above others in rank, so that some may take others into service,* and your Lord's mercy is better than what they amass.[52]

Similarly, verse 30:28 ridicules the polytheists for imagining that God has partners by making a comparison between this and the idea of having a horizontal relationship with your slaves – the primary class relationship at the time:

> He draws for you an example from yourselves: Do you have among your slaves any partners [who may share] in what We have provided you, so that you are equal in its respect, and you revere them as you revere on another?[53] Thus do we elaborate the signs for a people who apply reason.

The prominent exegetes (*mufasirun*), al-Tabari (d. 310/923), al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1272) and Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), interpret this verse as criticising the polytheists, who cannot envision (or fear) sharing their wealth equally with their slaves, and yet attribute partners to God in His universal sovereignty.[54] Thus, although the verse recognises a hierarchical relationship between the slave and their master, it is far from exalting of the latter.[55] Consequently, this has not prevented more left-leaning Islamic scholars in the twentieth century from attempting to regulate private property. In a discussion on Islam's economic system with regards to verse 2:262, for example, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), one of the most prominent ideologues of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, asserted:

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[50] Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi, 'Economic and Political Teachings of the Qur'an', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, vol. 1 (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 2015), https://www.al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-1-book-2/chapter-9-economic-and-political-teachings-quran.

[51] 41:10 refers to God's creation and was interpreted by left-leaning Islamic scholars as justifying equal right to ownership and nationalisation policies – "He set in it firm mountains [rising] above it, and blessed it and ordained therein its [various] means of sustenance in four days, *alike for all the seekers*." – Emphasis added to relevant phrase.

[52] The idea of some being raised above others will be addressed in detail later. Emphasis added.

[53] Yusuf Ali translates this part as "do you have partners among those whom your right hand possess, to share as equals in the wealth We have bestowed on you?"

[54] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 990.

[55] There are also many *hadith* that recognise the relationship between workers and employers that, although encouraging the latter to treat those they employ well, seemingly does not critique this relationship in itself. For example, The Prophet is reported to have said: "Those are your brothers [workers]… Allah has placed them under you. So, if anyone of you has someone under him, he should feed him out of what he himself eats, clothe him like what he himself puts on, and let him not put so much burden on him that he is not able to bear, [and if that be the case], then lend him your help." (Sahih Bukhari, vol. 3, no. 2545). Elsewhere, a famous *hadith* tells employers to "give the labourer his wage before his swear dries." (Ibn Maja, vol. 3, no. 2443).

> God's covenant with man stipulates that believers must look after one another's welfare and share the benefits of what God has provided for all of them. This does not mean common ownership in the Marxist sense, but responsible and regulated private ownership. Those who have should share with those who have not and all are equally required to seek work and earn their living according to their ability.[56]

Similarly, Mustafa al-Sibai (d. 1964), the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood between 1945 and 1961, in his famous text, *Ishtirakiyat al-Islam* [The Socialism of Islam], argues that God is the real owner of all things and so rights to private property are predicated on fulfilling God's will and all groups of people are equally entitled to make use of His creation. He cites the *hadith*, "People own three things in common: water, grass and fire", to justify nationalisation.[57] According to al-Sibai, this narration relates to the basic necessities of desert life and is not exhaustive or exclusive. Rather, it means that all the requirements of contemporary life should be under public control to avoid private exploitation.[58]

Khalid takes the logic presented by thinkers such as al-Sibai further by emphasising that private property in its entirety paves the way for exploitation of the masses and, in doing so, agrees with Shariati's views on common ownership (discussed in chapter two). By juxtaposing this to the principle of justice therefore, activists were able to lay the foundation for an anti-capitalist politics that identifies the class relationship between labour and capital as inherently exploitative. The command for Muslims to oppose oppression and establish justice requires abolishing this class relation and working towards a systemic alternative.

The Evil of Wealth Accumulation

In addition to this general aversion to injustice, activists also extracted specific principles from the Quran and hadith that could be used as a critique of capitalism and promote the need for a classless society. As we have seen, the extraction of surplus value is only possible because workers are not paid the *true* value of their work, but rather a working wage. Khalid argues that the Quran's prohibition of theft, for example in verse 4:29, which commands believers to "not devour wealth among yourselves unrightfully, but… trade by mutual consent", could be extended to the idea of surplus value today.[59]

This argument is further supported by constant prohibitions to hoarding wealth, which Shelly notes, is "one of the main reasons why class exists",[60] and an animosity towards wealth accumulation as an end in itself. For example, Surah al-Humaza states:

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[56] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Quran (Fi Zilal al-Quran)*, Vol. 1, trans. Adil Salahi (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2003), 382–83.

[57] This *hadith* is also mentioned by Sayyid Qutb in *Social Justice in Islam* for the same ends. See: Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam* (New York: Islamic Publications International, 2000).

[58] See: Mustafa al-Sibai, *Ishtirakiyat al-Islam [The Socialism of Islam]* (Damascus: Mu'assasat al-Matba'at al-Arabiyah, 1960); Hamid Enayat, ed., *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Response of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

[59] Ibid.

[60] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

> Woe to every slanderer, backbiter, who amasses wealth and counts it over. He supposes his wealth will make him immortal! No, indeed! He will surely be cast into the Crusher. (104:1-4)

and Surah al-Ma'un criticises

> the one who drives away the orphan… does not urge the feeding of the needy… those who show off and deny aid/withhold things of use from others (107:2-7).[61]

Based on these verses in particular, the activists argued that an argument could be made for challenging classed economic systems, which expropriate wealth and facilitate its concentration in the hands of a few. Indeed, Akbar makes an ethical distinction between earning money and accumulating wealth:

> There's a big difference to me between earning a lot of money and being rich. You're only rich, it doesn't matter how much you earn, you're only rich if you actually hold on to that money. You make a million a day, you spend a million a day [helping others], your bank account is zero. You ain't rich. You have to be sitting on that money to be rich… *Wealth is just evil*, you know? You sit with the money in the bank, millions, but there's a limit, yeah. Yes, save some money. Yes, there's a rainy day. Yes, you want a bit of security. But… who draws the line on security, who draws the line on materialism? … You're not going to spend that before you die and you're not going to take it to the grave with you. It means nothing. But you're not going to share it with that person who's right opposite because you might need it later on.[62]

Here, Akbar makes an important distinction between work and wealth accumulation. While working to earn a living and survive is exalted as a virtue (something also seen in hadith),[63] a fixation on attaining and keeping wealth is seen as unethical. Indeed, it is worth noting that although the Prophet Muhammad himself (along with many other prominent religious figures) worked, they were known to distribute all their earnings among those in need on a daily basis. Working to meet personal and communal needs thereby becomes a praiseworthy alternative to accumulating for its own sake and, although not mentioned by activists, this attitude is exemplified in Surah al-Takathur:

> Rivalry in [worldly] accumulation distracted you until you visited the graves. No indeed! Soon you will come to know. Again, no indeed! Soon you will come to know. No indeed! Were you to know with certain knowledge, you would surely see hell. Again, you will surely see it with the eye of certainty.

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[61] Khalid mentioned both these passages during the Nijjor Manush focus group discussion, 30 January 2023. "Withhold things of use from others" was the translation he provided in our discussion, which follows the general meaning provided by other translators.

[62] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

[63] For example, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said when asked about what is the best kind of earning: "That for which a man works with his hands and honest trading." See: 'Whad Did Muhammad Teach about Business?', University of Alberta Muslim Students' Association, accessed 16 November 2023, https://sites.ualberta.ca/~msa/pdf/hadith_economics.pdf.

> Then, that day, you will surely be questioned concerning [your worldly] pleasures/blessings.

The prohibition on interest (*riba*) similaryly, which is given central importance in theories of Islamic economics, even its capitalist iterations (such as Islamic finance), is further evidence of an animosity to wealth accumulation. Charging interest "is the exploitation of the [economic] advantage over somebody else" and allows the possessor of capital to gain at the expense of the needy, who are prevented from being able to flourish.[64] Khalid draws symbolic significance from the very clear and strong prohibitions on usury[65]:

> The fact that it [interest] was a prominent way that people have acquired wealth, and there is a direct injunction against that… within the holy text, there is [clearly] an animosity and enmity towards people acquiring wealth and there's a preference towards people who are made poor, and there's a demand that follows to try to understand what those background conditions are made from.[66]

According to this view, the prohibition on interest symbolises something deeper than just the act itself. It indicates a clear preference for the destitute by removing one of the key instruments through which they were exploited at the time (and indeed, continue to be). Combined with the general animosity discussed above, this injunction can be read to signify a general condemnation of wealth accumulation and its concentration in a few hands. This is of course fundamental to any capitalist economy, which encourages actors to be self-interested and seek wealth. Activists' readings, however, show how this goes against Islamic principles, providing further evidence for the need for an alternative, where a minority is not able to accumulate wealth at the expense of a majority.

Equality and Redistribution

In addition to interest, which serves the purpose of limiting accumulation, mechanisms of Islamic taxation, *zakat* in particular, according to activists, point towards a desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth. Indeed, Akbar argues:

> Islam, if followed properly, would remove class, would remove poverty, because you have the laws around the distribution of wealth – if every single

[64] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

[65] Verses on the prohibition of usury include 2:275-6: "Those who exact usury will not stand but like one deranged by the Devil's touch. That is because they say, "Trade is just like usury." While Allah has allowed trade and forbidden usury… Allah brings usury to naught, but He makes charities flourish. And Allah does not like any sinful ingrate."; 3:130: "O you who have faith! Do not exact usury, twofold and severalfold, and be wary of Allah so that you may be felicitous."; 4:160-1: "Due to the wrongdoing of the Jews, We prohibited them certain good things… for their taking usury – though they had been forbidden from it – and for eating up the wealth of the people wrongfully. And We have prepared for the faithless among them a painful punishment."; and 30:39: "That which you give in usury in order that it may increase people's wealth, does not increase with Allah. But what you pay as *zakat*, seeking Allah's pleasure, it is they who will be given a manifold increase."

[66] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

> person in the world followed the *sadaqa* and *khums*[67] rulings, one fifth of their wealth.[68]

Although, as we have seen, the problem of class is far deeper than distribution and taxation alone would be insufficient to produce systemic change, when these institutions are combined with prohibitions on interest and hoarding wealth, there is a clear trajectory towards equality. Qutb, drawing on verse 59:7 regarding the spoils of war, echoes this view. The verse states:

> The spoils that Allah gave to His Apostle from the people of the townships are for Allah and the Apostle, the relatives and the orphans, the needy and the traveller, *so that they do not circulate among the rich among you.*

Referring to this final section of the verse – "so that they do not circulate among the rich among you" – Qutb extrapolates "a major rule of the Muslim community's economic and social system" that wealth being held by the wealthy is

> contrary to the Islamic economic system… [and] all transactions in the Muslim community must be so organised so as to not allow such a situation to develop and to dismantle it if it does exist.[69]

Building on this, Tayyaba makes reference to how Muslims were encouraged to treat slaves, which was the primary class conflict at the time of revelation, with dignity, for example, by educating them. This was in addition to giving them the means to live full lives once freed, eventually creating a society where slavery no longer existed.[70] While Tayyaba's statement here that Islam encouraged slave abolition is almost a truism for Muslims today, with the exception of extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS/Daesh) or Boko Haram, the actual historical record is far more nuanced. Indeed, for the majority of Muslim history, in many cases well into the twentieth century, slavery was considered a normal and accepted part of social life and, despite injunctions that called for the manumission of slaves and fair treatment, the practice endured and expanded, with evidence of widespread abuse of enslaved persons.[71] Indeed, for Azumah, the prevalence of the practice is unsurprising and he asserts:

> Slavery as a practice is therefore not condemned in either the Qur'an or *hadith*. If anything at all the practice is endorsed with modifications and stipulations aimed at regulating and mitigating possible abuses.[72]

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[67] *Khums* is a form of Islamic tax, mostly practiced by Shia Muslims, through which one-fifth of an individual's surplus wealth is apportioned to the Prophet's family or, in its absence, the *marja al-taqlid*. In general, half of this is used to maintain the Islamic institution seminaries (by for example, providing students with a basic bursary that will allow them to continue their studies) and half is given to orphans and the poor.

[68] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

[69] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Quran (Fi Zilal al-Quran)*, vol. 16, trans. Adil Salahi (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2003). 430-31.

[70] Tayyaba, interview with author, 16 February 2022.

[71] For a look at the history of slavery in the Muslim-majority world, see: Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); John Alembillah Azumah, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006).

[72] John Alembillah Azumah, *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 124.

Evidence would suggest that this was the prevalent position among scholars but, as Bashir notes, there was also an "emancipatory ethic" that ran through the legal tradition, which, through calls to free the enslaved and restrictions on the means to enslave, could lay the foundation for abolition.[73] Verses from the Quran, such as 5:89, 24:33 and 90:11-13[74] could be supplemented with *hadith* to discourage the practice and encourage freedom. For example, one report from the Prophet Muhammad states:

> There are three categories of people against whom I shall myself be the opponent on the Day of Judgement. [One of these] is one who enslaves a free man, then sells him and devours the money.[75]

It was however, only in the nineteenth century, partly as a result of similar movements in Europe, which were simultaneously encroaching in Muslim-majority lands, that Muslims began to talk of abolition. In British-controlled India, for example, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) unequivocally opposed slavery. His contemporary, Chiragh Ali (d. 1895), built on his ideas by arguing that the Quran *de facto* recognised slavery because of its presence in Arabian society, rather than in principle. The Shia scholar, Sayyid Amir Ali (d. 1928) asserted, in a similar manner to the Egyptian *mufti*, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), that Islam could not abolish slavery overnight because it would turn the Arabs against Islam and so sought to do it gradually.[76] Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) similarly, argued that the institution of slavery threatened the social justice imperatives of Islam. Echoing the gradualist perspective he notes that the Prophet:

> declared the principle of equality and though, like every wise reformer, he slightly conceded to the social conditions around him in retaining the name of slavery, he quietly took away the whole spirit of the institution… The truth is that the institution of slavery is a mere name in Islam.[77]

[73] Haroon Bashir, 'Islam and the Emancipatory Ethic: Islamic Law, Liberation Theology and Prison Abolition', *Religions* 14, no. 9 (September 2023): 1083.

[74] Verse 5:89 stipulates "the freeing of a slave" as one of the atonements (*kaffara*) for breaking an oath. 24:33 lays out the *mukataba* contract through which slaves could secure their freedom: As for those who seek an emancipation deal from among your slaves, make such a deal with them if you know any good in them, and give them out of the wealth of Allah which He has given you.". The verse also goes on to prohibit prostitution: "And do not compel your female slaves to prostitution when they desire to be chaste, seeking the transitory wares of the life of this world. Should anyone compel them, then after their compulsion Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful." In Surah al-Balad (90) among the acts of good done to others, which are described as the "uphill task/road", "freeing a slave" is mentioned first, in verse 13.

[75] Hadith quoted in Maher Hathot, *In Pursuit of Justice: The Jurisprudence of Human Rights in Islam* (Los Angeles: Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2006), 349.

[76] Muhammad Abduh, the famous Egyptian scholar and Islamic revivalist, popularised this gradualism in the Arab world, arguing that Islam had always been against slavery, even if this was not explicit. He cited condemnations of illegal enslavement and the frequent encouragements to emancipate slaves to justify his opinion, which was built on by scholars such as Abdulrahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1902), who asserted that slavery continued because of the abuse of religious tradition by tyrannical rulers. For more on Abduh, see: Haroon Bashir, 'Islam and the Emancipatory Ethic: Islamic Law, Liberation Theology and Prison Abolition', *Religions* 14, no. 9 (September 2023): 1083. For more on abolitionist trends in British India and the Arab world, see: William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), 196–208.

[77] Muhammad Iqbal, quoted in William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), 201.

Therefore, although the historical relationship of the Islamic tradition and polities to slavery is more nuanced than what Tayyaba presents, in citing Islam's emancipatory ethic, she draws on a tradition that was popularised from the mid-nineteenth century and advocated for slavery abolition.[78] For her, this provides further ideational weight to the argument that Islam seeks to remove class inequalities, whether those be between workers and capital or masters and slaves.

This interpretation is further bolstered by a general tendency towards equality throughout Islamic thought, which was referenced by several activists. For example, the Prophet's famous final sermon states:

> All humankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action.[79]

Although this hadith can be interpreted in the liberal sense of affirming the nominal equality of all without drawing specific socio-political implications,[80] the latter is also possible. An alternative reading would require removing social hierarchies, such as those based on race, class or gender, so that piety and good action can become governing principles in society.[81] This quest for equality is also further symbolised in Islamic ritual practices, such as congregational prayer, where believers stand shoulder to shoulder with no distinction between them; *hajj*, where all men and women wear the same special clothing (*ihram*); and at the time of death, where all individuals wear the same shroud (*kaffan*).[82]

Akbar extrapolates a general push for equality from these rituals, which, he notes, has spiritual, social and political implications for believers. When combined with commands to establish justice and an aversion to injustice and hoarding wealth, activists produce a convincing reading of Islam that seeks to abolish class. This can only be done through systemic change that redistributes wealth, read as the means of production or capital, among the masses. This, in turn, requires combatting the exploitative status quo, and the relatively small but powerful capitalist class that upholds it.

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[78] As a final point, it is worth noting that slavery abolition had been advocated prior to the nineteenth century by smaller sects, such as the Ismailis and Druze, and can be dated back to at least the eleventh century CE. See: Ibid.

[79] 'The Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad SAW', *Hadith of the Day* (blog), 8 September 2012, https://hadithoftheday.com/the-last-sermon/.

[80] This view was promoted by Anna in an interview with the author, 21 February 2022.

[81] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

[82] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021; Anna, interview with author, 21 February 2022.

It is worth noting that, in practice, social hierarchies and capitalism have distorted the spirit of equality that is inherent to these ritual practices. This is perhaps most visible during the *hajj*, which, aside from being unaffordable for many and a means of tourist revenue for the Saudi state, offers different packages to different people: those with the means can stay in 5* hotels neighbouring the *Ka'ba*, have access to a wide variety of restaurants (including many multinational fast food chains) and stay in luxurious tents in Arafat, while the poor are pushed to worse accommodation on the outskirts of Makkah or simply sleep on the streets of the city.

The Process of Reflection: Negotiating Silences and Reconciling Different Readings

As the discussion so far in this chapter has illustrated, the activists represented a broad range of views on Islam's economic goals and substantiated the claims made in chapter four that Islam can be interpretated in a variety of ways and to different ends. It follows that while the activists have provided the foundations for a liberative Islam that challenges the economic status quo, their formulations remain incomplete and in need of development. This is an inevitable part of praxis, as through the cyclical process of action and reflection theoretical consciousness (and the tactics used to materially change the status quo) is sharpened and becomes more sophisticated. It is important, therefore, to remember that the process is far from complete and the task of negotiating activists' silences and reconciling different readings and contradictions remains.

Islam: A Liberal or Liberative Religion?

On the surface, there is a potential conflict between the imperative to manage and abolish class differences, which is also reflected in the broader clash between a liberal and liberative theology. The latter focuses on God's preference for the dispossessed and addresses the structural causes for their marginalisation. A liberal manifestation, on the other hand, calls for everyone to be treated equally, regardless of social position, and limits itself to reforming the existing system. Among the activists for example, Ali's statement, mentioned earlier, exemplifies a liberal theology:

> And you look at the Prophet, he was known to sit with the people… and the Prophet would enjoy spending time with those of the low class *because he was a man of all statuses, of all people*. And again, he didn't believe in equality, but rather in equity because *he didn't neglect the rich, nor did he neglect the poor*.[83]

The emphasis on the Prophet as a man of all people, regardless of social standing,[84] obscures the very real and regular preference he showed, both in his actions and words for the dispossessed.[85] It presents him as a neutral observer of social relations, who is indifferent to its causes and consequences, rather than an active participant.

This contradiction between calls for equality and a preference for the marginalised was spoken about in a focus group with members of Nijjor Manush. They were asked whether God had a preference for the poor and working class or saw everyone as equal. This was done by juxtaposing verses 28:5-6 – "And We desired to show favour to those who were abased in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the heirs and to establish them in the

[83] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021. Emphasis added.

[84] Verses such as 4:135, where God says, "and whether it be [someone] rich or poor, for Allah has a greater right over them" and 49:13, which says, "Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary" are used to emphasise this nominal equality among all people.

[85] For example, in a famous hadith, the Prophet is reported to have said, "Beware of the supplication of the oppressed, even if he is an unbeliever, for there is nothing to veil it [from God]." (Musnad Aḥmad Hadith no. 12549). Other hadith speak specifically about the poor, for example: "The poor are the friends of Allah." (al-Firdaws v.3, Hadith no. 4423).

land…" – which show a clear preference,[86] with two verses that point to a nominal social equality of all: 49:13 – "Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary among you" – and 4:135 – "O you have faith! Be maintainers of justice and witnesses for the sake of Allah, even if it should be against yourselves or [your] parents and near relatives, and *whether it be [someone] rich or poor, for Allah has a greater right over them.*"[87]

In response, activists distinguished between Islam's short and long term goals, arguing that the equality, so emphasised by liberal iterations, reflected a metaphysical humanism and was a normative goal towards which Muslims have to aspire. Preference for the dispossessed, on the other hand, is based on the recognition that oppressive social structures organise the status quo.[88] As long as these continue to exist, a preference is necessary. As Aqeel noted in relation to his distinction between rich and poor and exploiter and exploited:

> I don't think there's an inherent contradiction between equality and preference because… questions of rich and poor are relative categories… whereas the question of exploitation is a lot more concrete… I think the really difficult question is how does the Quran and hadith, as an example of Islam in action, move towards a vision [of] a society, a place where exploitation is no longer allowed and being exploited is negated… and [inevitably] any sort of distinction between rich and poor become drastically limited.[89]

According to this logic, there is no contradiction between a preference for the oppressed and the nominal equality of all. The Quran and *hadith* make a *de facto* recognition of the social inequalities and oppressions that exist, while pointing believers towards the ideal, where these distinctions no longer govern social relations.

Considering this, Sukayna and Maya's position that Islam seeks to manage class differences can be reconciled with a broader, long term objective to create a classless society. Their emphasis on the necessity to give dignity to the economically marginalised is necessary within a world that refuses to afford them that and treats them as non-persons, as Latin American liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez identified. However, rather than perpetually reacting to this reality, this push should be combined with a broader ambition to remove the causes of their dehumanisation. This combination of short and long term goals is summarised succinctly by Tayyaba:

> I think eventually, the ultimate goal is to get rid of it [class], but [Islam] also accepts that these classes exist, and how we should learn and manage to live with those as well. And then eventually, through certain

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[86] Activists were also provided with several *hadith* that showed a preference for the poor: "The poor are the friends of Allah." (al-Firdaws, vol. 3, no. 4,423); "The poor will be the kings of the people of Heaven. All people long for Heaven, whereas Heaven itself longs for the poor." (Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 72, no. 58); "I gaze into Heaven and I saw that most of its people were the poor." (Musnad ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, no. 2,086); "Beware of the supplication of the oppressed, even if he is an unbeliever, for there is nothing to veil it [from God]." (Musnad Ahmad, no. 12,549).

[87] Emphasis added.

[88] Khalid and Aqeel, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

[89] Aqeel, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

> implementations, eventually, you should be in a position where class no longer exists.[90]

Addressing Silences and Contradictions

While, as we have seen, many of the activists interviewed saw class abolition as desirable (even if some were unconvinced of its practicality), this is undoubtedly a nonconformist opinion that contradicts the widely-held orthodox opinion, briefly mentioned earlier, that Islam seeks to manage socioeconomic disparities through relations of solidarity and goodwill among individuals. The latter reflects the Keynesian and trickle-down economic positions, cited previously by Khalid and Zehra, respectively, and the views of Ali and Ameen.

There is certainly some compelling textual evidence for this perspective. On a fundamental level, it is supported by the frequent acknowledgements in the Quran that God allocates His blessings (*rizk*) according to divine wisdom. For example, verse 17:30 states:

> Indeed, your Lord outspreads the provision for whomever He wishes, and tightens it [for whomever He wishes]. Indeed, He is all-aware, all-seeing about His servants.[91]

Believers in verse 4:32 are, therefore, commanded to "not covet the advantage which Allah has given some of you over others." The verse continues:

> To men belongs a share of what they have earned, and to women a share of what they have earned. And ask Allah for His grace. Indeed, Allah has knowledge of all things.[92]

Al-Zamakshari (d. 467/1065), noting the assertion at the end of the verse that "Allah has knowledge of all things", argues that this inequality is a matter of divine wisdom.[93] Al-Tabari's interpretation, furthermore, says that, rather than desiring what others have been given and being envious of God's blessings on them, believers should "ask Allah for His Grace."[94] In a similar vein to the view of al-Afghani, cited earlier, this interpretation encourages the community of believers to maintain social unity, regardless of any disparities in economic or political position. Further, it can be interpreted as a condemnation of any form of class antagonism or struggle that challenges this solidarity and harmony. This commonly held view among Islamic thinkers, both past and present, is further supported by prophetic *hadith*, such as, "Look at the one who is at a lower level than you and do not look at the one who is above you, for that may keep you from scorning the blessing of Allah."[95]

This interpretation lays the foundation for the theology of examination detailed above. Interpreting verse 6:165:

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[90] Tayyaba, interview with author, 16 February 2022.

[91] Similar statements are made in verses 13:26, 28:82, 29:62, 30:37, 34:36-39, 39:52 and 42:12.

[92] This verse is said to have been revealed in response to a complaint by some women (potentially one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, Umm Salamah) that men receive twice the inheritance of women and can gain greater spiritual reward for participating in *jihad*. See: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 205.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Sahih Muslim, vol. 7, no. 7,430.

> It is He who has made you successors on the earth, *and raised some of you in rank above others so that He may test you in respect to what He has given you.* Indeed, your Lord is swift in retribution and indeed, He is all-forgiving, all-merciful.[96]

Al-Zamakshari interprets these degrees to relate to the worldly provision of goods and nobility and this allows God to test the generosity and kindness of the haves in relation to the have nots.[97] Furthermore, according to Al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), this tests "the humility and trust of those given little, inspiring them to emulate the nobler human beings in their midst."[98] They will be rewarded for their patience through these trials, as seen in 2:155 – "We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives and fruits; and give good news to the patient."

Conversely, for those who have wealth, their test is what they do with their *rizk* – "Rather, your possessions and children are a trial, and Allah, with Him is a great reward!" (64:15). As discussed earlier, this can take the form of giving in charity, treating workers properly and not partaking in unlawful practices. They are reminded that their wealth does not make them superior, as stated in verse 17:21 – "Observe how We have given some of them an advantage over some others; yet the Hereafter is surely greater in respect of ranks and greater in distinction." – and 43:34 – "and your Lord's mercy is better than what they amass." Qutb, in his commentary of 34:34-39, summarises this viewpoint:

> It states that God grants sustenance in abundance or scant measure to whomever He wills, and this has nothing to do with Him being pleased or displeased with anyone. God may indeed give riches in abundance to someone with whom He is displeased as well as to one who has earned His pleasure. Likewise, He may stint the provisions of anyone, good or evil. Most certainly the actions they do will not lead to the same result.[99]

Qutb, just like more traditional commentators, reflects the perspective that *rizk* and a person's socioeconomic status in this world is meaningless in the eyes of God. Although, unlike a capitalist Islam, this decentres wealth accumulation, it still adds weight to the theology of examination by portraying economic relations as the manifestation of God's will.

Advocates of class abolition were silent on these verses and *hadith*, which seem to contradict their more systemic critique of a liberal Islam. Of course, at the outset it is worth noting that these activists are not theologians, nor have they had any formal education in the Islamic sciences, such as Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*). It is for the liberation theologian therefore, to fill these gaps in the process of developing a substantial and more complete theology.[100]

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[96] Emphasis added.

[97] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper One, 2015), 403.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Quran (Fi Zilal al-Quran)*, vol. 14, trans. Adil Salahi (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2003), 132.

[100] Leonardo and Clodovis Boff make a similar argument by making a distinction between three levels of Liberation Theology: professional, pastoral and popular. For them, popular theologies are expressed in the everyday by regular believers, while professional theology adopts a more scholarly language and rigid structure. Pastoral theologies lie in between the two and are developed through dialogue between these two different

Nevertheless, there were signs that they sought to reclaim and reframe the idea of spiritual tests and see it in a more collective manner. Shelly, for example, said:

> Islam literally advocates for us to change them [material conditions] because capitalism isn't a God-given system. Nothing, none of anything that we're doing is God-given; anything can change and we all have the tools to [work towards] that and we are being tested by having privilege in lots of senses and God will ask us what we did with our privilege.[101]

Invoking the concept of *rizk*, here Shelly uses the language of privilege to illustrate how individuals are tested by their response to injustice. Reclaiming the principles that are often distorted by a theology of examination, she suggests that working towards systemic change, when the status quo is oppressive, becomes a duty on Muslims (echoing Qutb's interpretation of 59:7 discussed earlier). It moves the idea of *rizk* and the responsibilities associated with it away from an individualised conceptualisation that centres "the haves" and renders the "have nots" invisible. Rather, Shelly suggests that the nature of the test is not individual but concerns structures and what Muslims do to combat the underlying causes of an unjust status quo. The individual within this perspective has not only the agency but the duty to combat oppression and change material conditions – discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. This sentiment appears in 36:46-47, which was revealed in response to those who scoffed at Quranic injunctions to feed the poor and places the responsibility for this on the people, not an abstracted divine wisdom:

> There did not come to them any sign from among the signs of their Lord but that they used to disregard it. When they are told, "Spend out of what Allah has provided you,"[102] the faithless say to the faithful, "Shall we feed [someone] whom Allah would have fed, had He wished? You are only in manifest error."

Here, the Quran makes clear that it is not enough to invoke God's will as an excuse to not do anything about socioeconomic realities.

A key difference, furthermore, between a liberal theology that is restricted to managing class disparities and a liberative one that seeks to abolish them is their overall approach to the Quran. As we have seen, the former takes a granular approach that interprets the verses in isolation, at best, collating similar verses to present inequalities as the consequence of God's wisdom. A liberative approach, however, starts first by extracting principles, interpreting the specific through its lens.[103] This can draw further inspiration from Amina Wadud's approach of a "hermeneutics of *tawhid*", which, rather than taking the "atomistic" approach of traditional exegesis, interprets the Quran through the lens of its overall ethos and moral

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strands. For more, see: Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987).

[101] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

[102] The verb *anfiqu*, which is here translated as "spend", can also translate as "provide" and, considering the broader meaning of *rizk* mentioned by Shelly and Ali, can be interpreted as not being limited to just spending money.

[103] The German term, *weltanschauung*, commonly translated as worldview in English, is perhaps useful here and indicates a comprehensive or personal philosophy of human life and the universe.

outlook, seeing the revelation as a unified whole.[104] In the case of the activists who advocated for abolition, this broader worldview was centred around the Quranic concept of justice. The exploitation inherent to a classed economic system would suggest that the verses mentioned here that activists did not address be interpreted through this more holistic approach. This could, through more in-depth engagement, allow for the development of a more substantial theology of class struggle, which reads the entirety of the Islamic canon through a liberative lens that addresses the root cause of oppression and economic exploitation – class.

Contesting Khadija: Girl Boss or Class Traitor?

As our theoretical exploration of various trends of Islamic thought in this and the previous chapter has shown, different readings all invoke history in order to support their positions. For example, both a pro and anti-capitalist interpretation emphasises different parts of the Prophet's life as evidence for the validity of their views. His first wife, Khadija, also has a prominent position in this regard. Interestingly, both Ameen and Ali, in their justifications for accumulating wealth, mentioned her exploits as a businesswoman. Ameen states:

> The Prophet married Khadija al-Kubra… who was a very wealthy businesswoman, and I think nowhere in the religion does it mention that she was not right to work on these bits. She was a woman working in a lot of business, and if anything, that was encouraged throughout. It was just because of her generosity that she ended up giving [up] pretty much near all her wealth, and we admire her for it, but nowhere in religion does it say that that's a requirement… And in fact, her business acumen was quite applauded. I think religion applauds that.[105]

Similarly, Ali mentions:

> Going back again, to the principle that you have people who were rich and wealthy, but who are some of the best of people. If you're looking for an example: Lady Khadija (peace be upon her). She was a very, very successful businesswoman and she married the best person that walked this earth [Muhammad].[106]

Both Ameen and Ali explicitly link her profession as a businesswoman and her virtue within an Islamic worldview. Indeed, her success in this regard was a source of prestige for her in pre-Islamic Makkan society and can be used to promote a corporate form of "girl boss" feminism, which celebrates women reaching prominent positions of economic leadership (such as CEOs), while ignoring the exploitation that this implies. Tayyaba celebrates this, saying that if

[104] For more, see: Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Siavash Saffari, 'Tawhid Paradigm and an Inclusive Concept of Liberative Struggle', *Religions* 14, no. 9 (September 2023): 1088.
[105] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.
[106] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

she was “somebody that was alive today, she'd be on The Apprentice,[107] she'd be running it basically. That's how I feel she would be.”[108]

This emphasis on her business and entrepreneurial skills is a powerful example of the way in which the current economic structure of society, as well as the principles that it promotes, influences Muslims’ readings of their history and the prominent figures in it. We have seen earlier how capitalism celebrates wealth accumulation and entrepreneurial spirit and so it is no coincidence that these elements of her life are emphasised. This hustle culture (exemplified by Alan Sugar and contestants on The Apprentice) that is encouraged by capitalist norms is projected back onto Khadija, celebrating her material success and relegating other factors in the process. For example, her economic and moral support for the nascent Muslim community is all but ignored in this reading – indeed, the above quote by Ameen is quite dismissive about taking any religious teachings from the fact she gave the entirety of her wealth away. Khalid refers to this contestation:

> I see a certain kind of veneration of the Prophets wife, of Khadija, because I think that that's a really, really important symbol of a particular kind of feminist politics, which I think is crucial. I think that the symbology of Khadija can also unfortunately, be bastardised in certain ways as a kind of certain, almost corporate Islamic feminism. But I think that there's something, there's a seed of something much more radical in there, you know. The fact that she, in many ways was the first Muslim… her very job, her very work, her very support of her husband, in a particular historical moment was itself revolutionary and emancipatory.[109]

Khalid alludes here to the potential of an alternative “revolutionary and emancipatory” reading of Khadija, which, instead of focusing on her business acumen, focuses on the way in which she supported the Prophet Muhammad and the Muslim community in Makkah. Indeed, along with Abu Bakr, she is likely to have provided the bulk of material support for them, since they were mostly from poor and disenfranchised social groups.[110] Using today’s terminology, she could be seen as a class traitor who gave up her socioeconomic position to align herself with the marginalised and challenge the system that oppressed them.[111] Furthermore, it is not completely implausible that, just like her grandson Hussain many years later, this decision ultimately cost her life, since, when the non-believing Quraysh boycotted Muslim labour and isolated them, both economically and socially, the community was left stretched and without the means to acquire the basic necessities needed to sustain life.[112]

Rahemtulla and Ababneh, referencing Foucault, show how our readings of history and decisions to silence particular narratives speak to current power relations and justify

[107] The Apprentice is a popular BBC reality TV show in which contestants compete in a series of business-related tasks to win an investment into their start-up business from British billionaire, Alan Sugar.
[108] Tayyaba, interview with author, 16 February 2022.
[109] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[110] Shadaab Rahemtulla and Sara Ababneh, ‘Reclaiming Khadija’s and Muhammad’s Marriage as an Islamic Paradigm: Toward a New History of the Muslim Present’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no. 2 (2021), 99.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.

contemporary ways of life.[113] In Khadija's legacy we can see this playing out, as a pro-capitalist Islam places emphasis on her attributes as a successful and wealthy businesswoman. An alternative reading however, which emphasises her life post-revelation, promotes different values such as solidarity with the marginalised and choosing to live in a community where all are treated equally. Khadija could have continued to build her business empire or use the social respect that she had amassed to live a comfortable life. Just like Hussain however, she chose the harder path of justice and solidarity. This can provide Muslims with a paradigm that is specific to the issue of class, which illustrates just how much dedication is needed to realise social objectives and the level of identification activists must take with the oppressed, regardless of their own socioeconomic position. This alternative reading contests the appropriation of Khadija by a corporate Islam and seeks to reclaim her for the margins, where she lived and died.

Conclusion

For praxis to be effective, it is essential to correctly define and understand the goals towards which it is directed. By building on the views of the research participants, this chapter seeks to bring together their various readings of Islam to build the foundations of a liberative ideology that can be utilised for this purpose. Some activists, despite their praxis, as well as orthodox Islamic interpretations and the works of many modern Islamic political theorists, however, promoted a framework, which I have termed a theology of examination, that emphasised individual ethics and reproduced the capitalist reverence for wealth accumulation. In seeing wealth, like other forms of *rizk*, as a trial through which its possessors are tested, a particular construction of the rich and poor is created. It removes agency from the latter, who become the objects on which the wealthy act to achieve their salvation and the medium through which God intervenes in history. Furthermore, rather than recognising that these economic differences are the consequence of a particular exploitative and classed reality, it naturalises them by focusing on what people do with their wealth, not *how* it is acquired.

The dehumanisation associated with this type of theology means that it is completely inconsistent with a liberative ethics, which seeks to humanise the marginalised in a world where they are treated as non-humans. Although many activists did not address many of the specific verses used by advocates of a theology of examination and the task of developing a substantive theology remains, they were clear that an alternative was possible. Their anti-capitalist politics allowed them to recognise that the exploitation inherent to the system needed to be resisted. For some however, a lack of faith in the possibility of completely overhauling the class system led to them prioritising the Islamic imperative to manage economic differences and provide dignity to the exploited. The absence of hope, however, turns capitalism into an omnipotent, all-encompassing entity. To avoid this *shirk*, an optimistic belief in the possibility of an alternative is essential and activists provided the foundations for this through a reading of Islam that combines the short term need to manage class differences with the long term aim to abolish class. By contesting a capitalist reading of history, for example in relation to Khadija, and undertaking a "hermeneutics of *tawhid*" that emphasise the centrality of establishing justice and resisting oppression, activists highlighted how the exploitation at the heart of contemporary class relations is antithetical to Islam. When this is

[113] Ibid.

combined with more specific prohibitions on hoarding wealth and interest and calls for redistribution and equality, a strong argument can be made that a liberative Islam should aim to create a classless society by placing the means of production in the hands of the people. It is towards this ultimate end that praxis must be directed. The next chapter grapples with how this can be achieved.

6. Establishing Economic Justice: Towards a Liberative Praxis

> A revolutionary programme is one set forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system to a better one… [Whereas] a reform programme is set up by the existing exploitative system as an appeasing handout, to fool the people and to keep them quiet. – Bobby Seale[1]

> Radical or revolutionary consciousness… is the perception of *oneself* as unfree, as oppressed – and finally it is the discovery of oneself as *one of the oppressed* who must united to transform the objective conditions of their existence in order to resolve the contradiction between potentiality and actuality. Revolutionary consciousness leads to *the struggle for one's own freedom in unity with others who share the burden of oppression.* – Greg Calvert[2]

> There is not and cannot be an imperceptible "gradual transition" from capitalism to socialism. The economic and political power of the bourgeoisie will not be whittled away by a slow process of erosion, nor destroyed by a succession of partial reforms, each one apparently innocuous and acceptable to capitalism, but which cumulatively would amount to a discreet siege of the enemy by a secret and masked socialist army… What can and must be gradual and cumulative in a socialist strategy is the preparatory phase which sets in motion a process leading to the edge of crisis and the final trial of strength. – Andre Gorz[3]

Introduction

In the previous chapter we discussed the goals towards which Muslim praxis should be directed in order to achieve economic justice. Although establishing this theoretical foundation is imperative to direct activism towards abolishing class rather than simply managing the inequality created by capitalism, the question of how this can be achieved within a given context remains unanswered. As we have seen, any theology of liberation must prioritise the transformation of society in favour of the oppressed and marginalised. This makes the link between the theoretical and material essential.

This chapter will explore the approach that British Muslim activists took in order to achieve this material change within their particular context. It starts by first reaffirming the importance of praxis within Islam, which activists asserted as the means to achieve both spiritual and worldly success. It then moves onto a more detailed discussion of tactics and the

[1] Bobby Seale, Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1971). 412-3
[2] Greg Calvert in Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 130.
[3] Andre Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution', trans. Ben Brewster, *The Socialist Register*, 1968. 112.

various means through which Islam's economic objectives can be realised. The tension between the short and long term was a prevalent theme throughout interviews, which was most apparent in discussions surrounding the role of charity in achieving material change. Many acknowledged the limits of these practices, recognising the importance of combining it with a longer term vision geared towards social transformation. Here, Andre Gorz's concept of revolutionary or non-reformist reforms is particularly relevant and provides a strong basis through which praxis can be organised and systemic change achieved. The chapter discusses the various ways in which the organisations embody this practice, before concluding by discussing questions of power. Indeed, several activists recognised that systemic change that benefits the marginalised can only be achieved and sustained through a dramatic shift in political power relations. It is only through this, they argued, that Islam's long term goal to abolish class and, consequently, establish economic justice be achieved.

Islam as a Religion of Praxis

Islamic imperatives to establish justice broadly and to tackle class exploitation specifically are only given real value and content through action and practical steps through which individuals and groups of believers stand with the oppressed and change their material reality. All the activists, naturally, emphasised the importance of action as the fundamental link between abstract goals and reality and the means to achieve both spiritual and worldly success. They noted that tackling injustice is a requirement, as emphasised in the *hadith*:

> Whosoever of you sees an evil, *let him change it with his hand*; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of faith.[4]

In chapter four, we saw how activists critiqued apolitical manifestations of Islam for being passive in regard to social questions and entirely focusing on individualised acts of worship. The Karbala paradigm, furthermore, lays the foundation for a socially informed praxis that goes beyond this. Ameen explicitly makes this connection and notes how this emphasis was a key motivation for the formation of Who Is Hussain:

> In these Shia mosques when we're commemorating Imam Hussain (AS), who was obviously the main motivation behind the Who Is Hussain charity, they'll start beating their chests, they'll even do more extreme stuff, which I'm sure you know what I'm talking about,[5] which I don't necessarily think gives justice to the values that he stood for. And a lot of the time I applaud people for their intentions, but I just think they're missing the mark, with what… Imam Hussain was representing. He fought for social justice and I think a lot of that needs to be translated to what we're seeing in the real

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[4] Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi (Hadith 34). This hadith was mentioned by both Maya and Shelly in interviews with the author. Emphasis added.

[5] Here, Ameen is referring to practices such as *tatbir*, where mourners beat themselves with knives or chains. This practice has been condemned by many prominent Shia *ulama*, including Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and Ayatollah Fadlallah in Lebanon, but continues to be practiced in some circles.

> world, as opposed to just crying about the disasters that he was put through.[6]

Reflecting on his involvement with the organisation, he continues:

> It [activism] changed my perspective on how I view certain things… It's easy to sit down at home and be like, I want to be a social justice warrior, a keyboard warrior on Twitter… Whereas, I actually think religion doesn't want you to just speak up about it, it's very much about actually providing hands on support.[7]

Ameen reflects the *hadith* mentioned earlier in affirming the centrality of praxis and seeking to change oppressive conditions. Returning to a quote from Shelly in the previous chapter, she recognises that nothing is immutable, as the earlier discussion around pessimism being a form of idolatry showed:

> Islam literally advocates for us to change them [material conditions] because capitalism isn't a God-given system. Nothing, none of anything that we're doing is God-given; anything can change and we all have the tools to [work towards] that and we are being tested by having privilege in lots of senses and God will ask us what we did with our privilege.[8]

This dialectic between faith and activism was a prevalent theme throughout conversations with research participants, with an analysis of socio-political issues often driving reflection on how believers should respond. Shelly explains how, as she learnt more about Islam, it confirmed the socialist politics that she already held. She explains how the latter allowed her to understand different oppressions, which Islam, without exception, stood against.[9] This stance against injustice is not dependent on following the religion, but a manifestation of a deeper human disposition (*fitra*). Sumaira explains that we should do good "because it's our responsibility to do good, not because we're fearful of heaven or hell, but because it's the right thing to do." She continues that, "when we do things that are immoral, we're going against the nature of our creation."[10]

Building on this insight from Sumaira, Islam's particular emphasis on doing good or standing against injustice is consistent with a broader humanism. It implicitly challenges theological views that being a Muslim is essential to decipher between right and wrong and allows for believers to both borrow from other liberative ideologies (such as socialism in Shelly's case) and work with non-Muslims in solidarity (as all three organisations do). The quest for justice is thus also the quest to become more human, something that can only be achieved through engagement in praxis.

Malcolm X and Liberative Action

Activists, particularly in Sufra and Nijjor Manush, were acutely aware that their politics would be refuted by many within the Muslim community, who accuse them of "following their

[6] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Sumaira, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

desires" rather than true Islam, as defined by a particular reading of the *sharia*.[11] Adam notes how some leftists he has come across, rather than genuinely engaging with Islamic sources and allowing them to also inform their politics, "use the faith to reinforce what they already believe".[12] Although completely understanding others intentions is next to impossible, these accusations do highlight the importance of sincerity in driving the relationship between faith, political ideology and praxis. From a liberative perspective, righteous action directed towards justice is the litmus test against which this is judged. Shelly exemplified this in her reflection:

> I think about if I'm doing the right thing and how I do the right things. How do I feel like Islam, or God, would want me to do them. Like, am I doing something that God would be happy with? And that's how I do centre all my politics… am I doing something so genuine [so that I am considered] a good person to God?[13]

Within modern Islamic history in the non-Muslim majority world, perhaps no one embodies this sincerity of action in the cause of justice more than Malcolm X (1925-65) – one of the most prominent African American activists during the Civil Rights era in the United States and, considered by many, as the forefather of the Black Power movement that followed.[14] For both Layla and Sukayna (as well as myself), his autobiography[15] was a watershed moment in their political development.[16] Sukayna explains how, as she engaged more with the text, it helped her "formulate a language for standing up to power."[17] This was apparent in his passionate speeches and praxis to challenge the racist status quo, which he stood steadfastly against from his days with the Nation of Islam until his assassination.

While his anti-racist politics are well known (albeit frequently diluted today by a liberal identity politics), his analysis of the economy is often neglected. His experiences in the ghettos of Harlem, New York, in particular, gave him an acute understanding of how race, in the African American experience, was used as a tool for socioeconomic exploitation. On leaving the Nation of Islam and after meeting revolutionaries during his tour of Africa in 1964, he became more vocal about this relationship between race and capitalism, identifying the latter more explicitly as the enemy.[18] In a speech in New York in May 1964 for example, he said, "It's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can't have capitalism without racism."[19] Race and class therefore, became fundamentally linked in his

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[11] Sukayna, Zehra, Maya, Shelly, Aqeel, Khalid and Sumaira all either experienced this personally or commented on this narrative being used to refute Muslims with left-leaning politics. Indeed, Islamic Liberation Theology itself is not immune to these accusations and is sometimes considered to be an attempt to introduce "un-Islamic" ideas, such as socialism and feminism, into the religion.

[12] Adam, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

[13] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

[14] Malcolm X was mentioned by Layla, Khalid and Sukayna as a source of political and religious inspiration and also featured on several of Who Is Hussain's social media posts and printed material. He is also a prominent figure within Islamic Liberation Theology and has been engaged with by scholars such as Hamid Dabashi and Shadaab Rahemtulla.

[15] See: Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

[16] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021; Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021.

[17] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.

[18] Les Payne and Tamara Payne, *The Dead Are Arising: The Life of Malcolm X* (London: Pengion Books, 2021). 454.

[19] Malcolm X in Ibid.

worldview, with capitalism being the system through which race was organised in the US and abroad.

In addition to the specifics of his anti-capitalist and anti-racist politics, broader lessons for a liberative praxis can be learnt from Malcolm's journey, particularly with regards to the aforementioned issue of sincerity. His life was defined by a constant evolution that was guided by his quest for justice. Therefore, when, for example, new information came to light about Elijah Muhammad's extramarital affairs, the primacy of justice preventing him from supporting his mentor, contributing to the rift that eventually resulted in his departure from the Nation. Rather than being dictated by any individual loyalty, he is a potent example of a liberatory Islam, which emphasises justice and praxis directed towards achieving material change for anyone that is oppressed.

Just like the Prophet's wife, Khadija, and grandson, Hussain, Malcolm X's stand for justice would eventually cost him his life. He represents a modern example of someone who wholly aligned himself with the quest for justice in all its aspects. For several activists he was a modern inspiration that embodies Islam's emphasis on action and standing up to oppression.[20] Speaking about her own political inspirations, Maya placed central important on this praxis:

> the people I've always admired the most historically have been people who have always been involved on the ground, they weren't just theorising and talking… That's not to say writing isn't significant in being a part of the struggle, but what I appreciate about [them] is how they wrote but they were also involved, you know, they were on the ground with people… seeking justice.[21]

For the activists, therefore, Islam is not a religion of abstract spirituality or theological belief but a religion of praxis, embodied so powerfully by the life of Malcolm X. As per verses 28:5-6, discussed in chapter two, Muslims are tested by whether they reflect God's preference for the dispossessed in their own lives and seek to establish them in the land. As emphasised by Shelly in the previous chapter, this does not take the form of an individualistic theology of examination but utilising the *rizk* you receive to address systemic oppression and the underlying causes of injustice. This latter objective requires pursuing economic justice in the here and now. The remainder of this chapter will address how activists understood this substantially and which instruments could be used to realise this objective.

Going Beyond the Reactive: The Limits of Charity

Although activists agreed on the centrality of praxis and establishing economic justice, there was great variance among them on what this substantially means. For some, as we have seen, this was limited to imbibing Islamic ethics into a capitalist system, while for others the goal was structural change. In the previous chapter we explained the flaws of the former approach and the necessity of a liberative Islam to be directed towards systemic change that abolishes

[20] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021; Layla, interview with author, 24 November 2021; Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022. Malcolm X has also featured on Nijjor Manush and Who Is Hussain's online platforms in the form of snippets from his speeches, quotes and the commemoration of specific events.
[21] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.

the exploitative class structure. This theoretical foundation is essential to develop because it can be used to judge the efficacy and value of particular actions. Adam spoke about this in our interview:

> How we go about [establishing justice] is the ultimate question really and it's something that I grapple with because it also makes you think about your faith and where you stand and [whether you should be] organising merely to overhaul the system or should you be also organising to help plaster the maladies that have come about because of this system… I mean, these are questions I often ask myself, and it's also a question of where I stand and how I can go about doing things.[22]

As he notes, our definition of justice determines the trajectory of activism and whether it focuses on the short or long term. This tension is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the different organisations' and activists' approaches to charity as a practice and Islamic institutions such as *zakat* and *sadaqa*.[23] For Who Is Hussain, the primarily goal of their activism is to understand local needs and provide aid. Ali explains this approach:

> I think it's important to remember how all our teams operate: to benefit their local society, ideally with local needs… or, to borrow the phrase, "Act local, but think global", is how aim to operate.[24]

Ameen gives more detail on how this differs from other charities:

> [Who Is Hussain] is not the most traditional charity. It's not one of those charities where we're just focusing on giving orphans an education or we're talking about something like cancer treatment or whatnot. It's very much an organisation whereby we want to live the values of Imam Hussain within the struggles that are currently happening in that certain area and that certain point and simultaneously support wherever it's required.

The organisation therefore takes on a more dynamic character, through which it uses its resources in a variety of ways, judged by those on the ground. This is why, for example, Who Is Hussain can be seen organising a variety of activities in its various chapters, such as food drives in London, providing school supplies in Chicago, or cleaning up oil spills in Mauritius.[25] Although the variety of charitable activities that they are involved in may be unusual, the

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[22] Adam, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

[23] According to verse 2:177, this money is to be used for "the relatives, the orphan, the needy, the traveller, the beggar and for [the freeing of] the slaves." This list of recipients is mentioned again in verses 2:215, 4:36, 8:41 and 59:7, while they are also mentioned individually at various points throughout the Quran.

[24] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

[25] See: 'Who Is Hussain?', Who is Hussain, 15 October 2023, https://whoishussain.org/.
One of Who Is Hussain's most prominent campaigns, which is shared across their different chapters, is blood drives. Perhaps inspired by similar practices in Shia communities in countries such as Lebanon, the organisation conducts them regularly. Between July and September 2023, for example, they collected 2,207 units of blood. See: 'Who Is Hussain (@whoishussain_) • Instagram Photos and Videos', 20 October 2023, https://www.instagram.com/whoishussain_/.

organisation ultimately uses charity giving as a means to operationalise the ethical impulse to show compassion towards others that are less fortunate.[26]

Shelly, in our interview, joked about how good Muslims are at fundraising but criticised their failure to connect this to a more critical analysis of socioeconomic causes.[27] Interestingly, out of members of Who Is Hussain, it was only Ameen, who reproduced some of the religious arguments to justify wealth accumulation (see previous chapter), that recognised the limits of this form of charity. He noted:

> I think the work that we're doing is absolutely fantastic, but we are not preventing anything – we are not taking a step back to make real changes and I think these steps are very necessary. So, I'm not belittling the work that we've done, because it's incredibly necessary and it's incredibly valuable and I'm incredibly proud to be part of this movement, because if someone has fallen down, you want to pick them up. But if twenty people fall down this pit, you don't want to pick up twenty people, you want to fill this pit up, close it, so people will stop falling down, so those steps are required.[28]

Ameen here recognises that Who Is Hussain's activities are reactive and do not address the more systemic causes behind the issues that they seek to address. He, however, does not see this as part of the organisation's remit. He continues:

> This is not my responsibility to fill up this pit. This is, at the end of the day, the government's responsibility and we can absolutely put pressure, we can support that, we can talk about them [the homeless], our research, and I do envision in the next few years, I'd like to very much be involved in conversations with MPs, councils and even at government level, because we as Who Is Hussain… would have had experience on what the stakes were with homeless people, which I don't think your local MP [has]… So, they're looking at it from an outside perspective, whereas we actually will have a little bit more insight of what are the root causes of homelessness are, and how can we prevent them.[29]

Here, Ameen speaks of a reformist approach, where, through discussions with those in power, issues such as homelessness can be tackled. This is consistent with Who Is Hussain's liberal outlook, which generally stays clear of systemic critiques and is largely apolitical.

Several activists in Sufra and Nijjor Manush, however, echoed Shelly's critique of charity being the only way to engage with politics. While *zakat* was acknowledged as an obligation that had

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[26] Mawdudi goes so far as to argue that charity and taxation are the *only* permissible ways that the Quran sanctions to deal with poverty. See: Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi, 'Economic and Political Teachings of the Qur'an', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, vol. 1 (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 2015), https://www.al-islam.org/history-muslim-philosophy-volume-1-book-2/chapter-9-economic-and-political-teachings-quran.

[27] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

[28] Ameen, interview with author, 18 November 2021.

[29] Ibid.

spiritual benefits for the believer,[30] it was criticised for reflecting a very "neoliberal understanding of the faith",[31] which has commodified giving[32] and only allows for a "narrow" solidarity with the oppressed.[33] Consequently, it serves as a way for Muslims "making themselves feel good"[34] without addressing the "root cause of inequalities and exploitation."[35]

The response of Sufra employees[36] was particularly interesting, since the organisation is dependent on the charitable practices of donors.[37] Despite this, they were critical of the neoliberal attitude many of their patrons had. Zehra observes:

> Islam's about mercy and being charitable but I guess sometimes… what I've seen from very generous Muslim donors is they're living very privileged lives, but they throw money at charity thinking that will absolve them from having to address the underlying issues of why there's a disparity. And I'm still in the process of figuring out where Islam [stands] and I'm still figuring out that contradiction.[38]

Zehra here takes issue with an Islam that solely sees charity as a means to absolve wealth accumulation, which distracts from the broader structure through which this can be achieved. Although she found her experiences hard to reconcile with the Islamic imperative to give charity, her assessment is an implicit critique of the theology of examination, through which systemic inequalities are ignored in favour of an individualised outlook that sees wealth as a test for the rich.

Although many activists were critical of the neoliberal practice of charity, this did not mean that they dismissed its value as a short term measure to remedy some of the most severe inequalities and ensure the survival of marginalised groups. As we have noted, each organisation, to varying degrees, depends on donations[39] and, when these are used in conjunction with the economically marginalised, it can serve as a means of providing them with some semblance of dignity within an oppressive status quo. Sufra, and to some extent Who Is Hussain, embody this in their praxis. Both organisations are careful in their use of language and refer to those they help as "guests", which has a more positive connotation than terms such as homeless.[40] Being more embedded in its local community, Sufra has been able

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[30] Maya, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[31] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[32] Shelly, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[33] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[34] Adam, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
[35] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022. Similar sentiments were also expressed by Akbar and Zehra in our conversations.
[36] Sufra has a small core group of paid staff, which is supplemented by a large pool of volunteers.
[37] Nijjor Manush also uses fundraising for some of its activities (although a lot of their day-to-day activities are paid out of pocket by members). For example, they crowd funded in order to cover the legal expenses associated with challenging the court ruling in favour of the Truman Brewery's plans to gentrify Brick Lane.
[38] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.
[39] Operating as charities, the place of donations in Who Is Hussain and Sufra is clear. Although Nijjor Manush is a grassroots campaigning group, they have used fundraising, for example to raise money to mount a legal challenge to the Brick Lane regeneration plans.
[40] Amena, interview with author, 26 November 2021.

to foster this environment further. Tayyaba observes how their hub is a kind of safe space for different economically marginalised groups:

> It's just to show them a bit of compassion, giving them a three course meal, which is what we used to do on a Friday, actually serving them, treating them like a human being and giving them the respect.[41] It was just a relief [for them] from the disrespect they would find outside. So, it was the one place, one safe zone that they could come to and just leave the outside world where it is. And that probably helped boost their self-esteem. I know it's for a little while, because with them, they're just in this vicious cycle, they can't get out of it, but just for that moment is temporary relief, like what they need to kind of go back into that harsh world and deal with all the other issues that they're dealing with.

Sukayna echoes these sentiments, noting that "the community I witnessed through the community garden at Sufra was so tight and they were so supportive of each other."[42] She continues that local people felt a sense of ownership and connection to the organisation, something that was reflected by the way that the community came together to commemorate the death of two staff members during the COVID-19 pandemic.[43]

It is worth referring back to Islam's injunction to provide dignity to the poor and marginalised, which Maya and Sukayna identified as one of the key objectives of Islamic economics. While working towards the ultimate goal of class abolition is a liberative imperative, they are both right in identifying the need to manage class differences in the short term, recognising the lived material reality of poverty through which many are currently living. This has been recognised by revolutionaries throughout history. For example, the Black Panthers' famous Survival Programmes, which included free school meals and health clinics, were seen as a necessary measure to address the current issues that poor African American community faced. The Panthers understood that you could not have liberation without first securing the means of existence for the people that need liberating.[44]

These short term measures however are simply not enough on their own, as the quote from Bobby Seale at the beginning of the chapter five acknowledges. Zehra reflects on how working at Sufra has changed her perspective on charity:

> *Sadaqa* in my mind was always money and money is *sadaqa*, you know, we have a *sadaqa* box at home, you throw in a few pounds every now and again, that's giving *sadaqa*. But when you're actually seeing the people on the receiving end of *sadaqa*, you know their situation and you know that this is not a permanent fix, then charity takes on a whole other meaning, *sadaqa* takes on a whole other meaning.

[41] As noted in chapter three, Sufra has expanded its dinner services from one day a week to each weekday.
[42] Sukayna, interview with author, 26 October 2021.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*. 179-98.

Here, Zehra proposes a new way to conceptualise charity within Islamic praxis, which seeks to address the broader systemic causes for economic inequality, such as class exploitation. Khalid eloquently summarised this position:

> we can look at the deeper meaning behind [*zakat* and *sadaqa*], that there is this duty and obligation towards the made-marginalised. And if you take that deeper meaning, that opens up a completely different kind of politics and engagement that you have with the world. Is it really enough when homeless people are sleeping outside of boarded up houses, when people are drowning in the English Channel, is it really a fulfilment of your duty that every Friday at *jumua*, you put a couple of quid in the bucket?[45]

Rather, if Islam

> has a preference for the poor and it has a normative aspiration of equality… then your reading and conceptualisation of justice would be completely different, what we might in the contemporary moment call social justice, right or transformative justice. Whereas, if you don't see class difference, if you don't see any other kind of embedded material difference through reading attempts, then your conceptualisation of justice might be something akin to an individualistic justice, you know, eye for an eye, criminal justice, punitive approaches, those kinds of things. So, I think that the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes justice within Islam, as well as it being a sentiment, a disposition, it has to be read through how we think Islam, and all of its collection of texts, understands the world and its aspirations.[46]

These quotes illustrate the importance of defining economic goals and a clear historical project against which particular tactics and tools for change can be judged. As several of the activists highlight, charity is limited in this regard and, although it can alleviate some of the worst effects of economic exploitation, at best, it fails to address these structural issues, while in many cases, it actually helps to uphold the exploitative status quo. As an alternative, they reflect Paolo Freire's redefinition of charity:

> True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.[47]

Judged against a liberative Islam's goals to combat economic exploitation and create a classless society through which the marginalised become political agents, as alluded to by Freire and argued by activists, charity is clearly insufficient. Although it goes some way to addressing some of the worst excesses of capitalism and providing dignity where there would

[45] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[46] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[47] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 19.

otherwise be none, the act of giving fails to address structural issues and simply reacts to these.[48] As a tool for change, therefore, it is insufficient and needs to be supplemented with long term tactics that address the very structure of exploitation.

The Path of Revolutionary Reform

While short term measures, such as charity, have a vital role to play in providing dignity to the oppressed and alleviating some of the consequences of economic exploitation, a liberative Islam would combine this with a long term vision to achieve social transformation. Many were aware of the need to combine the two, while recognising that it is easier to mobilise around fulfilling immediate needs than it is to develop the conditions for systemic change. Speaking about this tension, Khalid put forward the idea of non-reformist reforms, first proposed by the French Marxist Andre Gorz and popularised by feminist and abolitionist thinkers such as Angela Davis. Speaking in Marxist-Leninist terms, Khalid explains:

> I think that the Leninist understanding of strategy and tactics maybe captures what I think where our politics should lie. The state's law can be useful for tactics for the kind of important short term, non-reformist reforms, but then the strategy that has to be beyond, you know, the legal superstructure to use a [Marxist] term and beyond the kind of apparatus of the state.[49]

Explaining the Leninist terminology, Khalid continues:

> Strategy is something long term, tactics is much more short term, creating incremental gains. And law and parliamentary politics can be used for that [the latter], you know, we need to protect our working class, right we need to protect our migrant comrades and brothers and sisters, we need to protect those religiously oppressed… and so these kinds of tactics can be important. And I think also, what complicates that, in a good and interesting way, is the kind of non-reformist reforms of Audre Lorde and Angela Davis. How can you intervene in parliamentary politics or through strategic litigation to make advances that don't endorse the overall structure but makes particular reformist gains. So, for example, if you intervene on the

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[48] Interestingly, Sayyid Qutb presented a similar perspective to the activists here when it comes to the role of charity within an Islamic worldview. In his commentary of verse 2:262 – "Those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah and then do not follow up what they have spent with reproaches and affronts, they shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve." Qutb says: "Despite the attention given to charity, life under Islam is in no way based or dependent on it. Social and economic life in Islam is based, first and foremost, on the provision of work and a decent means of earning a living for all those who are able to do so. It is also based on the fair and equitable distribution of wealth in the community, with the aim of achieving a proper balance between input and reward. Nevertheless, there will always be times when people fall short for various exceptional reasons, and it is these that need to be dealt with through charity. This comes in two forms: obligatory and voluntary." Charity, for Qutb therefore, is a temporary fix and should be approached within the broader goal of creating a system in which people have the means to meet their needs. Although, as we saw in the previous chapter, he disagreed with the activists' goal of abolishing class and affirmed the right of private property, here he does acknowledge charity within a broader systemic context. See: Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Quran (Fi Zilal al-Quran)*, vol. 1, trans. Adil Salahi (Markfield: The Islamic Foundation, 2003), 378.

[49] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

> housing debate, you don't talk about, let's get more private developers in because that's just going to reproduce the logic of the market producing something which is essential, which is housing. [Instead] let's talk about like building like 10,000 new houses, okay, that's not going to house everyone, but it's going to be social housing, right? So, you're not endorsing the overall structure of you know, housing being something that's provided through the market as a kind of a speculative asset.[50]

Knox explains the distinction between strategy and tactics in greater detail. The former, he argues, is related to addressing relatively permanent social relationships, such as the mode and relations of production, that are fundamental to the field in which the intervention is being made. Therefore, strategic questions are those that address and seek to overturn these and are more likely to be informed by theory and be considered revolutionary.[51] Tactics, on the other hand, address transitory conflicts in the political sphere that do not directly call the system into question. This could, for example, include how to tackle a particular parliamentary election or, as Khalid cites, build 10,000 new houses.[52] Tactics are therefore more concerned with reform. As Knox notes however, strategy and tactics do not exist in isolation from each other but is the

> consequence of advancing a 'revolutionary' critique in non-revolutionary times… If the overturning of the social structure is not immediately on the cards, it must become a long term goal, whereas conjunctural issues necessarily operate in the shorter term… To put it simply, we might say strategy concerns finding methods to achieve long term, systemic aims, whereas tactics concerns finding methods to achieve short term, conjunctural aims.[53]

In a similar way, Gorz produced the strategy of non-reformist reforms, also sometimes referred to as revolutionary or structural reforms, in a European context where the violent seizure of power was not possible.[54] These are differentiated from social democratic reforms because of their underlying logic, which, rather than looking to restrain or discipline capitalism (as is the case of reforms associated with Keynesianism), is designed to make concrete gains within capitalism that simultaneously permit further movement against the system – preparing for "the battle of rupture".[55] In a practical sense, revolutionary reforms are determined by what the masses need and want, not what is possible at a given juncture. In doing so, they expose and deepen capitalism's contradictions, particularly those between the owners of capital and the masses.[56]

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Robert Knox, 'Strategy and Tactics', *Finnish Yearbook of International Law* 21 (2010): 193–229.
[52] Ibid., 200.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution'. 112.
[55] Ibid. 119.
[56] Ibid.

Revolutionary, or non-reformist, reforms, in other words, require adapting to conditions on the ground and exploiting gaps and opportunities through which anti-systemic gains can be made. Taking the issue of prison abolition,[57] Angela Davis observes:

> The most difficult question for advocates of prison abolition is how to establish a balance between reforms that are clearly necessary to safeguard the lives of prisoners and those strategies designed to promote the eventual abolition of prisons as the dominant mode of punishment. In other words, I do not think that there is a strict dividing line between reform and abolition… Demands for improved healthcare, including protection from sexual abuse and challenges to the myriad ways in which prisons violate prisoners' human rights, can be integrated into an abolitionist context that elaborates specific decarceration strategies and helps to develop a popular discourse on the need to shift resources from punishment to education, housing, health care, and other public resources and services.[58]

As Davis observes, taking advantage of campaigns around prisoner rights is a means to build a public discourse that ultimately will build the base from which prison abolition becomes a real possibility. Indeed, in the wake of Black Lives Matter uprisings following the police murders of African Americans such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, abolitionists were quick to draw links between racism and the prison industrial complex, thus forwarding the case for abolition and using the protests to draw more people into a broader anti-systemic movement.

For the British Muslim activists, the ambiguity and lack of codification of the concept of justice within Islamic texts was helpful in allowing them the necessary flexibility to adapt to changing conditions and demands. After deciphering what justice means on the strategic level (in this case, the abolition of class), activists felt free to interpret the appropriate tactics through which justice could be realised in specific situations. Khalid notes:

> There's a pragmatism to the ambiguity, to the generalness of it [justice], right? Because what justice means, justice isn't something that you can identify in each individual instance, every moment in time, everywhere in the world, right? It's a particular telos, it's an aspiration, something that we work towards, it's something that pulls us towards it and what that looks like in different places and different times means different things. But, you know, it's God that's demanding that of us. Rather than [telling us] when all of this shit is going on to just make sure you maintain yourself [and act with propriety]. No, no, that's not what he's saying. It's actually we've got to do something about it.[59]

Here, Khalid highlights not only the primacy of justice within the Islamic canon, but what he interprets as, the wisdom behind leaving it unspecified. As he notes, the simplicity of the

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[57] Out of the activists, Shelly explicitly identified as an abolitionist, while other members of Nijjor Manush also expressed their support for this movement in other private conversations.

[58] Angela Y. Davis and Dylan Rodriguez, 'The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation', *Social Justice* 27, no. 3 (2000): 216.

[59] Khalid, Nijjor Manush focus group, 30 January 2023.

command allows for it to be applied to different times and contexts and remain relevant in the contemporary world. It allows for Muslim activists to judge what are the most appropriate means to abolish class in a given context – whether this be revolutionary change, or in the absence of this, the path of revolutionary reform.

Revolutionary Reform in the British Context

Just like Gorz recognised in the 1960s, activists recognised that there was little prospect of revolution in modern day Britain and opted for the path of structural reform. Nijjor Manush's praxis provides the starkest example of this. The Save Brick Lane Campaign, which looks to resist the proposed gentrification of one of London's East End's most famous and culturally significant areas (which is also home to a large Bengali population), exemplifies this. The conceptualisation of justice emerged in this campaign through a dialectical relationship between activists and the local community, who were threatened by regeneration plans. Maya explains how "we came in with a particular idea [of justice], but that itself was challenged, it shifted, it then reformulated into something else, it has a different meaning now".[60] She expands:

> justice isn't just something you arrive at on your own… because often knocking on literally hundreds of peoples' doors and speaking to them in English and Bengali, trying to figure out what it is they want and… the thing that kept coming up over and over and over again, where they felt like injustice was being done to them, is their housing situation. So, coming to the particular conclusion, and therefore, a particular goal that we want to reach for the campaign was done in relation to what we were observing, alongside the other campaigning groups, but also, coming to that conclusion, based off what we learnt from the collective struggle of the local residents and tenants.[61]

Here, Maya illustrates how praxis not only informs theology within the hermeneutical circle, but our very understanding of social justice and class struggle itself. Through conversation with people during the campaign, it was given real content within a particular time and place, which meant demanding good quality and affordable housing, rents and community spaces, while resisting eviction, home foreclosure and forced displacement.

This anti-gentrification campaign is a great example of a non-reformist reform or tactic (to use Lenin's terminology). In working towards these objectives, developed in conjunction with the marginalised, the Save Brick Lane Campaign challenges the logic and power of capital and looks to secure the interests of working class and racialised communities. As Gorz emphasises, revolutionary reforms are primarily concerned with the demands and needs of the masses, not its practical viability. By emphasising the need for community houses and spaces, they are challenging the profit motive of property developers and landlords and looking to put control in the hands of those that capitalism exploits and neglects.

Nijjor Manush emphasised that this activism should not be isolated from a broader worldview, which looks to politicise and mobilise the Bangladeshi community. Indeed, the campaign itself has an education element and illustrates to those that the gentrification plans would impact

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[60] Maya, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.

[61] Ibid.

that capitalists (as well as politicians that people have elected to represent them) do not have their interests in mind. In the absence of hope and representation, Nijjor Manush helps them to imagine an alternative way of living, where not only "they survive, but where they thrive and where they flourish."[62] Therefore, it seeks to build up the Bengali community as a political force that understands the root causes of racial capitalism (supplemented by community education programmes such as Bangla Fora) and helps them imagine and work towards a viable alternative – in other words, prepare to become revolutionary agents of change.

Sufra has a somewhat ambiguous position between operating as a charity (in the neoliberal sense) and mutual aid society and, while individuals within it often espouse radical anti-capitalist positions, on an organisational level they find themselves, in many cases, limited by their status as a registered charity and reacting to the implications of austerity and the retreat of government. As we have seen, the organisation was founded by concerned members of the community to tackle food insecurity in Brent and has since expanded into other areas, such as resettling refugees and providing training and job opportunities for locals.

Although their activism primarily focuses on poverty alleviation, Sufra have been instrumental in fostering community and care in the local area. This is precisely what one of their "guests" said to me as we left the Sufra premises together. A local resident on St Raphael's Estate, he complimented the organisation for bringing people together and helping him without any judgement.[63] For example, the Community Kitchen project is open to all and brings people from a variety of backgrounds in the local area together. This includes refugees and other immigrants that are new to the area, the homeless and socially isolated, as well as families in food poverty, giving them a space of belonging. The St Raphael's Edible Garden project also has a similar role, being the nucleus around which community activities are organised and the hub for Sufra's food services, children's activities and weekly market. Indeed, a theme that is present throughout Sufra's development from a food bank into a multifaceted organisation is its desire to embed itself into the local community by providing it with the services that it needs. Whether this takes the form of addressing food poverty, tackling social isolation, providing for refugees and other vulnerable migrants, etc. their various projects are united by this goal.

Based on this, a strong argument could be made that these practices mean Sufra more closely resembles a mutual aid organisation than a traditional charity. A key part of anarchist ideology, mutual aid groups aim "to transgress the hierarchies of established charities and erase distinctions between helpers and helped in order to prefigure a more equal – and stateless – society".[64] Taken from the perspective of revolutionary reform, these can play an important role by fostering a community of care that challenges the hyper-individualistic logic that is encouraged by capitalism and the specific austerity politics of the UK government, which has dominated since the 2008 financial crash. As Akbar asserts, "we shouldn't exist… [but] we are here to be a middleman until society rebuilds what is called a community, which we don't have anymore."[65] Although sometimes critiqued by some state-centric and revolutionary strands of leftist thought for stepping in where the capitalist state has failed, they can be

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[62] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[63] Author interaction with Sufra food bank user, 27 October 2021.
[64] John Preston and Rhiannon Firth, *Coronavirus, Class and Mutual Aid in the United Kingdom* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 57.
[65] Akbar, interview with author, 27 October 2021.

radical. “Rather than reproducing capitalism, mutual aid rather tends to reproduce life – potentially radical life – that is either disposable or a burden to capitalism.”[66]

In a similar manner to Nijjor Manush’s Save Brick Lane Campaign, Sufra’s success in fostering a community of care is an educative experience with potentially radical implications. It illustrates that capitalists (and again, a state that is geared to protect elite interests) will not and cannot meet the needs of the poor. It puts into practice a potential alternative, where regular people take care of each other. While their focus is justifiably on immediate materials needs and they have not partaken on an explicit education campaign like Nijjor Manush, Zehra expressed hope that Sufra would more explicitly become involved in such activities in the future:

> Hopefully we'll have a more comprehensive programme that addresses some systemic issues and pushes the people that we work with to not just reach their financial goals and become independent and find a stable life here, but also to be able to go into the world, to go into independent living [with] the consciousness of the systemic issues and the role that they play in society, and to avoid that next generation of immigrants or refugees from becoming individualistic [and], hopefully, harness a little bit of awareness along the way. That's the ideal.[67]

The outlook of Nijjor Manush and Sufra can more clearly be embedded into the framework of revolutionary reform than Who Is Hussain’s activities. While it is beyond doubt that the latter has supported countless people, both in London and further afield, they lack a clear political messaging and limit their ambitions to “building compassionate communities”. This seems to be intentionally left vague in order for the organisation to be able to react to different demands, while staying clear of systemic questions and addressing *why* these compassionate communities are needed and why they do not already exist. Perhaps in an attempt to appeal to a wide audience – which, in the London case, includes relatively wealthy Khoja and Arab Shia communities who may be deterred by a more radical messaging – or because of a cautiousness to not overstep their remit as a registered charity, Who Is Hussain steers clear of any political critique or activities that may lose them support among their broad base.

Using the three organisations’ social media accounts as an indicator of their messaging substantiates the apolitical nature of Who Is Hussain. With the exception of addressing current events in Palestine (albeit by presenting it as a humanitarian issue, rather than a liberation struggle by a colonised people), they do not discuss contemporary issues or present any critique or systematic context in which their activities occur. Sufra, while also primarily using social media to advertise their activities, presents some critique, for example by highlighting the UK’s failure to providing food security for its residents. Nijjor Manush, unsurprisingly, is the most explicitly political on social media, using it extensively to share

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[66] Preston and Firth, *Coronavirus, Class and Mutual Aid in the United Kingdom*. 81.
Preston and Firth, like many anarchists, make a distinction between food banks and mutual aid “solidarity kitchens”, critiquing the former for reproducing hierarchical relationships through which employees become gatekeepers that judge whether those in need are eligible for aid (See: ibid., 76.). Although Sufra is limited by charity regulations, given the entirety of their activities and positionality within the local community, a strong case can be made for their status as a mutual aid group rather than neoliberal charity.

[67] Zehra, interview with author, 29 October 2021.

views and articles on a variety of issues. At the time of writing, they have been organising as part of the "South Asians 4 Palestine" Bloc, which is working with other groups to mobilise South Asian communities in the UK around the ongoing genocide in Palestine. [68]

Partly because of their model, therefore, Who Is Hussain are detached from the people that they help. Unlike Nijjor Manush and Sufra, which are embedded in the marginalised communities of Tower Hamlets and Brent, respectively, Who Is Hussain lacks this grassroots character. Although their office is in Harrow, West London, their activities take place across the city and the Shia community remains the primary pool through which it recruits volunteers and is its primary constituency – not those that benefit from its activities. This more hierarchical (and so less grassroots) relationship that Who Is Hussain has with marginalised communities means that it operates through a neoliberal charity structure that separates the helpers from the helped. Its apolitical messaging and outlook has certainly helped it to grow into an impressive global charity in a relatively small period of time but also means that it avoids being critical of the structures (or even government policies) that could be identified as being responsible for causing the issues that they seek to address. Tackling systemic issues, as a result, is also beyond its remit.

Unlike these neoliberal practices of charity, the praxis of groups such as Nijjor Manush and Sufra more closely reflects a liberative theology and is premised on a recognition that systemic change is necessary to address the root causes of class exploitation and economic inequality. Contemporary struggles and praxis are attached to the broader long term aim of abolishing the class structure. After establishing this as the strategy, to borrow the Leninist terminology, the flexibility afforded to Muslims by generalised commandments to establish justice, allows them to decide which tactics are most appropriate in a given time and place. With the impracticality of revolutionary change in contemporary Britain, the theory of revolutionary, or non-reformist, reforms provides activists with a framework. Nijjor Manush's anti-gentrification campaign and Sufra's mutual aid community are two examples of viable tactics, which challenge the logic of capitalism, help to produce a Gramscian counter-hegemony and pave the way for systemic change in the future.

Achieving Revolutionary Change: On Moving from Liberation to Power

Whether it is Lenin's conceptualisation of strategy and tactics, Gorz's non-reformist reforms or Gramsci's hegemony, the ultimate objective of political action is to achieve systemic change. This inevitably requires a fundamental shift in power relations, with those that were previously marginalised seizing political power (in whatever form this may take). Gorz argues:

> The bourgeoisie will never surrender its power without struggle, without being forced to do so by the revolutionary action of the masses. It follows

[68] See: 'Who Is Hussain? - London (@wihlondon) • Instagram Photos and Videos', accessed 25 January 2024, https://www.instagram.com/wihlondon; 'Who Is Hussain? London (@wihlondon) / X', X (formerly Twitter), 17 January 2024, https://twitter.com/wihlondon; 'Sufra NW London (Food Bank) (@sufranwlondon) • Instagram Photos and Videos', accessed 25 January 2024, https://www.instagram.com/sufranwlondon/; 'Sufra NW London (@SufraNWLondon) / X', X (formerly Twitter), 8 December 2023, https://twitter.com/SufraNWLondon; 'Nijjormanush (@nijjormanush) • Instagram Photos and Videos', accessed 28 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/nijjormanush/; 'Nijjormanush (@nijjormanush) / X', X (formerly Twitter), 27 February 2018, https://twitter.com/nijjormanush.

> that the principal problem of a socialist strategy is to *create* the objective and subjective *conditions* which will make mass revolutionary action and engagement in a successful trial of strength with the bourgeoisie possible.[69]

Similarly, Gramsci, in his work on hegemony, differentiates between two types of tactics, which he describes as a war of position and war of manoeuvre, that are ultimately directed towards overturning the existing status quo. The former is "akin to trench warfare", where activists (in his worldview organised into a vanguard political party) look to strengthen their position within civil society and develop a counter-hegemony. The latter is direct confrontation with the institutions of power which, in a similar manner to Gorz, Gramsci argues can only be successful when the balance of forces is in favour of the marginalised and the hegemonic state is vulnerable to attack.[70]

As we have seen, socialist and Marxist thinkers have always rooted their ideas in a critique of the capitalist structure itself, rather than the specificities of any policy. The objective, therefore, is not to create "islands of socialism in a capitalist ocean" but to fundamentally change the structure.[71] This is made even more important by capitalism's ability to absorb and subordinate resistance and re-establish a balance. Indeed, Gorz strongly emphasises that revolutionary reforms can only be effective if they are followed by "a frontal attack". Otherwise, the gains made from these will be subsumed into the capitalist status quo, creating new conditions and the need for another preparatory struggle.[72]

Many examples in modern British history can be found for this occurrence. Shafi[73] and Nagdee, in their important intervention on the history of anti-racist movements in the UK, explore how the political establishment, and Labour Party in particular, blunted Asian radicalism in the 1980s by incorporating activists into their ranks. Local government, a politics of recognition and the professionalisation of anti-racism was used to elevate the voices of selected middle class non-white individuals, resulting in struggles being co-opted and emptied of their ideological and grassroots content.[74] Rather than focusing on the issue of racialised capitalism, these individuals became the middlemen that could be used to diversify the status quo.

In more recent times, the third sectors expanding role to fill the gaps left by successive governments' austerity policies is another example of capitalism's ability to subsume resistance. Indeed, as the state withdraws social support and capitalism becomes increasingly unfettered, governments are able to rely on social support systems, predominantly reliant on free volunteer hours, to ensure the normal running of things. This was perhaps most starkly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, when Public Health England's official policy for

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[69] Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution'. 111. Emphasis in original.
[70] McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*. 204-5. For an application of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the specificities of a war of manoeuvre and position, see: Toby Dodge, 'The Sardinian, the Texan and the Tikriti: Gramsci, The Comparative Autonomy of the Middle Eastern State and Regime Change in Iraq', *International Politics* 43, no. 4 (September 2006): 453–73, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800165.
[71] Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution'. 112.
[72] Ibid. 120.
[73] Azfar Shafi is also a member of Nijjor Manush.
[74] Shafi and Nagdee, *Race to the Bottom*.

individuals who had to stay at home was to rely on their own networks, not the government that, at least in theory, should provide public services to them:

> Ask family, friends and neighbours to support you and use online services. If this is not possible, then the public sector, business, charities, and the general public are gearing up to help those advised to stay at home. Please discuss your daily needs during this period of staying at home with carers, family, friends, neighbours or local community groups to see how they can support you.[75]

The potential for the charity sector to be co-opted by neoliberal capitalist governments is particularly relevant for Sufra and Who Is Hussain. Only by being conscious of and actively resisting these attempts can they undermine the logic of capitalist exploitation and achieve systemic change.

Although, as we have seen, many activists identified the need to challenge the capitalist economic structure, few explicitly engaged with questions of power. Interestingly, it was only the two members of Nijjor Manush, Aqeel and Khalid (who both explicitly identified as Marxists) that addressed this. For Aqeel, seizing and transforming state power are the "things we should ultimately be aiming towards."[76] He cautions:

> I think it's something that the left should not lose sight of. Sometimes the dialectic between the local and the national can get lost, like the idea of community organising, which I support too, cannot remain at the level of community without understanding that the structure in which you operate in as communities is defined at the national level. So, I think ultimately, build up community struggles, build up your connection with anti-police struggle locally, while recognising it as something that can move towards advancing popular power towards seizing power on the national level and transforming it.[77]

Similarly, Khalid believes the left "needs to be serious about taking state power and use the state as an instrument to support the working class."[78] Aqeel's recognition that the local and national are intrinsically linked together alludes to Gorz's insight, mentioned earlier, that creating "socialist islands" is not the way to combat capitalism.

In the context of the War on Terror and heavy government surveillance of Muslim communities, most prominently through the Prevent programme (see chapter three), many Muslims fear broaching subjects related to power and, particularly, violence. Indeed, despite being inspired by the martyrdom of Hussain, Who Is Hussain explicitly distances itself from violence and advocates for peaceful and gradual change.[79] Members of Nijjor Manush however, were the only ones to address the role of violence within Islamic praxis. Citing

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[75] Public Health England (2020) in Preston and Firth, *Coronavirus, Class and Mutual Aid in the United Kingdom*. 80.
[76] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Khalid, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[79] Ali, interview with author, 17 September 2021.

Subhas Chandra Bose,[80] Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon as political inspirations, Maya acknowledges:

> In today's world, with the way that Muslims are scrutinised, whether we like it or not, there is an element within our faith that does say, if you need to take up arms, you take up arms.[81]

Similarly, Shelly accepts that the oppressed have a right to demand their rights, even with violence if this is necessary.[82] She reflects the views of Abu Dharr, a Companion of the Prophet and prominent figure within Islamic Liberation Theology and Islamic socialist thought, who said, "I am perplexed by a hungry person who has no bread in his house; why does he not arise from among the people, his sword unsheathed and rebel."[83] Although, as we have seen, the violent seizure of power is considered by many to be unviable in the British and majority of Western contexts, activists from Nijjor Manush challenge the liberal doctrine of non-violence as an ethical standard and assert the validity of the former where it is practical and necessary. This opens up another potential tactic for a liberative Islam geared towards the transformation of the capitalist power structure.

The question of power is therefore of fundamental importance to Islamic liberation theology. Dabashi speaks of an inherent paradox within (Shia) Islam whereby "it can only morally succeed when it is politically weak and combative, and conversely it morally weakens and loses legitimacy when it is in political power."[84] He argues that Islam, particularly its Shia variant, must remain in opposition and a state of permanent revolution and resistance to power structures. This however seems to raise big questions for the transformation of capitalist power relations and changing the conditions of the economically exploited. In opposition to Dabashi, Aqeel argues that Islam addresses statecraft and:

> We can't evade questions of state power. Sometimes people will be scared of it like, "Ah, we don't want to deal with that. We want to be pristine, pure in our political virtue." I think you have to get involved in the dirty work sometimes and think about state power.[85]

Here Aqeel reasserts his belief that the question of power must be addressed in order to achieve long term change. Whether this be related to economic or other social hierarchies, such as race and gender, transforming power relations is fundamental to the task of Liberation Theology. Aqeel critiques the attitude of perpetual opposition and victimhood, which, although it may uphold a "pristine" image of praxis, will fail to move it in the direction of creating a classless society and truly achieving the Islamic imperative to establish economic justice. How this power can be obtained and structured, therefore, is fundamental to the task of securing a liberative future. Dabashi, in his proposal for a new anti-imperialism, which supplants simplistic binaries of the West versus Islam, calls for the development of an Islamic

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[80] Maya recognised the controversy surrounding Bose's choice to align with the Axis Powers during World War Two, but argued that this was primarily driven by his belief that, as enemies of the British, they would be able to aid his anti-colonial struggle.
[81] Maya, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[82] Shelly, Nijjor Manush focus group with author, 30 January 2023.
[83] Abu Dharr in Shariati, *Abu Dhar*. 10.
[84] Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. 61.
[85] Aqeel, interview with author, 4 October 2022.

theodicy. This embraces alternatives and oppositions, seeing Islam as one piece of the collective struggle for liberation.[86] Alternatively, Abdou, in his exciting work, *Islam and Anarchism*, offers a decolonial, non-authoritarian and non-capitalist Islamic anarchism, which constructs a decentralised notion of power.[87] As Aqeel and Khalid recognise, engaging with these theoretical insights is essential for any theology of class struggle, since it is only with a transformation of power relations that class can be abolished and economic justice achieved.

Conclusion

Activists, regardless of the specificities of their political views, recognised that Islam is not a religion of theory and abstract belief, but is given meaning through action. This dialectic between faith and praxis is of central importance, with individuals tested by their responses to manifestations of injustice, their commitment to the marginalised and their sincerity in seeking Islam's social objectives. The figure of Malcolm X, mentioned by several of the research participants, is perhaps the most powerful modern example that embodies these principles. The specifics of his activism, which sought to combat the US' racist power structure and, in later years, capitalism, were combined by a constant evolution as he stood steadfastly for justice. Just like other prominent figures discussed in earlier chapters, Husayn ibn Ali and Khadija ibn Khuwaylid, Malcolm's stand for truth and justice ultimately cost him his life. Today, he can be used as an inspiration for a liberative praxis centred around justice in all its manifestation.

Although activists agreed on the centrality of establishing economic justice, there was a large variance among them on what this meant substantially. For some this was limited to reform, instilling Islamic principles such as compassion and generosity into the unchallenged capitalist structure. For others, it was structural change. This tension emphasises the importance of laying a theoretical foundation and, as the previous chapter illustrated, a liberative conceptualisation of economic justice would agree with the latter group of activists and seek to abolish the class structure that is at the root of exploitative economic relations and inequality. This then becomes the benchmark against which particular tactics are judged and decided.

The three organisations – Who Is Hussain, Sufra and Nijjor Manush – are engaged in a variety of activities that bring this discussion more directly into the British context. For Who Is Hussain, their primary goal is to react to the needs of different communities and provide them with aid. Although tackling a wide range of issues, this form of charity was critiqued by many of the research participants as being too limited in scope, apolitical and not sufficient in tackling the root causes of economic exploitation and inequality. While some within the organisation were aware of these limitations, it was primarily members of Sufra and Nijjor Manush who forwarded this critique. Although they recognised the importance of charity as a short term measure (indeed, both are reliant on fundraising to different degrees), judged against the need to achieve structural change, it was seen as insufficient. Although important as a means to sustain the lives and dignity of the economically marginalised, they argued that

[86] Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*.
[87] Mohamed Abdou, *Islam and Anarchism: Relationships and Resonances* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

it needed to be combined with more long term praxis aimed at producing structural change in order to realise Islam's goal of economic justice and the abolition of class.

In the absence of prospects for immediate revolutionary change, non-reformist reforms can be used as a tactic to work towards more long term change. First conceptualised by Andre Gorz, this calls on activists to prioritise the needs and demands of the marginalised and challenge the logic of capitalism, creating further contradictions, which can be used for the eventual rupture of the system. Put another way, directed by the long term strategy to abolish capitalist class relations, activists are required to intervene in temporal struggles and use the appropriate tactics to work towards this objective. Both Nijjor Manush and Sufra can be considered to be working in this manner. For the former, involvement in the Save Brick Lane anti-gentrification campaign and advocating for an alternative that prioritises the needs of the local community rather than the profit motive of developers and landlords is a prime example of a structural reform in action. For Sufra, although in many senses it operates like a traditional charity, their grassroots nature and ability to foster a strong community, means that they could also be considered a mutual aid group. By developing a community of care, which the marginalised can also take ownership of, they challenge the hyper-individualism encouraged by a neoliberal logic and illustrate the possibility of an alternative way of living. Indeed, one of the key elements of revolutionary reforms is to do precisely this, educating and mobilising communities as a political force that can drive social change.

For this to be sustained, however, it inevitably has to engage with questions of power. It is insufficient for a liberative Islam, in trying to maintain a pristine veneer, to avoid these questions and, as some of Nijjor Manush's activists emphasised, the ultimate goal of praxis must be to fundamentally alter the structure of political and economic power. Whether using peaceful or violent means, the abolition of the capitalist class structure and its replacement with a new form of economy that removes exploitation can only be achieved and sustained if the marginalised and oppressed seize power. An Islam that looks to abolish class, therefore, cannot avoid these questions and, while it engages in the process of non-reformist reforms to challenge the capitalist structure, it must also consider the decisive war of manoeuvre, in Gramsci's words, or rupture, through which a fundamentally new reality can be created.

Conclusion: Imagining Liberative Futures

> When I say that there will soon be a high tide of revolution… I am emphatically not speaking of something which in the words of some people 'is possibly coming', something illusory, unattainable and devoid of significant for action. It is like a ship far out at sea whose masthead can already be seen from the shore; it is like the morning sun in the east whose shimmering rays are visible from a high mountain top; it is like a child about to be born moving restlessly in its mother's womb. – Mao Zedong[1]

> I do not think that life will change for the better without an assault on the Establishment (The power structure, based on the economic infrastructure, propped up and reinforced by the media and all the secondary educational and cultural institutions) which goes on exploiting the wretched of the earth. This belief lies at the heart of the concept of revolutionary suicide. Thus it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions. This possibility is important, because much in human existence is based upon hope without any real understanding of the odds. Indeed, we are all – Black and white alike – ill in the same way, mortally ill. But before we die, how shall we live? I say with hope and dignity; and if premature death is the result, that death has a meaning reactionary suicide can never have. It is the price of self-respect. – Huey Newton[2]

The Case for Optimism

For several centuries now, capitalism, and its corollaries such as imperialism and slavery, have blighted the world in which we live. Whether it is garment factory workers in Bangladesh, paid pennies to produce the clothes that we wear; forced labour in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where cobalt is mined for the rechargeable batteries in our electronic devices; or the racialised working class across the imperial core, including here in the UK; economic exploitation is the lived reality of the vast majority of the world's population. The class relation which is at the root of this goes back even further, shaping much of human history. It would be forgivable to think, as some of the activists interviewed for this study did, that this is an inevitable part of our existence and there will always be those that have and those that have not – the exploiter and the exploited.

Past generations, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have grappled with this reality and complained about widespread injustice, the weakness of their position and the seeming inevitability of defeat. For example, you see these themes at the end of Dua Iftitah, said to be narrated by the twelfth Shia Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, in the ninth century CE:

[1] Mao and Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction*, 42.
[2] Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 3.

> Grant us victory over Your and our enemy. O God of Truth, respond to us! O Allah, we complain to You about the departure of our Prophet (Your blessings be upon him and his household), the absence of our leader [the Mahdi], the big numbers of our enemies, the few number of us, the severity of *fitna*[3] and vicissitudes of time against us. So… help us overcome all that through victory from You that You hasten, through relieving us from our injuries, through Your help… through bringing in the rule of justice and fairness.[4]

However, as the above supplication alludes to and liberation theologians have identified, God's preference for the oppressed gives reasons to be optimistic, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds:

> And we desired to show favour to those who were abased in the land and to make them leaders, and to make them the heirs, and to establish them in the land. (28:5-6)

Furthermore, as we have seen, this optimism is an Islamic imperative that reaffirms the central tenet of *tawhid*, which rebukes all social hierarchies, by acknowledging that nothing other than God is necessary and inevitable. In other words, God is the only eternal; everything else can and *will* change.

Of course, this change will not occur by itself but requires people to engage in the cyclical process of action and reflection – praxis. This is the middle road between two forms of determinism – a nihilistic resignation to the status quo; or belief that something other than human action (such as an abstracted God's will) drives history forward. Rather, Islamic Liberation Theology tells us that God works through the dispossessed and those that strive for justice, placing Him firmly on the side of the oppressed. His solidarity, manifested through history with events such as the Exodus,[5] gives sanctity to their struggle, while stressing their agency as actors of change.

This study is designed to be the first stage of reflection on the action against class exploitation undertaken by Muslim activists in the British context and, through this, contribute to the dialectic process of praxis through which liberation will be achieved. As way of conclusion, the rest of this chapter will summarise its key ideational and material findings, before tentatively outlining some potential areas for future research and action.

Islamic Liberation Theology and the Production of a Counter-Hegemony

Liberation Theology provides Muslims with a methodology that incorporates the process of praxis through which change can be realised. On an ideational level, this is premised first and

[3] *Fitna* is an Arabic word with no exact equivalent in English and has both metaphysical and material connotations. In this context, it is most likely referring to the material reality of socio-political trials and tribulations, rather than spiritual temptations or discords and divisions.
[4] 'Dua Iftitah - Ramadan - Duas.Org', accessed 4 December 2023, https://www.duas.org/iftitah.htm.
[5] The Exodus paradigm is central to Christian Liberation Theology and has also been used by Islamic liberation theologians such as Farid Esack. See: Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*.

foremost on the realisation that religion, just like all other social and cultural phenomena, is influenced by the social context and power relations in which it emerges. In this sense, it critiques the Marxist tendency to portray religion as solely the opium of the masses and an inherently reactionary force that stands as a barrier to change. Rather, Ali Shariati, the founding intellectual figure of Islamic Liberation Theology, paints a narrative of history as the struggle between two conflicting religious trends. On the one hand, there is, what he terms, the system of Cain, which has used religion to uphold systems of oppression and inequality throughout history. Whether it was in the form of Pharaoh, the Umayyads or Safavid Shi'ism, religion served as the tool of the powerful and was used to preserve hierarchical relationships.

Activists echoed Shariati by critiquing two types of religion that they believed either actively or passively uphold the status quo. Regarding the latter, they identified an apolitical form of Islam, which placed absolute emphasis on individualised acts of worship and the spiritual. Excessively concerned with keeping their head down and integrating into British society, the scope of political activity is limited to charitable activities, which activists criticised for failing to address the material needs of Muslims and wider societies in any substantial way. On a more ideational level, this apolitical Islam conflated religiosity with acts of worship, placing value on actions such as the number of times a person had been for *hajj*, how long they pray for or their position within the local mosque. While the vast majority of activists acknowledged the importance of these acts of worship, they believed that it should also manifest in acts of kindness and activism, rather than indirectly accommodating the status quo by choosing to ignore political questions, such as capitalism, or indeed racism and patriarchy.

A second intellectual trend that activists identified, which is perhaps more dangerous, is reactionary readings of Islam that actively and explicitly uphold the status quo and espoused the virtues of existing oppressions by giving them religious sanction. For example, female activists pointed out the way in which patriarchy manifested in Muslim circles and led to a degree of mistrust among Muslim women (towards religious authority and the Muslim community in general). On economic questions, it was the religious sanction for wealth accumulation that was particularly relevant. In chapter five we saw how even some activists internalised this principle and exalted wealth as a blessing through which the rich are tested. This theology of examination, as I have termed it, ignores questions about how exploitation is necessary for wealth to be amassed in the first place and portrays this as the natural division of society, ordained by God. In this schema the wealthy are tested by their charity, while the poor are tested by their patience and become the objects on which the former act in order to elevate their spiritual position. Thus, an inherently political issue becomes a question of individual ethics that fails to provide an analysis of *why* things are the way they are or calls for systemic change.

Certainly, this type of trickle-down Islam can be substantiated through reference to the Islamic canon and any theology of economic liberation will have to grapple with these. The Quran's acknowledgement (or, perhaps, acceptance) of the employer-worker relationship and frequent assertions that *rizk* is apportioned through divine wisdom and people are tested by how they respond to their relative worldly circumstances, have supported the orthodox views surrounding economic activity. This emphasises social solidarity between the rich and poor and centres charity as the key tool for redistribution.

Running parallel to these manifestations of religion that uphold the status quo, or the system of Cain, are the theologies of the margin, which align themselves to the masses and aid them in their quest to become full political actors and the agents of history – the system of Abel. Again, Shariati traces this through historical figures such as the Abrahamic prophets, Ali ibn Abi Talib, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari and Hussain ibn Ali, attaching it to the struggle of the Iranian people in his time against the despotic Shah, Muhammad Reza Pehlavi. For Shariati, this was the true Islam, the religion of the people, which rejected all social divisions as a manifestation of *shirk*. While the system of Cain looked to co-opt religion for the powerful elite, according to Shariati, God was aligned to the people, whose victory was the inevitable direction of history.

On the issue of class, activists outlined the foundations for a liberative alternative to the readings of Islam that upheld the status quo, which was distinctly anti-capitalist. Challenging the ethics of wealth accumulation, they emphasised the importance of understanding how this occurs and why wealth disparities exist. In this regard, seeing class in a relational sense, where the rich are rich *because* the poor are poor sheds light on the true nature of the problem. Indeed, using Marx's theory of surplus value, it is clear that capital accumulation is only possible because of an inherently exploitative relationship between those who are required to sell their labour to survive (workers) and possessors of the means of production (capitalists). The latter uses their economic power, which translated into socio-political power also, to extract profits from the work of others and maintain their privileged position.

The inherently exploitative nature of how class operates (whether it is under capitalism, feudalism or slavery) was seen by many activists as inherently contradictory to Islam's commands to establish justice, which they saw as being left deliberately vague so that it could be applied to different contexts across space and time. When this was combined with specific prohibitions against hoarding wealth and interest and the explicit and symbolic calls for redistribution and equality, a strong argument can be made for a different reading of Islam that seeks to abolish class. Liberation is this sense means to work *with* marginalised classes to challenge the class system which is at the core of economic exploitation and work towards the realisation of a classless society, where the people themselves are in control of the means of production, not a small minority.

As Shariati alludes to in his explanation of the sociology of Islam, the struggle between Cain and Abel, here represented through the various readings of how Islam responds to the economic question of class and wealth, is a struggle over meaning. Because of the power of "the tradition" in Islamic thought, both sides invoke history to justify their points of view and gain legitimacy. What constitutes tradition is not of course neutral or objective but, rather, is a reflection of power relations and particular priorities. Shariati, for example, speaks of how Shi'ism was transformed from a "religion of martyrdom or protest" into a "religion of mourning", where Hussain's example was transformed from one that encouraged rebellion against injustices into a practice of lamentation for the tragedy that befell him.[6] Shia activists echoed this in their criticisms of the passivity of their communities, which kept the message of Hussain within the walls of the *masjid* or *hussainiyya*. Indeed, Who Is Hussain was founded on the very belief that his message should inspire social action and the creation of more

[6] Shariati, 'Red Shi'ism - Black Shi'ism'.

compassionate communities. In their own way, they sought to reclaim Hussain for the margins and challenge dominant, passive interpretations of his legacy.

The contestation over history was perhaps best exemplified by the position of Khadija ibn Khuwaylid, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife, in both pro and anti-capitalist interpretations of Islam. In the context of a society that celebrates wealth accumulation and entrepreneurial spirit, it is no coincidence that some praised and emphasised her tenacity and success as a businesswoman. Indeed, her elevated status in Islamic history is read as tacit acceptance of these qualities, which can be emulated by Muslims inclined towards a capitalist lifestyle today. An alternative reading, however, places greater value on Khadija's support for the nascent Muslim community, particularly during the Makkan boycott. In this reading, Khadija betrayed her class position and gave up her wealth in solidarity with the marginalised, even giving her life for the sake of their survival. This reading places the Prophet's beloved wife on the margins and has the potential to have emancipatory implications for Muslims and their praxis today. Indeed, reclaiming Khadija, along with other revolutionary currents within Islamic history, such as those embodied by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran and Islamic socialism, can aid the task of creating a new understanding of Islamic tradition, or a counter-hegemony, which seeks to address the issue of exploitation and produce an anti-capitalist reading of Islam that advocates the abolition of class relations.

Islamic Liberation Theology as a Challenge to Hegemony

Liberation Theology is not, however, simply an intellectual exercise that seeks to challenge dominant readings of Islam and produce alternatives that consider the perspectives on the margins. Rather, it is a praxis, which means that it is a process of action and reflection through which material reality can be changed. This study takes this imperative seriously by centring the latter and challenging the tendency for an elite, whether in traditional centres of learning or the academy, to monopolise the interpretive process. It takes an embedded approach, which prioritises those that are already involved in struggles for economic liberation and understands how they develop a theology in response to the material challenges and injustices that they see. Indeed, as activists argued, Islam is only given true value through action. It is not an abstract intellectual or moral position but something that manifests in society through sincere action in the quest for justice – a principle embodied in the figure of Malcolm X.

On the economic issue in particular, the inherently exploitative nature of class meant that, as many of the activists argued, a liberative Islam had to go beyond reformism to be explicitly anti-capitalist and strive for systemic change. Short term measures, particularly giving charity, are still necessary in blunting the sharpest edges of capitalism and providing dignity to the poor who, in the words of Latin American liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, are rendered non-persons by capitalism. Activists however were critical of the perspective that limited political activity to charity, seeing this as a reactive and neoliberal approach to the faith. It is not enough to simply deal with the symptoms of class exploitation; it is necessary to address the root cause – in other words, the very existence of classes.

The general nature of the commandment to establish justice (and combat oppression), activists noted, gave them the flexibility to use tactics that they believed would be most effective in their current context to reach the broader strategic goal of class abolition.

Fundamentally however, whichever path was taken, it had to address systemic change and be directed towards an overhaul of existing power relations. Members of Nijjor Manush, for example, recognised (in theory) the validity of using violence as a means to establish justice – a direct challenge in itself of liberal understandings of Islam as a "religion of peace".[7] In the absence of the prospect of revolutionary change, as is the case in contemporary Britain, the concept of non-reformist, revolutionary or structural reforms can be helpful as a means to conceptualise action. This differs from liberal reformism because it is linked to a long term objective to dismantle capitalism, with reforms being pursued not for their practicality under existing economic relations but because of the needs and wants of the marginalised classes.

Revolutionary reforms are designed to challenge the logic of capitalism, deepening material contradictions and educating the masses (through action) about the possibility of an alternative way of living. Nijjor Manush and Sufra, in particular, were engaged in these. For the latter, building a mutual aid community on St. Raphael's Estate in Brent, which has expanded to support those in need across northwest London, challenges the individualistic logic of neoliberal capitalism. For Nijjor Manush, which is an explicitly socialist organisation, their anti-gentrification campaign, which challenges the primacy given to profit-driven property developers and emphasises community needs is combined with an educational campaign to build the British Bengali population, which is the country's poorest, into a political force. For activists in organisations such as these, the challenge is to not become absorbed into capitalism's ever-evolving structure but to continue pressing in the direction of systemic change, preparing for the eventual war of manoeuvre, to borrow Gramsci's phrase. It is only through this careful balancing of short and long term goals ("tactics" and "strategy", to use Leninist grammar) that the objectives of a liberative Islam can be realised. This, by necessity requires Muslims to work towards systemic change that abolishes class, thereby removing the underlying cause of the economic injustices that we see today.

Future Directions

This study has sought to provide a methodological and practical contribution to the field of Islamic Liberation Theology. In this sense, it is both the continuation of an ongoing discussion and the initiation of a new one. In this final section, I want to briefly outline how I envision these developing in the future and the directions in which I think liberation theologians can take research, both generally and specifically in regard to economic issues.

The first contribution that this study makes is in its method, which can be extrapolated most broadly to develop other theologies of liberation. Throughout, I have emphasised that the primary objective of any Liberation Theology should be achieving material change for the marginalised. The theologian's preference for the oppressed should not be rhetorical or abstract but rooted in their lived reality and struggles for change. Without this, it is devoid of substance and resembles the work of traditional intellectuals, working from their ivory tower to study social phenomena. Unfortunately, whether it is in traditional centres of learning or the academy, Muslim intellectual thought has all too often lost sight of this radical imperative and focused on abstracted readings of the Islamic canon, detached from the reality of the people. Liberation Theology is a theology of *praxis*, a never-ending cycle of action and reflection on the world in order to change it, that asserts that Islam is not just a way of being,

[7] Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11'.

but a fluid way of doing. To substantiate this, I have used qualitative social research methods, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, to centre those involved in material struggles for change. This foundation is then developed through textual hermeneutics and reference to social and Islamic sciences. In taking this approach, I have sought to reclaim the impulse of praxis, which is the only way that Islamic Liberation Theology can become a challenge to the status quo and force for change.[8]

The second contribution ties together the methodological and practical elements by highlighting the importance of defining clear theoretical goals that are derived from reflections on religious texts and political reality in conjunction with activists and provide a trajectory towards which action can be directed. Using the Leninist language of strategy and tactics is helpful here, with the former being a guiding light that informs the decision making of actors in response to the demands and opportunities in a particular time and place. For example, how can the new spaces afforded to debates around decolonisation and racial discrimination be used to push for a radical critique of the racialised capitalism that continues to lock entire peoples in the Third World in imperial relationships and result in the exploitation of minoritised groups in the imperial core? For liberation theologians, just like progressive forces in wider society, having this clear ideological worldview will help to give praxis its coherency.

This is also an essential insight for activists in developing their understanding of the strategic direction in which they should move and against which they can judge the efficacy of their actions. As we have seen, the failure of scholars, whether traditional or academic, and political actors to define a clear theoretical understanding of class from an Islamic perspective has led to a confused response to the economic questions of today. Some have fallen into the trap of not recognising the inherently exploitative nature of class divisions and, consequently, been content with reformism. Others felt a dissonance between their own recognition of this reality and the seeming acquiescence of Islam to capitalist norms. For both, understanding that an alternative reading exists, which opposes economic exploitation and seeks to abolish class, can give a more solid theoretical foundation for future action.

It is the initiation of this conversation on class marginalisation that is the third contribution that this study makes. Since the start of the research process, the urgency of this task has been further highlighted by, first, the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crises, which were exacerbated by international instability and the collapse of supply routes, which has led to a severe cost of living crisis. Each day, more and more people are falling into poverty or dying from capitalist violence, which renders marginalised classes, whether they are workers, peasants or the lumpenproletariat, as non-persons, either living as commodities to be used for capital or rejects that are outside the system entirely. Each day capitalism illustrates its disinterest in their survival and wellbeing.

As I have shown, introducing class into discussions on liberation opens up a new horizon for Islamic Liberation Theology and can help to ground it in material reality. As decolonial, Third World, Black and feminist Marxists have shown us, class can help us to understand the ways

[8] A recent Special Edition, The Future of Islamic Liberation Theology, published in the academic journal Religions provides some encouraging signs that praxis is once again being recentred within the field. See: Shadaab Rahemtulla, ed., *The Future of Islamic Liberation Theology* (MDPI, 2023), https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-0365-8789-9.

in which other forms of marginalisation, such as race and gender, operate today. Class, from this perspective, is not an identity but the fundamental relationship that shapes our reality. Taking it into consideration will allow for a more nuanced discussion and a clearer differentiation from shallow liberal identity politics. Indeed, if we take class into account, it becomes impossible to see racialised people or women's inclusion into the existing system as a form of liberation that should be celebrated. A diversification of the agents of oppression is not emancipatory and a class-based analysis asserts that no one is free until we are all free.

This is however simply the first stage of reflection in the endless cycle of action and reflection that defines the process of praxis. It needs to be developed in different directions and is far from complete. This study has focused on the thought of activists in three community-based organisations, which represent only one type of class struggle. This has brought many fruitful insights, which can be deepened by engaging with other organisational forms, such as trade unions, and more directly with the masses, whether it be workers, refugees, asylum seekers or those discarded by the capitalist structure, such as the homeless.

Geographically, this study has also been limited to the London context, leaving ample room for further exploration. It is of course necessary for a praxis-based theology to be embedded in a particular time and place and, while the findings can inform action elsewhere, the way in which class struggle manifests and is articulated will inevitably differ. For example, in Muslim-majority contexts, where the capitalist and marginalised classes are both Muslim, the field of ideological struggle is completely different, while imperial relationships also tie them into the global context in distinctive ways. While this study has had a narrow focus on the British context, the UK's position, both historically and today, in the imperial core also has implications for British Muslim activists. It is a historical reality, as Third World revolutionaries have told us, that European wealth is built on the exploitation of the rest of the world. This raises questions for activists and how historical and contemporary injustices that come out of the international division of labour can be addressed. In other words, what needs to be done in the context of an international system of exploitation from which everyone in Britain, regardless of position, benefits?

Muslims have a particular interest in addressing such questions since they are disproportionately represented among exploited classes, whether in the UK or globally. Their involvement in the class struggle opens the potential for a new paradigm of action and interfaith relations, based on shared interests and experiences, rather than superficial discussions about tolerance or theological similarities. Esack, in his work on pluralism,[9] shows the potential of this interest-based interfaith solidarity, which would be strengthened even further by a consideration of class. Indeed, the vast majority of Muslims are part of a diverse tapestry of the world's economically dispossessed and this opens many opportunities for us to struggle as equals for our collective liberation, which means abolishing the class relations that are at the root of the economic exploitation that afflicts our world today.

[9] Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*.

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