

Theology of the Margins

The Reading of Farid Esack

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is devoted to the Qur'anic exegesis of the South African theologian Farid Esack. The first part of the chapter will focus on hermeneutical method: how does Esack read the text and how is his reading a departure from other interpretive methods? Here, I will demonstrate that, although the Qur'anic text certainly plays a prime role in Esack's commentary, the experiences of the marginalized coupled with struggle against oppression constitute as important a text that is to be read alongside scripture. This will then lead into a discussion of how Esack interprets justice in the text. According to Esack, the God of the Qur'an is not only a just deity, but is in solidarity with the marginalized—a preferential option that is embodied in the Exodus. In this section, I critique Esack's usage of the Exodus as the key paradigm in his liberationist exegesis, pointing to its centrality in Christian liberation theology and, in its stead, proposing a more organic paradigm, one that can underline the distinctiveness of Muslim theology and experience. This chapter will then explore the scope of Esack's discourse on justice. I will argue that while the genesis of his radical theology lies in the South African struggle against apartheid, it cannot be reduced to this struggle. Indeed, to do so would undermine his very conception of justice. Esack's articulation of liberation is a fully comprehensive one and cannot be confined to a specific struggle. 'Prophetic'—or a principled—solidarity, therefore, is a fundamental component of liberation and lies at the heart of a meaningful commitment to social

justice. The final section of this chapter will deal with the wider significance of Esack's hermeneutic, which, I argue, is twofold. Firstly, his pluralistic reading of the Qur'an speaks to the potential of liberation theology, as an approach that is not only critical of power relations but built on the struggle against oppression, to act as an effective, interfaith alternative to the problematic and simplistic language of religious dialogue. Secondly, Esack's hermeneutic undermines any objective, disembodied claim to 'Islam'. In so doing, he forces Muslims to raise larger questions of whose Islam is being articulated in a given context and whose interests are being served by this particular understanding. This chapter will first set the stage for discussion by providing a short history of South Africa and some biographical background on Esack.

Historical Context

Over the course of its modern history South Africa became an increasingly racist state, as a White minority came to dominate an indigenous Black majority, leading to an anti-apartheid movement that toppled the regime in 1994. The Dutch first arrived in South Africa as part of a shipping cartel in the late seventeenth century, followed by the first wave of the British in the late eighteenth century.¹ The burgeoning White settler community confiscated land from the indigenous people and created a racially stratified society. Separation—or apartheid, as it later came to be termed—between Coloureds and Whites became an integral part of the social order and was institutionalized in law.² The Urban Areas Act of 1923, for example, made it illegal for Blacks to live in the cities.³ Three hundred years of White supremacy came to a head in 1948 with the electoral victory of the National Party, which sought to institutionalize racial hierarchy in every aspect of South African life.⁴ Though a mass

¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 19.

² For useful surveys of South Africa and its history of apartheid, see Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) and William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ Bernard Magubane, 'Introduction: The Political Context', in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Vol. 1, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), 8.

⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 24.

resistance movement had existed since the early 1930s,⁵ it took on a more radicalized and militant colouring with the rise of the National Party.⁶ The anti-apartheid struggle gained great momentum over the second half of the twentieth century, despite the ruthless manner in which the state clamped down on activists, ranging from imprisonment to torture to outright murder. The internal liberation struggle was also strengthened by a formidable international solidarity movement, arguably the largest in world history,⁷ successfully calling for a global boycott of the South African state. In 1994, the regime fell and democratic elections were held, ushering in Nelson Mandela—the leader of the main resistance organization, the African National Congress—as president.

Trained in Qur'anic studies and active as a religious scholar, Esack played a leading role in the anti-apartheid struggle. He was born in 1956 in the Cape Town suburb of Wynberg,⁸ and experienced the racism of apartheid at a very early age. As a result of the Group Areas Act of 1961, Esack, his mother, and five siblings—his father had abandoned his mother when Esack was only three weeks old—were forced to move from their home, which was now rendered 'White', to the ghettos of the Cape Flats.⁹ It was here, in the Coloured township of Bonteheuwel, that Esack was raised. He recounts vividly his experience of growing up in poverty: 'Long periods passed during which we had no shoes and I recall running across frost-covered fields to school so that the frost could not really bite into my feet.'¹⁰ These formative experiences led Esack to join the anti-apartheid struggle while still a child. Indeed, he was first detained by the South African Security Police at the age of nine. Esack was awarded a scholarship when he was seventeen to undertake Islamic studies in a *madrassa* in Karachi, Pakistan. Eight years later he completed his studies, specializing in *'ulum al-Qur'an* (the Sciences of the Qur'an). After his return to South Africa, he and several friends formed the Islamic anti-apartheid group 'The Call of Islam' in 1984. The Call worked closely with the United Democratic Front (est. 1983), a mass-based coalition

⁵ Magubane, 31.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 240.

⁸ Esack (in discussion with the author) preferred that his full date of birth not be disclosed.

⁹ Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 95.

¹⁰ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 2.

of organizations that emerged in response to the National Party's proposed Tricameral Parliament giving Coloureds and Indians limited political representation while continuing to exclude the Black majority.¹¹ After the fall of apartheid, Esack travelled to Germany to study biblical hermeneutics and then to the UK, where he earned a Ph.D. in Qur'anic hermeneutics at the University of Birmingham. Having studied in the *madrasa* and the so-called secular university, Esack is reflective of a growing class of Muslim scholars schooled in both systems of knowledge.¹² He has taught at numerous seminaries and universities around the world, such as Union Theological Seminary in New York City and Harvard University. Esack returned to South Africa in 2009 and is, at the time of writing, Professor in the Study of Islam at the University of Johannesburg.

INTERPRETIVE METHOD

The Order of the Texts

Insofar as the textual sources of Islam are concerned, the Qur'an lies at the core of Esack's Islamic discourse. He focuses on the Qur'an because, as the Word of God, it is the only source of Islam that is deemed by all Muslims, irrespective of sectarian allegiance, to be completely authentic. To be sure, for Esack the Qur'an being the Word of God is not synonymous with the Qur'an being a closed corpus—a concept that will be explored later in this chapter. Conversely, the *hadith* do not have a prominent place in his Islamic discourse because they are highly contested amongst Muslims.¹³ He also finds the *hadith* difficult to negotiate due to the sheer number of prophetic reports—there are six canonical collections for Sunni Muslims and three separate collections for Shi'a Muslims—as well as the fact that the content of some of the reports are acutely misogynistic.¹⁴ This is not to imply, however, that Esack rejects *hadith* altogether, but rather that he privileges the Qur'an as the supreme

¹¹ Jill E. Kelly, "It is because of our Islam that we are there": The Call of Islam in the United Democratic Front Era', *African Historical Review* 41:1 (2009): 121.

¹² Taji-Farouki, 5.

¹³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 15.

¹⁴ Esack Interview, 2009.

textual source of religious enquiry. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the prioritization of the Qur'an—as opposed to the exclusive use of the Qur'an—is a common thematic thread running through the exegetes studied in this book. In fact, Esack makes use of prophetic reports in his work. In an article calling for compassion and solidarity with victims of AIDS, for example, he draws upon the following *hadith*, in which God, on the Day of Judgement, will address the believer who neglects the sick:

'O child of humankind, I was sick and you did not visit me!' I will say: 'My Lord! How could I visit You when You are the Sustainer of the Universe?' And God will reply: 'Did you not know that my servant so-and-so was sick and you did not bother to visit him? Did you not realize that if you had visited him, you would have found me with him?' (Tirmidhi, 2:438)¹⁵

It is telling that Esack's book *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today*—a deeply personal collection of writings—is prefaced not with a Qur'anic verse but a *hadith*, related to him by a dying friend afflicted with cancer, Shamima Shaikh. It reads, 'If the Last Hour strikes and finds you carrying a sapling to the grove for planting, go ahead and plant it.'¹⁶ Every *hadith* is comprised of a chain of narration (*sanad*), which traces itself back to Prophet Muhammad, and the substantive content of the report (*matn*)—the former historically receiving far more attention in Islamic scholarship than the latter—and it is interesting to note that the chains of narration are almost always absent in the *hadiths* that Esack cites. This is not because who narrated what, and thus the question of authenticity, is irrelevant to Esack, but rather because what the text actually says is the most important issue. Indeed, when I asked him if the *hadith* literature would figure more prominently in his work if there were to be a systematic rethinking of the *hadith* sciences—a scholarly shift from focussing on the chain of narration to the actual content of the *hadith* and how congruent this content is with the Qur'an—he promptly agreed.¹⁷

Just as Esack prioritizes the Qur'an over the *hadith* so, too, does he privilege the Qur'an over the historic intellectual tradition. Esack is at

¹⁵ Farid Esack, 'Care in a Season of AIDS: An Islamic Perspective', in *Restoring Hope: Decent Care in the Midst of HIV/AIDS*, eds. Ted Karpf, Jeffrey V. Lazarus, and Todd Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 66.

¹⁶ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, xi.

¹⁷ Esack Interview, 2009.

home with this immense corpus of knowledge, particularly the field of classical commentary, which is a direct result of his own traditional training.¹⁸ In his textbook on the Qur'an, for instance, he cites such celebrated scholars as Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923), Abu al-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), as well as modern commentators like Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992). Indeed, Esack's hermeneutical theory of 'progressive revelation'—which will be discussed shortly—builds upon the exegetical writings of the eighteenth-century Indian scholar Shah Wali Allah Dehlawi (d. 1762).¹⁹ Esack engages the tradition in a highly critical manner, however. The Qur'an reigns supreme in his thinking and where there is any conflict between the two, the Qur'an squarely takes precedence. As he succinctly sums it up, 'You trump all other arguments with the Qur'an.'²⁰

Contests over Contexts: From Scholarly Project to Liberating Exegesis

The question of context has become an increasingly salient feature of Qur'anic exegesis. This is quite a recent hermeneutical development, as classical commentators concentrated on the linguistic study of the text, such as its philology and grammar.²¹ The Pakistani Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) played a pioneering role in raising the question of historical context in commentary, engineering an entirely new method in approaching scripture: namely, the 'double movement theory'. It was historical criticism par excellence. The first 'movement', Rahman proposed, was an exhaustive examination of the immediate setting of revelation—that is, seventh-century Arabia—and thus a comprehensive study of the societal, cultural, political and economic milieu of Meccan life.²² Broader socio-moral

¹⁸ Jane D. McAuliffe, 'Reading the Qur'an with Fidelity and Freedom', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 (2005): 629.

¹⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 55.

²⁰ Esack Interview, 2009.

²¹ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 117.

²² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: The Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

objectives would be extracted from this classical context and then, in the second movement, these general Islamic principles would be applied to the specificities of the present.²³ An interesting aspect of this interpretive strategy is that the *'ulama* (the traditionally trained and historic interpreters of the faith) and lay experts in fields of knowledge outside Islam like sociology, law, history and philosophy would have to work together in order to see both movements through.²⁴ This was a shared scholarly project, therefore, between lay and learned. Islamic scholars have built on this notion of a shared *ijtihad*, or critical intellectual enquiry. The Muslim reformist Tariq Ramadan, for example, has classified scholars into two groups: *'ulama al-nusus* ('text scholars'), denoting specialists in Islam, and *'ulama al-waqi'* ('context scholars'), or those who are experts in other fields of learning.²⁵ And it is through the collaboration of both, Ramadan argues, that an Islam that speaks to the challenges of modernity can be articulated.

Esack's principal interest is not the classical context, however, but the immediate present. The historical criticism of Rahman denotes a certain distance, a rift between the average, contemporary reader and the Qur'anic text. The underlying assumption of his scholarly project is that the Qur'an, as a historical document, had a primary audience and that this was the Prophet's community in seventh-century Arabia. With the passing of generations, then, distance is inevitably created between the initial act of revelation and the present. The following description of the text by the Islamic scholar Bruce Lawrence, clearly conditioned by the logic of historical criticism, encapsulates this assumption:

The Qur'an as *written* in Arabic is less than the revelation given to Muhammad; it is a second-order revelation. The Qur'an written, then *translated* from Arabic into English, becomes a third-order revelation. Distance from the source handicaps us, yet we can still learn about Islam by engaging with the Qur'an, even as a written text, translated from Arabic into English.²⁶ (My italics)

²³ Ibid, 7.

²⁴ Abdullah Saeed, 'Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur'an', in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58.

²⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121.

²⁶ Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), 8.

The subtext here is that the most authentic encounter with the text is as an essentially oral, Arabic discourse. There exists an enduring and inherent hermeneutical gap, rooted in time, which cannot be bridged. But where a connection can be made, however limited it may be, is through the mediation of the immediate audience of the text: the very first generation of Muslims to whom God revealed the Word. And it is precisely because the Qur'an, Esack interjects, is not speaking primarily to the community of Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia but to all of humanity,²⁷ that his key interest is the contemporary context of the reader. This is not to say that Esack ignores the conditions of seventh-century Arabian life. In fact, he devotes the second chapter of his textbook on the Qur'an, entitled *The Word Enters the World*, to this topic, examining the prior circumstances and immediate social context of revelation.²⁸ Furthermore, because the Qur'an and its interpretation cannot be stripped of time and locale, and because the Qur'an was undoubtedly revealed in a particular historical moment, that historical moment must always, to some degree, be engaged.²⁹ Rather, my point is that the chief, the overarching framework of Esack's hermeneutic is the here and now—not late antiquity—and that he consciously privileges the former over the latter.

It is worthwhile noting that Esack's emphasis on the present bears a striking resemblance to Islamist readings. Leading Islamist thinkers, such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and the Pakistani Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979), urged ordinary Muslims to read the Qur'an themselves—and, therefore, to bypass the accumulated scholarly commentary on the text—arguing that the Qur'an spoke directly to the believers, addressing their immediate circumstances and struggles.³⁰ The following is an excerpt from a set of guidelines on how to read the Qur'an by Khurram Murad, a member of the Jama'at-i Islami—the most influential Islamist movement in South Asia—and a student of Mawdudi:

Be aware that you are always in Allah's presence.
Feel, as though you hear the Qur'an from Allah.

²⁷ Farid Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia,' in *What Men Owe Women: Men's Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 195.

²⁸ Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 56.

²⁹ Farid Esack, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects', *The Muslim World* 83:2 (1993): 119.

³⁰ McAuliffe, 'Reading the Qur'an with Fidelity and Freedom', 623.

Feel, as though the Qur'an addresses you directly . . .
 Consider each *aya* [verse] as relevant today, not as a thing
 of the past . . .
 Reflect deeply upon what you read . . .
 Take each passage of the revelation as addressed to you.³¹

In other words, scripture does not speak through the mediation of a primary audience (classical Arabia) to a secondary audience (the present). Rather, a direct hermeneutical link is forged between God and the faithful, transcending time and space. Another common characteristic between Esack's readings and those of Islamists, then, is their markedly lay character. South African Muslims engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle routinely came together in religious circles (*halaqat*) to reflect collectively on a translation of the Qur'an, asking one another what they felt the various verses meant and how these verses spoke to their experiences.³² Such communitarian exegesis and direct access to the Qur'anic text—a hallmark of Islamist interpretation—stands in stark contrast to the elite manner in which sacred authority operated historically in Muslim societies, wherein the *'ulama* functioned as the main arbiters of Islam.³³ Unsurprisingly, these reading practices have been met with much antagonism by the *'ulama*, who have been quick to dismiss such readings as skewed, as lacking requisite exegetical skills. According to the *'ulama*, without the guidance of a scholar well versed in the Qur'an and its interpretation, a lay reader will go astray.³⁴ And it is this scholarly claim to *own* the Qur'an that violates, for Esack, the profoundly universal spirit of the text. In our interview, he described

³¹ Khurram Murad, as quoted in Ahmad von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 2007), 179.

³² Esack Interview, 2009. The founders of the Call of Islam (Esack included) were former, disillusioned members of the Islamist-inspired Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), breaking away from the latter due to a number of ideological reasons. See Kelly, 128. The parallels that exist between Esack's and Islamist hermeneutics, therefore, are not a coincidence. For a historical analysis of how Islamism (and humanism) influenced South African Muslim discourse, see Matthew Palombo, 'The Emergence of Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44 (2014): 28–61.

³³ Taji-Farouki, 12.

³⁴ Farid Esack, 'Contemporary Religious Thought in South Africa and the Emergence of Qur'anic Hermeneutical Notions', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2:2 (1991): 210–11.

the *'ulama's* deep-seated reservations about direct access to the Qur'an as follows:

I think it has something to do with control. You have all of these barricades, all these walls, and they are not just walls. All these walls, all of these barricades have gatekeepers. And the gatekeepers derive their own meaning from their role as controllers or managers of the sacred. So once you say that, look, I want to parachute into the centre and seek an audience with the centre, all these people who have made their livings and have derived meanings from being interlocutors with the centre, you are threatening them. So they have sacralised all these borders, all these boundaries and so on, but it is also really about their authority. They will say we want to protect the centre.³⁵

This points to another problem in Rahman's approach: that it is an essentially elitist enterprise. For if the classical context is to be hermeneutically positioned between the Creator and the contemporary reader then so, too, must religious authority be delegated to those very few people, traditionally trained or otherwise, who can partake in this scholarly project.

In Esack's reading of the Qur'an through the lens of the present, he consciously privileges the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. The following guideline from Murad's essay on how to approach the text betrays a key difference between the readings of Esack and contemporary Islamists: 'Read the Qur'an with a mind free from bias and preconceived ideas, as otherwise you will read your own notions into the book.'³⁶ There is no acknowledgement, therefore, that the reader brings a *pretext*, conditioned by class, religion, ethnicity, gender, time, and place, among other factors, to the text and that this contextual baggage constitutes an inescapable reality of reading. This is not to imply, however, that classical Islamic scholars acknowledged their own biases when approaching scripture. Within traditional exegesis—a dense body of knowledge built on the continuous accumulation of commentary over the generations—interpretations that lay outside the fold of orthodoxy were hastily consigned to the categorical dustbin of *tafsir bi'l-ra'y*, or 'commentary by opinion'.³⁷ In contrast to this lack of reflexivity, Esack is keenly aware that he

³⁵ Esack Interview, 2009.

³⁶ Murad, as quoted in von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*, 180.

³⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 75.

cannot approach the Qur'an as a disembodied figure, appreciating that he brings to the text limited horizons rooted in his own reality.³⁸ And it is through this acknowledgement that all readings are contextual that he chooses to favour a specific context: that of the oppressed. The principal subjects of Esack's interpretation are not the powerful and the affluent, but the marginalized (*al-aradhil*) and the downtrodden (*al-mustad'afun*).³⁹ It is important to clarify here that he is not interested in merely including the perspective of the marginalized into a growing pool of existing accounts. Esack's hermeneutic is not one in which the discourses of the powerful and the powerless weigh in side-by-side. Instead, he privileges the vantage point, the experiences of the oppressed.⁴⁰

But Esack does not read from the perspective of the oppressed as a neutral and disinterested observer. Rather, he approaches the text as an ally actively engaged in struggle with the oppressed against their oppressor. Esack's understanding of Islam is one that emerges in the heat of resistance, for 'understanding is viewed as the product of engagement for justice combined with reflection'.⁴¹ *Praxis*—the idea that the struggle against oppression ought to form the framework through which theology emerges⁴²—is a cornerstone of his exegesis. And it is precisely this overtly political aspect of Esack's reading that makes his hermeneutic a hermeneutic of liberation. The pioneering Christian liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez, sums up the difference between liberating and conventional exegesis:

the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a new way to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology.⁴³ (*My italics*)

Theology and struggle, therefore, are inextricably interwoven into a dialectical paradigm of action, religious reflection, and renewed action—a mode of reading sanctioned, Esack argues, by the very

³⁸ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 192.

³⁹ Farid Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 81.

⁴⁰ Esack Interview, 2009.

⁴¹ Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', 80.

⁴² Christopher Rowland ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xix.

⁴³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 15.

nature of the Qur'an's revelation. For the text never presented itself as a coherent and closed scripture, but as 'a revealed discourse unfolding in response to the requirements of a society over a period of twenty-three years (Q. 17:82; 17:106)'.⁴⁴ God was thoroughly immersed in the struggles of the early Muslim community, manifesting the divine presence, through the act of revelation, in response to various situations as they emerged. In other words, the seemingly insulated categories of text and context were collapsed into a hermeneutical circle of liberation: struggle, followed by revelation and introspection, followed by further struggle.⁴⁵ Hence, the Qur'an's revelation reflects a deity who engages history and whose discourse is shaped by that history, intervening in and conversing with the affairs of humankind. Esack calls this Qur'anic commitment to *praxis* 'progressive revelation'—a form of scriptural engagement that characterized the lives of the first Muslims. And it is because the text speaks to all times and places that the principle of progressive revelation, too, is universal. To be sure, Esack clarifies that the process of *revelation* was completed with Muhammad as the Final Messenger and Seal of the Prophets—a key Muslim belief—and so when Esack refers to interacting with the Qur'an today through *praxis* he is referring to the process of *understanding*.⁴⁶ Through this commitment to *praxis*, the Qur'an becomes alive and speaks in a liberating way to every generation of Muslims, who draw their own distinctive meanings and inspiration from the text.⁴⁷

It is misleading and simplistic to dismiss interpretations rooted in *praxis* as being politicized or contextual, for all readings are inescapably shaped by context and reflect vested political interests. Many contemporary Islamic scholars, traditional or otherwise, have hastily dismissed what they have deemed as politicized readings of Islam. Rahman is a compelling case in point. Operating on the assumption

⁴⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 53.

⁴⁵ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 3.

⁴⁶ Esack, 'Contemporary Religious Thought in South Africa and the Emergence of Qur'anic Hermeneutical Notions', 222. While Esack focuses on the progressive nature of the Qur'an's revelation in seventh-century Arabia when arguing for a *praxis*-based hermeneutical precedent in Islam, he also points to Q. 29:69, which reads: 'To those who strive for Us, We will surely guide them to our ways, and indeed God is with the doers of good.' To quote Esack's reflection on Q. 29:69: 'This verse implies a dialectical process whereby struggle informs guidance as much as guidance informs struggle.' See *ibid.*, 221.

⁴⁷ Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 206.

that there exists a pristine, apolitical state of being, Rahman criticized the mixing of religion and politics which, he argued, had led to disastrous consequences for Islamic thought.⁴⁸ What is even more problematic in Rahman's discourse is that while he was reluctant to partake in political activity, justice remained a core component of his exegesis, reiterating time and again that a key objective of scripture was the attainment of a socially just order.⁴⁹ This incongruence between Rahman's emphasis on Qur'anic justice on the one hand and his criticism of the mixing of religion and politics on the other—or, to put it another way, speaking of justice in purely abstract terms and thus divorced from specificity, from concrete contexts of oppression—raises larger ethical questions about those who preach justice but who are not, at the same time, engaged in struggle. The refusal to locate oneself within a decidedly political context is not restricted to Rahman, however. During the anti-apartheid movement the *'ulama*, many of whom chose to remain silent and complicit in the face of oppression, kept an arm's length from Muslim youth in confrontation with the state, dismissing them as having radicalized and politicized Islam.⁵⁰ Not only are detachment and neutrality hermeneutical impossibilities, but, within a context of manifest injustice, 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.⁵¹

Indeed, within the expressly politicized discourse of liberation theology, *praxis* is a central text that is to be read alongside the Qur'anic text. Most Islamic reformists who have sought to reread scripture in light of contemporary circumstances have, in spite of their differing methods, searched for the right way to expound the text. Rahman, for instance, was pre-occupied with finding the 'correct method' of interpreting the Qur'an, and this objective lay at the heart of his pioneering scholarship.⁵² His interest in unearthing the proper methodology of Qur'anic exegesis, culminating in the double

⁴⁸ Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 53.

⁴⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis, US: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), 37.

⁵⁰ Farid Esack, 'Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice', *Third World Quarterly* 10 (1988): 478.

⁵¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 7.

⁵² Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 1.

movement theory, was premised on the deep-seated conviction that there exist concrete and unchanging principles within the text. The trick was simply to discern the universals from the particulars. And it is here that a fundamental divergence emerges between Rahman and Esack, for *whose* understanding of the universal gets universalized? As Esack exclaims: 'It's not just: Oh, the Qur'an must be studied in its context. Whose context?'⁵³ The context and vantage point of the slave is radically different from that of the slave-master—a lived experience that will inevitably shape the type of exegesis that emerges. Thus, within a theology of liberation, lived realities of inequality and oppression constitute the interpretive point of departure, reflecting an embodied text ('life') that is as significant as the written text ('scripture').⁵⁴ Because context is never universal or stable, and because context is hermeneutically on a par with scripture, truth—what Rahman calls *the* underlying principles of the Qur'an—can never be singular and absolute, timeless and disembodied. Rather, through the process of *praxis* truth manifests itself, in complex and manifold ways, as an ever-unfolding discourse to those immersed in struggle.⁵⁵

ISLAM AND THE TASK OF LIBERATION

On Divine Justice

Justice is a crucial part of the Qur'anic message. In fact, it constitutes such an important component of the Qur'anic worldview that, Esack reminds us, justice is one of the reasons as to why God created the universe (Q. 45:22):⁵⁶ so that every human being, via the Day of Reckoning, will receive exactly what s/he sows and thus no soul shall be oppressed. Justice, therefore, is a distinctly divine quality. God can never act unjustly. This is the natural state of the universe and humankind is obligated to act in a fair, equitable manner with others and to avoid partaking in oppression, as this would run

⁵³ Esack Interview, 2009.

⁵⁴ Rowland, 7–8.

⁵⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 111.

⁵⁶ Farid Esack, *But Musa Went to Fir-aun! A Compilation of Questions and Answers about the Role of Muslims in the South African Struggle for Liberation* (Maitland, South Africa: Call of Islam, 1989), 77.

contrary to the nature of God.⁵⁷ Moreover, humankind is commanded to establish an enduring, ethically based order on Earth,⁵⁸ thereby mirroring the divine justice of the Heavens. Action is thus located at the very heart of Islamic theology, for true faith is belief wedded to action. The Arabic word for faith in the Qur'an—*iman*—entails not only believing in God, but also observing righteous conduct, such as treating others in a just manner, giving charity and performing prayers.⁵⁹ The overwhelming emphasis on action in Esack's Islamic discourse—as we have just seen with regard to *praxis*—bears remarkable resemblance, yet again, to Islamist approaches to the text, in which Qur'anic reading is not an abstract, intellectual exercise but a solemn act of submission, of translating the Qur'an's teachings into one's daily life. Indeed, it is only through action, through putting the divine word into practice, that the text's meaning is unlocked to the reader. As Murad, the Islamist writer whom we met earlier, cautions: 'Do not forget that the real key to understanding the Qur'an is the practical application of its meaning.'⁶⁰

The Qur'an does not only mandate the believers to act justly, argues Esack, but expresses a preferential option for the oppressed and explicitly sides with them. Just as justice is a core theme, so is its antithesis: oppression (*zulm*), a ubiquitous term in the Qur'an. In fact, the linguistic root of *zulm* appears in various forms on almost every page of the text.⁶¹ Upon making a clear distinction between the opposing states of justice and oppression, Esack writes, the Qur'an takes an unqualified stance with those who are being wronged—the downtrodden (*al-mustad'afun*)—over those responsible for such oppression (*al-mustakbirun*) and who have therefore transgressed the bounds of just conduct (Q. 7:136–137; 28:5).⁶² It is important to note here that within a theology of liberation, God does not side with those who are oppressed but who, nonetheless, have faith and do righteous works. Rather, divine solidarity with the oppressed is unconditional, unqualified: God stands with the downtrodden

⁵⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 18.

⁵⁸ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 37.

⁵⁹ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 37.

⁶⁰ Murad, as quoted in von Denffer, 180.

⁶¹ Izutsu, 164.

⁶² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 98.

precisely because they have been wronged and exploited.⁶³ The question of their belief or righteousness is irrelevant. This notion of God as exerting a preferential option for the oppressed became common currency amongst South African Muslims during the anti-apartheid struggle. Specifically, verses five and six of *Surat al-Qasas* (The Chapter of the Story; Chapter 28) became the most significant Qur'anic passages quoted time and again by activist Muslims of all ideological strands.⁶⁴ Referring to the ancient Israelites suffering under the yoke of Pharaoh's oppression, the verses read:

It is Our Will to bestow Our grace upon the downtrodden of the Earth, and to make them the leaders and to make them the inheritors of the Earth. And to establish them securely on the Earth, and to let Pharaoh and Haman and their hosts experience through them (the Children of Israel) the very thing against which they sought to protect themselves.

The commitment of God to the oppressed, then, is sacralised in a solemn covenant: that injustice, soon, will be dismantled through a radical reconfiguration of the existing status quo, wherein those who were at the very bottom of society will inherit the Earth.⁶⁵

Esack and the Exodus: A Critique and a Proposal

Indeed, the Exodus is the central paradigm in Esack's liberation theology—an aspect of his Qur'anic hermeneutic that bears a striking similarity to Christian liberation theology. The Exodus is an exemplary model of interfaith solidarity with the oppressed, Esack argues, for it not only reflects a deity who sided with the enslaved Israelites against Pharaoh, but did so in spite of the Israelites' constant displays of disbelief (Q. 2:51; 2:55; 26:67), refusing to leave their side until they had reached the Promised Land.⁶⁶ God stood with the faithless

⁶³ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 48.

⁶⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 101. Q. 2:193 and 4:75—both calling on believers to struggle against oppression—also became popular Qur'anic passages in South African anti-apartheid Muslim circles. See Palombo, 44.

⁶⁵ Esack is not the only Muslim, of course, to have been inspired by the story of Moses and the Israelites. For an analysis of how Sayyid Qutb interprets this story, see Anthony H. Johns, 'Let my people go! Sayyid Qutb and the Vocation of Moses', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1:2 (1990): 143–70.

⁶⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 195–6.

Israelites, then, because they were being oppressed.⁶⁷ Yet as compelling as the Exodus is as a pluralistic model of liberation, it is important to note that Christian liberation theology, too, builds heavily on the Exodus experience. In addition to drawing great inspiration from the example of Jesus Christ as the struggle for justice personified,⁶⁸ Gutiérrez—a founding figure of Latin American liberation theology whom we mentioned earlier—drew extensively upon the Exodus when putting to paper his pioneering tract on liberation theology in the 1960s. In fact, according to Gutiérrez, the Exodus represented a ‘paradigmatic’ event in biblical history, constituting a liberating hermeneutical lens with which to reinterpret the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁹ In other words, when reading Esack in light of Christian liberation theology, one wonders how organic an Islamic theology of liberation built upon the Exodus experience truly is? This is not to imply that the Exodus is an exclusively biblical event and, as such, Islamically inauthentic. On the contrary, the Qur'an lays a powerful claim over all the Abrahamic prophets, embracing them as part and parcel of the monotheistic call.⁷⁰ In fact, Moses is the most mentioned prophet in the text, his name surfacing approximately 140 times.⁷¹

Rather, my argument is that because of the power differential that exists between Christianity and Islam, it is necessary to foreground the specificity of Islam in order to counter a universalizing Christian framework. As a result of over 200 years of world dominance through colonialism and imperialism, Europe and North America have come to occupy very different positions within the global power structure than the rest of the world. This disparity, in turn, has had tremendous consequences in terms of modern knowledge production. As the South Asian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, sums it up:

⁶⁷ The faithlessness of the Israelites is further evidenced, as Esack points out, by Q. 10:83, which states that only a small group of them (*dhurriyyatun*) believed in the God of Moses. See *ibid.* In a separate study, it is worth noting, Esack has explored the complex manner in which Jews are represented in the Qur'an, underlining a plurality of Qur'anic narratives and thereby challenging mainstream Muslim assumptions that the Jews have incurred divine wrath. See Farid Esack, “The Portrayal of Jews and the Possibilities for Their Salvation in the Qur'an,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez, 35.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 158–9.

⁷⁰ Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 196.

⁷¹ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 154.

insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, ‘history’ as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, ‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that would be called ‘the history of Europe.’⁷²

In other words, Europe has become universalized as an intellectual frame of reference. Or, to put it another way, non-European histories have been stripped of their specificities, becoming homogenized in their incorporation as backward into a grand narrative defined by (an idealized reading of) European historical experience. There is, therefore, an intellectual culture of inequality. Asian and African historians are often expected, for example, to refer to the histories of Europe and North America while European and North American historians seldom feel the need to cite the histories of Asia and Africa.⁷³ And because Christianity in general, and the figures, stories, and imageries of the Bible in particular, were—and to varying degrees remain—a major source of European culture,⁷⁴ the language and experience of (Western) Christianity, too, has become universalized.⁷⁵ This phenomenon is particularly acute in the modern academic discipline of Religion, also known as Theology, which originated in Catholic and Protestant circles.⁷⁶ Within the field of Religion, students of Islam are expected to be familiar with Christianity, Christian debates, and the Bible in a way that is rarely reciprocated by their Christian counterparts. Indeed, the very terms of discourse reflect a history rooted in a distinctly Christian past. For instance, the idea of religious tolerance, which is routinely used nowadays to refer to mutual understanding

⁷² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

⁷³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.

⁷⁴ John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100.

⁷⁵ To be sure, the power differential between Islam and Christianity is not necessarily material, but rather epistemic. This is particularly true in the context of liberation theology, since Latin America has been the continental wellspring of Christian liberation theology. Radical exegesis of the Bible, then, has emerged from a region of the world that has been as economically exploited as Africa and Asia.

⁷⁶ Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 47.

between different faith traditions, emerged in the aftermath of Europe's wars of religion, seeking to underline the plurality of paths *within* Christianity.⁷⁷ In other words, just as non-European historians need to struggle against the grain of the European experience as an underlying, universalizing tendency in the discipline of History, so must non-Christian theologians struggle against the epistemic might of the Christian experience as a homogenizing force in Religion. And it is in this pursuit to craft an Islamic theology of liberation that becomes more than simply a variation on a master narrative called Christianity, I argue, that historical and theological difference—that is, the specificity of Islam and Muslim experiences—ought to be foregrounded.⁷⁸

An alternative point of departure that may be more promising in conceptualizing an Islamic liberation theology that explicitly embraces this question of difference is that of *tawhid*—or the Divine Unity (the absolute Oneness) of God—and the ensuing social, economic, and political implications of this central Islamic belief. This liberating idea that the Oneness of a just God must be paralleled by the Oneness of a single humanity, and thus that anything that divides the creation into hierarchies violates the divine unity of the Creator, was first articulated amongst Islamic radicals during the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9, in particular the Mujahidin-i Khalq.⁷⁹ Combining Islamic and Marxist teachings, the Mujahidin-i Khalq was a resistance group committed to armed struggle against the Shah's regime.⁸⁰ Ali Shari'ati (d. 1977)—a leading revolutionary figure and intellectual in Iran—became a chief exponent of the sociopolitical implications of *tawhid*. As a divine concept built on the intrinsic unity of all beings, argued Shari'ati, *tawhid* cannot accept any

⁷⁷ Ibid, 39–43.

⁷⁸ For a more extensive exposition of this critique, see Shadaab Rahemtulla, 'Im Schatten des Christentums? Die Herausforderung islamischer Befreiungstheologie' [In the Shadow of Christianity? The Challenge of an Islamic Liberation Theology], in *Gott und Befreiung. Befreiungstheologische Konzepte in Islam und Christentum* [God and Liberation: Concepts of Liberation Theology in Islam and Christianity], eds. Klaus von Stosch and Muna Tatari (Paderborn, Germany: Schöningh, 2012).

⁷⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 83.

⁸⁰ The Mujahidin emerged in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the religious faction of the wider national struggle. Its members were initially part of the Freedom Movement of Iran, which underscored the compatibility between Shi'a Islam and modernity, and was thus largely liberal in scope. However, state suppression, especially in 1963, radicalized segments of the Freedom Movement and the origins of the Mujahidin are to be found in this transformation. See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 220–2.

'contradictions', such as those of economic, social, legal, geographical or racial hierarchy.⁸¹ Whereas Shari'ati and the Mujahidin-i Khalq approached *tawhid* primarily from the perspective of class, two decades later gender activists would draw on *tawhid* extensively when critiquing patriarchy and male privilege. As we shall see in the following chapters on Wadud and Barlas, Islamic monotheism is a core paradigm in women's gender egalitarian readings of the Qur'an. This doctrine, therefore, has been invoked increasingly as a guiding hermeneutical principle in liberationist expositions of Islam.

Two points of clarification are in order here. Firstly, I do not wish to imply that *tawhid* is entirely absent from Esack's hermeneutic. In weaving together an Islamic theology of liberation, he redefines, in light of his own experience and struggles against apartheid, a number of Qur'anic concepts, such as *al-mustad'afun fi al-ard* ('the oppressed on the Earth'), *jihad* ('struggle and praxis'), *al-nas* ('the people', that is, in the popular sense of the word), *taqwa* ('integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God'), and *tawhid* ('divine unity').⁸² And in his reading of *tawhid*, Esack echoes the earlier arguments of Shari'ati by unpacking the sociopolitical implications of this key tenet. But Esack consigns *tawhid* to the back of his theology and devotes far more attention to the Exodus, despite the fact that the language of *tawhid* became widely circulated amongst South African Muslims during the anti-apartheid struggle. As he himself notes, Islamic activists used terms like 'tawhidi society' and 'the sociological implications of tawhid' in their demands for a qualitatively different order, condemning apartheid as a form of *shirk*—the cardinal sin of associating partners with God and, thus, the theological foil of *tawhid*—since apartheid undermined the unity of God by dividing humanity into unequal racial camps.⁸³

Secondly, I do not mean to suggest that contemporary Muslim thinkers have drawn upon *tawhid* in solely progressive terms. Consider the Wahhabi movement or, as they refer to themselves, the *muwahhidun* (literally, the monotheists). *Tawhid* was a central aspect of the revivalist discourse of the Najd-based scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792). Calling for a return to the Qur'an and

⁸¹ Ali Shari'ati, 'On the Sociology of Islam: The World-View of Tawhid', in *Introduction to Islam: A Reader*, ed. Amina Wadud (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2007), 3.

⁸² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 83.

⁸³ Ibid, 91–2.

sunna, he and his followers maintained that Islam needed to be cleansed from so-called deviant beliefs and practices—especially Sufi Islam and its emphasis on saintly veneration, as well as heterodox sects like Shi'a Islam—which, they claimed, were guilty of *shirk*.⁸⁴ Wahhabism thus reflects a sharply puritan, literalist approach to Islam, fixated on dogma and ritual practice and with little interest in questions of social justice. The political thought of Mawdudi is another example of a non-progressive exegesis of *tawhid*. Islamic monotheism was central for Mawdudi, and his reflections would have a lasting impact on Qutb. For Mawdudi, to accept *tawhid* is to acknowledge the 'sovereignty of God' with all its political and legal consequences, namely, that 'God alone is the source of the law, all people must submit to this law, and the sole mandate of the Islamic state is to implement this law.'⁸⁵ *Tawhid*, then, has become an increasingly prominent theme in contemporary Islamic thought, and progressives like Shari'ati, Wadud, and Barlas are a part of this broader trend while, at the same time, departing from it by reinterpreting monotheism in significant and unique ways.⁸⁶

What makes *tawhid* so provocative as a point of departure for a liberating Islamic theology is that it not only weds the struggle for justice to the single most important tenet in Islam, but also foregrounds the specificity of Muslim theology. Christ stands at the centre of Christianity in general,⁸⁷ and of Christian liberation theology in particular,⁸⁸ and the nature of the biblical text mirrors the distinctiveness of this theology. Indeed, in traditional Christianity it is not the Bible that is considered to be the Word of God but Christ himself.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ There is a dearth of serious scholarship (as opposed to sensationalist writings) on the history and politics of Wahhabism. For two refreshingly sober and nuanced accounts, see David D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) and Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival to Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁵ Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Q. Zaman eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 81. To clarify, here I am quoting Euben and Zaman.

⁸⁶ I am grateful to James McDougall for this insight.

⁸⁷ Christopher Rowland and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation in the Present Time* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 21.

⁸⁸ Boff and Boff, 4.

⁸⁹ This is not the case, of course, for many conservative Protestant Christians, who view the Bible as God's Word, as 'God-breathed', and hence holding a similar ontological status as the Qur'an for Muslims.

The Bible represents a collection of texts, produced by individuals and communities, which reflect upon the example of Jesus and, as a sustained reflection, can never fully capture him, since the Son of God cannot be confined to a text. The roles of Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'anic text within the Islamic worldview, on the other hand, are markedly different. The Prophet of Islam holds no comparable position to the Christ of Christianity for, according to Muslims, Muhammad was a mortal man whose vocation was to deliver a divine message. The closest Islamic equivalent to the Christian Jesus is the Qur'an,⁹⁰ which is understood as the actual Speech of God. And it is precisely because Muslims perceive the Qur'an as being the Word that it is God, alone, who stands at the heart of the Islamic faith. The intrinsic value of *tawhid* as the conceptual framework for radical thought and action, then, is that it acknowledges the theological distinctiveness of Islam as a vigorously monotheistic religion. As Esack himself affirms, it is God and the belief in this single deity that comprises the crux of the Qur'anic call, receiving far more attention than any other topic in the text.⁹¹

Towards a Comprehensive Justice: Prophetic Solidarity

A crucial aspect of Esack's understanding of justice is its comprehensive character. Esack is usually associated with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. As important as this struggle was for Esack, however, his Islamic liberation theology cannot be reduced to it because, as a Coloured South African, he had vested interests in seeing the struggle through. As integral as the commitment to the liberation of one's own oppressed social, religious or racial group is, warns Esack, a genuine commitment to morality lies in being moved not by one's own suffering but by the suffering of others.⁹² This is the litmus test of the ethical, empathetic human being. Justice must be comprehensive—encompassing racial, class, and gender equality—and is the right of all of humanity, not a specific subsection of it. Esack's sense of liberation, then, is utterly universal. The South African struggle acted as a critical point of departure for this

⁹⁰ Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 16.

⁹¹ Ibid, 147.

⁹² Farid Esack, 'Open Letter', *Jewish Peace News* (2009), available at: <http://jewishpeaceneeds.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/farid-esacks-open-letter-is-inscribed.html> accessed 3 September 2012.

understanding. His experience of growing up under apartheid not only allowed him, when travelling to Pakistan for Islamic training, to make connections with the discrimination of women in Muslim-majority societies,⁹³ but also the second-class status of Pakistani Christians.⁹⁴ It is due to the complexity, the multilayered basis of oppression that Esack's definition of liberation is equally complex and layered, entailing 'the freedom of all people from all those laws, social norms and economic practices that militate against them developing their potential to be fully human.'⁹⁵

Because Esack's understanding of justice is universal, solidarity—what he calls 'prophetic Islam'—features prominently in his liberationist discourse. Simply translated, prophetic Islam is a *principled* practice of solidarity, whereby a Muslim stands with the oppressed while at the same time acknowledging that this analytical category—'the oppressed'—is not fixed or timeless but conditioned, and repeatedly reconditioned, by an ever-changing context, denoting different communities and individuals in different times and places.⁹⁶ Esack foregrounds this contextually contingent practice of solidarity since he has witnessed, at first hand, how an oppressed group can, with the passage of time, actually become the oppressing party: namely, the Afrikaners of South Africa. Initially the victims of the British, who placed them in concentration camps and destroyed almost a sixth of their population, the Afrikaners went on to consolidate their colonization of indigenous Black land, erecting a deeply authoritarian and White-supremacist state.⁹⁷ The case of European Jewry is another compelling example: the very people who experienced the horrors of the Nazi holocaust became staunch supporters of Israel—a settler-colonial state built on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and that

⁹³ Farid Esack, 'Religio-Cultural Diversity: For What and With Whom? Muslim Reflections from a Post-Apartheid South Africa in the Throes of Globalization', in *Cultural Diversity in Islam*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003), 167.

⁹⁴ Michael Wolfe ed., *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim their Faith* (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 2004), 15.

⁹⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, xi.

⁹⁶ Farid Esack, 'The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies: Challenges for the Progressive Muslim Intellectual', in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, not Static*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said, Mohammad Abu-Nimr, and Meena Sharify-Funk (London: Routledge, 2006), 125.

⁹⁷ Esack, 'Open Letter'.

continues to occupy Palestinian land illegally.⁹⁸ A prophetic solidarity, therefore, is about being vigilant of the inherently fluid and dynamic nature of injustice. As Esack puts it:

While I can, for example, be in solidarity with a male black worker in respect of the exploitation that he experiences at work, I ought to be in solidarity with his abused wife in the home context. While I can be in solidarity with the Muslim male who is being racially profiled at airports, I can be in solidarity with the marginalized Christian who lives in the same Muslim country that the Muslim male comes from.⁹⁹

In other words, by avoiding sweeping affiliation with abstract, disembodied communities—Muslims or Blacks or workers—and instead constantly defining and redefining the categories of oppressor and oppressed within a complex, ever-changing web of power relations, the progressive Muslim intellectual is able to pre-empt the reproduction of the very inequality that s/he seeks to critique. Prophetic Islam and the type of principled solidarity that it espouses, then, is built on a keen sense of *vision*: that whatever struggle one may be engaged in at the moment, the ultimate objective is the establishment of a genuinely inclusive social order wherein all people are equal.¹⁰⁰

Fitra, or human nature, is an interesting aspect of Esack's discourse on solidarity with the oppressed. Muslims often describe Islam as *din al-fitra*. Departing from mainstream Muslim understandings of *din al-fitra*, which views Islam as the natural religion of humankind, thereby treating other religions as aberrations,¹⁰¹ Esack understands Islam's description as *din al-fitra* as being a religion based on the natural state of humankind,¹⁰² that is, on one's humanity. The Islamic scholars Kecia Ali and Oliver Leaman have a similar rendering of *fitra*, which they describe as the innate inclination of every human

⁹⁸ The underlying purpose behind Esack's reflection on the Afrikaner experience and their transition from oppressed to oppressor is to make a wider analogy between apartheid South Africa and the state of Israel, as this reflection commences an open letter that Esack wrote to the Palestinians in solidarity with their national struggle (see *ibid.*). The letter will be discussed shortly.

⁹⁹ Esack, 'The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies', 125.

¹⁰⁰ Esack Interview, 2009.

¹⁰¹ Farid Esack, 'Muslims Engaging the Other and the Humanum', in *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*, ed. Abdullahi A. An-Na'im (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 52.

¹⁰² Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 189.

being, from the beginning of time when God fashioned Adam, to yearn for goodness.¹⁰³ For Esack, the presence and persistence of injustice constitute a threat to this natural state of being and thus one's humanity is fundamentally compromised if one does not act.¹⁰⁴ Esack, therefore, has an acutely communitarian sense of selfhood, for his *fitra* is wedded to the well-being of those around him and by standing for others he is, in fact, standing for himself. The idea that the liberation of the Self is intrinsically tied to the liberation of the Other—that *I* am lacking because *you* are suffering—has deep roots in Islam. The *zaka*, or annual almsgiving, is one of the five pillars of the faith. Yet the actual definition of *zaka* is neither almsgiving nor charity. Literally, *zaka* means 'purification', referring to the idea that when a Muslim gives a portion of her/his accrued wealth to the needy, the remaining amount is purified in the eyes of God.¹⁰⁵ The concept of *fitra* is especially salient to solidarity and activism because it provides an alternative, theoretical framework to the patronizing discourse of benevolence and charity. Standing in solidarity with others, through the framework of *fitra*, is not about doing a favour to the less fortunate, for the favour, by affirming one's own humanity through the act of standing, is done to oneself. As Esack describes it within the context of gender justice:

This is not a favour that I am doing for women. I have often used the analogy that if I am holding someone down, I am not free to be myself. I can't grow, I can't enjoy the sun, I just can't *be*.¹⁰⁶

It is important to appreciate the significance of this point, as it raises crucial questions concerning the complex power dynamics at play in solidarity work. Is a White American activist's humanity fully intact if s/he, whilst standing in solidarity with Black Americans, reproduces racial inequality by speaking over the voices of the very people that s/he is standing with? Is a male feminist's humanity wholly intact if he, when articulating an anti-patriarchal platform, does so with a voice louder than the very women that he is in solidarity with? By acknowledging one's own complicity in complex systems of oppression, the concept of *fitra* forcefully shifts the battleground of liberation from

¹⁰³ Kecia Ali and Oliver Leaman, *Islam: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2008), 40.

¹⁰⁴ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 79.

¹⁰⁵ Ali and Leaman, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Esack Interview, 2009.

the Other to the Self. In so doing, it undercuts the consignment of the oppressed to the role of passive objects—that are to be pitied and patronized through benevolent acts of charity—encouraging, in its stead, reflexivity and humility on the part of those in solidarity with the oppressed.

Esack has been extensively involved in solidarity work, such as supporting the Palestinian cause and working with South African Muslims who have HIV/AIDS.¹⁰⁷ He has visited Palestine numerous times and has been a prominent participant in the international solidarity movement, regularly speaking at educational events like Israeli Apartheid Week.¹⁰⁸ In 2009, Esack wrote an open letter to the Palestinians, outlining the striking similarities between the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the oppression of Blacks under the apartheid regime in South Africa.¹⁰⁹ This letter was then spray-painted in large font on the so-called Security Fence in Palestine, the wording running for over two and a half kilometres. Drawing on his understanding of a prophetic Islam dedicated to the attainment of justice for all peoples, Esack describes his connection as a South African to Palestine as follows:

Indeed, for those of us who lived under South African Apartheid and fought for liberation from it and everything that it represented, Palestine reflects in many ways the unfinished business of our own struggle.¹¹⁰

Here, again, liberation—although being waged in solidarity with the Other—is located within the Self. Esack's own humanity (*fitra*) is under siege so long as Israel continues to brutalize the Palestinians. He has also worked extensively with Muslims who are HIV-positive or have AIDS. Along with a number of colleagues, he established an

¹⁰⁷ While these are two prominent examples of his comprehensive approach to social justice, Esack has engaged numerous human rights issues. For instance, he has explored the rights of the child through an Islamic framework, focussing on the Qur'an's narratives on children and its discourse on parental obligations. See Farid Esack, "Islam, Children, and Modernity: A Qur'anic Perspective," in *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) is a weeklong series of lectures and activities held every spring that raise awareness about the Israeli occupation, promoting the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against the state of Israel. Initiated by Palestinian students at the University of Toronto in 2005, IAW has since spread to over fifty cities across the world and has aroused the ire of Zionist groups and conservative forces. See www.apartheidweek.org

¹⁰⁹ Esack, 'Open Letter'.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

organization in 2000 called Positive Muslims. In addition to creating a support network for victims, the group seeks to challenge dominant Muslim attitudes towards HIV/AIDS, exposing Muslim complicity in the stigmatization of those afflicted with the disease.¹¹¹ In his struggle to combat AIDS, Esack has repeatedly emphasized the socioeconomic roots of the pandemic. A meaningful struggle against AIDS, then, must include the critique of a cruel economic establishment that prioritizes profit over human welfare.¹¹² Capitalism, Esack laments, is a principal cause of global suffering, effectively cleaving the world into two unequal halves: the affluent North, comprising Western Europe and North America, which continues to become exponentially wealthier at the expense of the impoverished South—Africa, Asia, Latin America—leading to immense suffering for the vast majority of the Earth's inhabitants.¹¹³

It is the struggle for gender justice, however, that is most intimately tied to Esack's own liberation. Growing up in a single-parent family—recall that his father had abandoned his mother when Esack was only three weeks old, leaving her to raise six children on her own—Esack discerned the demons of patriarchy at a very young age. Furthermore, he experienced first-hand the close collusion of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism, as his mother laboured long hours every day as an underpaid factory worker, eventually succumbing to her crippling circumstances.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the roots of Esack's liberationist discourse are to be found in this painful, formative period. Due to the efforts of South African Muslim feminists, including Esack, gender equality became an integral component of anti-apartheid discourse within the Muslim community. Wadud, whose hermeneutic we will explore in the fourth chapter, visited South Africa in 1994 and was struck by the centrality of gender justice amongst Muslims, who were even talking about the possibility of women leading ritual worship.¹¹⁵ The following passage captures the critical linkages Esack draws between racism and patriarchy, underscoring their common denominator of inequality:

¹¹¹ Farid Esack, *HIV, AIDS and Islam: Reflections based on Compassion, Responsibility and Justice* (Cape Town: Positive Muslims, 2004), 5–6.

¹¹² Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy eds. *Islam and AIDS: Between Scorn, Pity and Justice* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 7.

¹¹³ Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', 91.

¹¹⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 166.

Every single argument, religious or cultural, that is employed to keep women in the kitchen or in the house has a parallel in racist discourse. 'Our traditional way of life,' 'Allah made them inferior,' 'No they are not inferior, merely different,' 'What would happen if women were to control the world?' ... 'Of course women can govern, if they are capable.'¹¹⁶

In other words, to call for racial or economic justice without at the same time taking a firm stand against patriarchy (and vice versa) is hypocrisy. Inconsistency—the selective application of justice, restricting it to only certain struggles—is an act of *injustice*.

The realm of gender relations is illustrative of how, within Esack's hermeneutic, *praxis* constitutes as important a text that is to be read alongside the text of scripture. As central as the theme of justice is within the Qur'an, Esack is wary of idealizing the text. In particular, he notes that with regard to social and legal matters, the Qur'an presupposes male control over women, in that women are to be economically maintained and protected by men, scolded, and even beaten if they are disobedient.¹¹⁷ The literal wording of the text, then, is essentially androcentric: a number of passages like Q. 4:34—the so-called Beating Verse, which we will engage in detail when examining women's gender egalitarian exegesis—clearly address men and speak of women in the third person, and therefore as objects to be acted upon by men.¹¹⁸ Q. 4:34 reads:

Men are the guardians of women, because of the advantage God has granted some of them over others and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. So righteous women are obedient, safeguarding what is unseen of what God 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, God is all-Exalted, all-Great.

This critical take on the Qur'an stands in contrast, as we will see later in this book, to the exegeses of Engineer and Barlas, who insist that the text affirms the complete equality of women and men. It is necessary to clarify here that Esack does not view the Qur'an as an obstacle to gender justice. He writes that the text 'contains sufficient

¹¹⁶ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 127–8.

¹¹⁷ Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 193.

¹¹⁸ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 125–6.

seeds for those committed to human rights and gender justice to live in fidelity to its underlying ethos.¹¹⁹ But this does not entail partaking in, Esack stresses, simplistic apologia. He thus seeks to navigate a complex middle way between what he sees as two interpretive extremes: classical commentators who read far more patriarchy into the Qur'an than there actually was and, now, modern-day apologists—women and men alike—who are reading absolute gender justice into the Qur'an despite the fact that several verses presume male listeners and male control over women's bodies.¹²⁰ These are verses, argues Esack, which ought to be confronted, not ignored. And in this hermeneutical endeavour contemporary standards of justice, as defined through *praxis*, need to be taken as seriously as scripture itself. There are, then, two principal texts—the text of the Qur'an and the text of *praxis*—that must be reconciled through various reading strategies, one such strategy being an emphasis on the spirit over the letter: that whenever a seeming contradiction may emerge between scripture and *praxis*, the Qur'anic spirit, or what he refers to as 'its underlying ethos', is privileged over the Qur'anic letter. In so doing, Esack is able to acknowledge unapologetically the androcentrism of the text while, at the same time, using its gender egalitarian spirit to uphold contemporary understandings of justice.

In addition to the centrality of *praxis*, Esack's writings on gender are illustrative of his commitment to approaching social justice in a comprehensive fashion, namely, supporting queer Muslims through an anticolonial lens. Esack, and coauthor Nadeem Mahomed, a South African legal scholar, have argued that while Muslims need to be more tolerant of homosexuality, recent attempts at a 'homosexual friendly Islamic jurisprudence' ought to be critiqued.¹²¹ Here, the authors refer to the work of the American Islamic scholar Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, who has made a case for homosexuality through an Islamic framework, systematically expounding the Qur'an, *hadith*, and legal tradition.¹²² Specifically, Esack and Mahomed contend that, in positing a sexually-sensitive reading of Islamic jurisprudence, Kugle plays into Western colonial notions of sexuality as a fixed, singular,

¹¹⁹ Esack, 'Islam and Gender Justice', 203.

¹²⁰ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, 126.

¹²¹ Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed, 'Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality', *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 17:2 (2011): 41.

¹²² Scott Siraj Al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010).

and stable category, thereby undermining sexuality's fluidity, complexity, and acutely unstable character, especially in non-Western societies.¹²³ In other words, while sexual justice is squarely a component of Esack's understanding of gender justice, he raises the following key question: sexuality on whose epistemological terms and based on whose lived experiences—that of the hegemonic West (read secular modernity) or the two-third world? In offering this postcolonial perspective the authors draw on, among others, the Palestinian intellectual Joseph Massad. Massad has argued that the 'Gay International', defined as the discourse of Western-based LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer) organizations who claim to defend and speak on behalf of homosexuals worldwide,¹²⁴ effectively 'produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology.'¹²⁵ This discursive production is a result of treating sexual categories—gay, lesbian, homosexual—as universal, timeless, and stable, and by presuming that sexual practice is intrinsically linked to *identity*: that is, that someone who practices same-sex contact necessarily identifies as a homosexual subject.¹²⁶ For Massad, this linkage is not axiomatic but socially created, a product of Western historical experiences that were universalized, and that continue to be universalized, through empire. Esack and Mahomed, too, underline the connections between discourses of gay rights and empire (past and present), noting, for example, how Israel portrays itself as a homosexual safehaven in the Middle East while simultaneously brutalizing the Palestinians, straight and queer, through military occupation.¹²⁷ To be sure, Esack and Mahomed also challenge Massad on various levels, such as his lack "of any recognition whatsoever of the harsh negative effects of heteronormative societal structures on Muslim or Arab societies"¹²⁸ and his dismissive attitude towards queer identity

¹²³ Esack and Mahomed, "Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality," 49–50.

¹²⁴ Joseph Massad, 'Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World', *Public Culture* 14:2 (2002): 361–2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 362–3.

¹²⁷ Nadeem Mahomed and Farid Esack, "The Normal and Abnormal: On the Politics of Being Muslim and Relating to Same-Sex Sexuality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, advance access published 24 July 2016, doi: 10.1093/jaarel/lfw057.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

politics. For this can serve to ignore the genuine grievances of (and, by extension, deny justice for) marginalized queer Muslims “struggling for acceptance and recognition, both spiritually and socially, as individuals, activists, and groups.”¹²⁹

INTERFAITH SOLIDARITY AND A COMMITMENT TO THE MARGINS

Beyond Dialogue

In this final section, I will reflect upon the significance of Esack's hermeneutic, beginning with its implications in terms of religious pluralism. The interfaith character of the anti-apartheid movement forced Esack to raise larger questions concerning the very nature of salvation. Solidarity amongst Muslims, Christians, and other religious groups became an integral component of the collective struggle, especially during the uprisings of the 1980s.¹³⁰ To be sure, not all South African Muslims resisted apartheid alongside the religious Other. The reluctance to partake in interfaith solidarity—particularly within the United Democratic Front—was actually a key reason why the founders of the Call of Islam (Esack included) broke away from the Muslim Youth Movement,¹³¹ one of the most influential Islamic organizations in South Africa. Though the Dutch Reformed Church was complicit in providing scriptural support to the status quo, other Christian elements were actively engaged in the struggle against apartheid. The Kairos Document is a classic case in point. Published in 1985 by Christian clerics, it argued that the moment of truth (*kairos*) had arrived for the Church and that it was an ethical obligation for every Christian to partake in the struggle to create a just society, calling for civil disobedience to undermine the regime.¹³² The deeply moving experience of standing with the religious Other, while a number of his own co-religionists chose silence in the face of oppression, compelled Esack to question the exclusivist notion that

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 8.

¹³¹ Kelly, 129–30.

¹³² ‘The Kairos Document,’ as cited in Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland eds., *Radical Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 303.

Muslims alone would achieve salvation. Indeed, being born into the fold of the faith is, for most Muslims, sufficient to be included amongst the ranks of the *mu'minun* (literally, those who believe).¹³³ It is important to note that the anti-apartheid movement was not the first time that Esack was touched by the humanity of non-Muslims. Growing up in Bonteheuwel, an impoverished, Coloured township in the Cape Flats, many a time it was Esack's Christian neighbours, themselves struggling to make ends meet, who helped out his family when there was no food on the table.¹³⁴ This heartfelt experience was reaffirmed in Esack's youth, when he became close friends with the marginalized Christian community in Pakistan.¹³⁵

As a result of this deeply moving encounter with the religious Other, pluralism and universal salvation constitute an intrinsic part of Esack's Qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation. Islam is simply one way of responding to the divine call. Genuine pluralism, he observes, must entail not the mere toleration of other religious communities, but the humble acknowledgement that there exist multiple paths to salvation.¹³⁶ In fact, in the Qur'an the words *islam* and *muslim* (submission and submitter, respectively) are not used to refer solely to those who accept the Qur'an as the final revelation and Muhammad as the last prophet. Rather, they encompass all those who have submitted themselves to God via the earlier prophets, who preached the same monotheistic message.¹³⁷ This acknowledgement of the *iman* (faith) of those who received scripture before Prophet Muhammad speaks to the universality of the Qur'anic worldview. To restrict salvation to Muslims, Esack argues, is to reduce God from a universal, indeed unfathomable, entity to one confined to the contextually contingent imagination of a specific socio-religious community.¹³⁸ Just as faith is a highly fluid and dynamic term in the Qur'an, so too is its counterpart: *kufr*, frequently translated as disbelief. But the meaning of the term is multilayered, Esack points out, as the linguistic root of *kufr* (*k-f-r*) denotes not simply disbelief but the notion of rejecting a gift, of being ungrateful for God's blessings and, as a result,

¹³³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 124.

¹³⁴ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 150.

¹³⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 5. Specifically, he got involved with 'Breakthrough', a student Christian group that addressed their lived experiences of oppression through a Christian lens.

¹³⁶ Ibid, xii.

¹³⁷ Safi, *Memoirs of Muhammad*, 202–3.

¹³⁸ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 125.

exhibiting arrogant behaviour.¹³⁹ By underscoring the fluidity of Qur'anic concepts like *islam*, *iman*, and *kufr*, and thereby creating a theological space for the religious Other, Esack is able to shift the key criterion of salvation from membership in the *right* religious community to righteous conduct. Faith in and of itself is insufficient, for faith must be wedded to *praxis*. It is precisely because of the Qur'anic emphasis on action as an integral component of faith that one scholar of the Qur'an, Michael Sells, has translated *iman* as 'keeping the faith', and thus as a verb instead of a noun.¹⁴⁰

Religious dialogue, particularly between Muslims and Christians, has become increasingly popular in recent years. In addition to hundreds of academic conferences and thousands of smaller meetings held by faith groups, entire centres have been constructed to promote religious dialogue. The Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the University of Birmingham; the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, DC; and the Duncan Black MacDonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut are a few cases in point.¹⁴¹ Keen to emphasize the scriptural similarities between Christianity and Islam, scholars of both religious traditions argued that it was necessary to foreground this theological common ground to counter the state of 'crisis' that had beset the world.¹⁴² Another important factor behind the rise of religious dialogue was the radically changing demographics of European and North American societies, which now witnessed sizable religious minorities in their midst.¹⁴³ Religious dialogue has not been spearheaded by state bodies and Christian communities alone, for Muslims too have been actively involved. 'A Common Word between Us and You' is an illustrative example. Issued in October 2007 to the Pope by over a hundred Muslim scholars across the world, Common Word was a statement

¹³⁹ Ibid, 137–8. Here, Esack draws upon the earlier work of the Japanese Qur'anic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, who cites a number of verses wherein *kufr* is used in this particular sense, such as Q. 14:34 and 26:18–19. See Izutsu, 120–1.

¹⁴⁰ Sells, 37.

¹⁴¹ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 185.

¹⁴² Kenneth Cragg, *A Christian-Muslim Inter-Text Now: From Anathemata to Theme* (London: Melisende, 2008), v.

¹⁴³ Goddard, 182.

of unity, underscoring the shared heritage of the two monotheistic religions and claiming that Christian-Muslim harmony was paramount in order to avert global crisis and ensure world peace.¹⁴⁴

As the above statement suggests, the discourse of dialogue emerged largely as a response to the idea that a clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity was imminent. Although popularized in the immediate post-9/11 environment, the clash of civilizations was a theory put forward by American political scientist Samuel Huntington in the 1990s. It posited that non-Western civilizations were growing in strength and Islam in particular, which was ‘exploding demographically’, was on a collision course with Western civilization and its core values,¹⁴⁵ especially democracy. Huntington’s thesis was not uncontested. Countless voices spoke out in protest to this simplistic paradigm, and the phenomenon of religious dialogue needs to be situated within this discursive context. John Esposito—a scholar of Islamic studies and director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding—is a representative example. He countered that the vast majority of Islamists worldwide worked through the democratic system, and thus that Islam and democracy were compatible categories.¹⁴⁶ Richard Bulliet, a historian of Islam at Columbia University in New York City, offered another noteworthy critique of the Clash of Civilizations thesis, proposing that the primarily Muslim societies of the Middle East and North Africa and the predominantly Christian societies of Europe and North America comprised a single historical complex—what he coined, ‘Islam-Christian civilization’—and, therefore, that an imminent clash between the two was actually a definitional impossibility.¹⁴⁷

So rather than unearthing the essentialism underlying the term civilization or questioning the universalist assumption that Western democracy was *the* political model that the whole world had to follow,

¹⁴⁴ ‘A Common Word between Us and You (Summary and Abridgement),’ *Common Word*, available at: www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1 accessed 3 September 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Touchstone Books, 1998), 20.

¹⁴⁶ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 221–2.

¹⁴⁷ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islam-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

most mainstream critics called for religious dialogue and peaceful co-existence. Though most of these accounts usually cited American foreign policy in the Middle East as a key reason as to 'why they hate us', a larger critique of global power relations was strikingly absent in the dominant discourse: specifically, that of American imperialism. Indeed, the USA is not only deeply resented in the Middle East, but throughout the global South, like in Latin America,¹⁴⁸ where US foreign policy has a far worse track record. Thus, the clash of civilizations paradigm was not challenged by mainstream critics as an ideological tool for the advancement of empire, despite the well-known fact that Huntington had a long history in the American foreign policy establishment, such as when he argued in favour of 'free-fire zones' in Vietnam to justify the US military's carpet-bombing of the countryside.¹⁴⁹

The significance of Esack's hermeneutic, then, is that it speaks to the potential of liberation theology, as a contextual approach rooted in the realities of oppression and inequality, to act as an alternative, interfaith model to the discourse of religious dialogue. Because of his experience as a South African living under apartheid, Esack is wary of sweeping statements of peace and co-existence that do not take into account questions of power. The apartheid regime, when it realized that the country was going up in arms, openly called for 'peaceful co-existence' in order to maintain the status quo and thus resistance fighters, like Esack, saw it as their duty to make the state as ungovernable as possible.¹⁵⁰ In other words, within contexts of manifest inequality a stabilizing language of peace becomes the favoured discourse of the oppressor and, conversely, a subversive language of militancy that of the oppressed. And it is this appreciation of the political nature of dialogue that is largely missing from mainstream interfaith discourse. Common Word is a classic case in point. Despite its ceaseless calls for global peace and Christian-Muslim unity, nowhere in the document is there to be found a critique of power relations, an effort to locate the root source of 'global crisis'.¹⁵¹ In so doing, Common Word only reinforced the discursive strength of the status quo by toeing the simplistic logic that peace and order are good, militancy and violence bad. By using a framework of social liberation,

¹⁴⁸ Esack, as cited in Wolfe, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Lockman, 142.

¹⁵⁰ Esack, 'Religio-Cultural Diversity', 167.

¹⁵¹ 'A Common Word between Us and You.'

however, Esack is able to shift the discourse effectively from religious dialogue to interfaith solidarity against oppression. As he puts it:

A theoretically postulated, dislocated or decontextualized passion for diversity and pluralism often becomes an excuse for not taking sides. This is the perfect ideology for the modern bourgeois mind . . . Interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue is empty without a firm grounding in solidarity with the oppressed and dispossessed.¹⁵²

To be sure, Islamic scholars and community activists involved in interfaith exchange have also called for collaborative action in social justice works and solidarity with the marginalized, as opposed to meeting solely in a seminar setting.¹⁵³ The crucial difference with Esack's approach, however, is his emphasis that religious pluralism must be built on a principled, prophetic solidarity with the oppressed. The collective struggle against the unjust status quo, then, becomes *the* point of departure for all interreligious interaction.

Islam as a Theology of the Margins

Esack's exegesis is also significant because he forces Muslims to reconsider the context in which they articulate understandings of Islam. Since the 1990s, the question of whether Islam and Islamism are synonymous with terrorism has taken centre-stage in public discourse in Europe and North America.¹⁵⁴ The 9/11 attacks of 2001 have entrenched this discourse further. Indeed, 9/11 has become the overwhelming backdrop in which contemporary Islamic thinking has taken shape, with Muslim spokespeople and intellectuals eager to prove the compatibility of a peaceful, tolerant Islam with Western values. To quote Esack's words:

All of us are forced by the context of 9/11 to find a moderate Islam, a beautiful Islam, a gentle Islam. Why should the context of occupation not force us to find an angry Islam?¹⁵⁵

Common Word needs to be located within this larger post-9/11 project of presenting a good Islam—one that does not challenge the

¹⁵² Esack, 'Religio-Cultural Diversity', 184.

¹⁵³ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 212.

¹⁵⁴ Lockman, 223. ¹⁵⁵ Esack Interview, 2009.

powers that be but simply affirms empty expressions of religious tolerance, world peace, greater understanding—in juxtaposition to a bad Islam, which is confrontational, anti-imperialist, militant. This is not to imply that deep-seated misconceptions about Islam do not abound. Islam is often portrayed by Islamophobes as a violent, authoritarian faith of fear, as opposed to Christianity, which is presented as a religion that promotes love and tolerance.¹⁵⁶ Rather, my point here is that, for Esack, the most important question is: in *whose* context do we approach Islam? In a global context of manifest injustice, a friendly, law-abiding Islam projected through the lens of the powerful will inevitably devolve into a theology of accommodation, toeing the simplistic lines of peace and dialogue, while an Islam channelled through the experiences of the oppressed will take on a fundamentally different character. In fact, Esack writes, if one's eyes are those of the world and not of the USA, then it is capitalism, not religious fundamentalism, which represents the most devastating form of terrorism.¹⁵⁷ The very fact that one country—the USA—consumes half of the world's natural resources speaks volumes about the glaring maldistribution of wealth.¹⁵⁸ It is this stark reality of economic deprivation, in which the affluent North rides with complete impunity on the broken back of the South, that forms the principal context through which Esack articulates his faith.

Questions of authenticity are central to theologies that seek to accommodate the unjust status quo. In their hermeneutical quest to present a peaceful, passive, and beautiful Islam, critiques Esack, liberal Muslims persistently claimed that their reading of Islam was the only authentic one, that they alone adhered to 'true Islam' while other Muslims, particularly Wahhabis and militant oppositional figures like Osama Bin Laden, were not really Muslim, did not really practice Islam.¹⁵⁹ This desire to claim authenticity, however, is not restricted to post-9/11 liberal Muslim discourse, but is a signature trademark of accommodationist theology, which posits its understanding and practice of religion as the *correct* one.¹⁶⁰ Conversely,

¹⁵⁶ Sells, 23. ¹⁵⁷ Esack, 'Religio-Cultural Diversity', 184.

¹⁵⁸ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 105.

¹⁵⁹ Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11', 83.

¹⁶⁰ I do not mean to suggest that rhetorical claims of authenticity are the preserve of accommodationist theology, as dissident figures and groups routinely present themselves as the most authentic and genuine spokespersons of the faith. I am grateful to James McDougall and Paul Joyce (in discussion with the author) for this insight.

radical interpretations rooted in protest and the struggle for liberation are Othered within theologies of accommodation as inauthentic. A recurring frustration for Barlas (whose work we will engage in Chapter 5) was that the language she used in her gender-sensitive rereading of scripture—terms like anti-patriarchal, sexual inequality, and liberation—was hastily dismissed by mainstream Muslims as Western concepts alien to Islam.¹⁶¹ Interpretations in confrontation with capitalism, too, have been disregarded by most Muslims as being nothing more than socialist and Marxist ideologies cloaked in Islamic garb,¹⁶² and thus lacking genuine authenticity. Yet the fact that these very Muslims, by being complicit in and even actively promoting free-market policies, are as ideological in their (neoliberal) economic thinking does not seem to problematize their own incessant claims to authenticity.

On the contrary, a radical commitment to justice and economic equality has deep roots in the history of Islam. Esack does not claim to be an innovator. Rather, he argues that progressive Islam—one dedicated to the task of liberation for all of humanity—has been present, albeit in the shadows, right from the very beginning of Islamic history,¹⁶³ tracing all the way back to the practice of Prophet Muhammad. Having little interest in securing an audience within the Meccan corridors of power, Esack writes, the Prophet condemned wealth accumulation and spent his life serving the neglected, praying to God 'to let him live, die and be raised on the Day of Judgement with the poor.'¹⁶⁴ Indeed, the emergence of Islam represented a formidable challenge to the socioeconomic practices of seventh-century Mecca,¹⁶⁵ which was a rigidly stratified society. Intrinsic to the Islamic call was a comprehensive reconfiguration of the existing order, and it was because of the profound socioeconomic implications

That being said, I would argue that such dissident actors make assertions of authenticity precisely in order to challenge the entrenched authenticity claims of the status quo, which exercises hegemony over what constitutes truth.

¹⁶¹ Barlas, 'Believing Women' in Islam, xii.

¹⁶² Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 7. To be sure, Muslim Marxists have not made serious attempts to interpret Islamic texts, such as the Qur'an, in light of their ideological commitments. As Safi—a progressive Islamic scholar—observes, their lack of engagement with religious texts and traditions is one of the reasons why they have failed to attract mainstream Muslim audiences.

¹⁶³ Esack, as cited in Wolfe, 15.

¹⁶⁴ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 105.

¹⁶⁵ Izutsu, 16.

of Muhammad's monotheism that the Meccan elite rejected his prophecy.¹⁶⁶ But a liberating practice, Esack continues, was not just characteristic of Prophet Muhammad, but of all the prophets of God. Like Muhammad, the prophets of the Qur'an were firmly committed to the oppressed and their own social origins were largely humble, coming from peasant or other lowly backgrounds.¹⁶⁷ In other words, a radical religiosity devoted to justice is, insofar as Qur'anic and prophetic precedence is concerned, more orthodox than the very orthodoxy that dismisses it.

The Qur'anic hermeneutic of Esack thus forces Muslims to ask *whose* interests—the powerful or the powerless—are being served by their articulation of Islam. The call for reform has become a pervasive discourse in contemporary Islam. But the most important question in any discussion of reform, interjects Esack, should be 'in response to whose demands do I re-think the meaning and implications of my faith?'¹⁶⁸ That is, reform to what ends? The question of subject is paramount here: are the subjects—the primary actors—of my religious discourse the elites or the people? Is my Islam a theology of the centre or a theology of the margins? These questions are rarely raised in contemporary Islamic discourse. Esack gives the example of fasting in Ramadan. The rationale that is usually given as to why Muslims are commanded to fast in the holy month is in order to empathize with the poor. Yet this explanation is problematic, as it is founded on the presumption that the average Muslim is wealthy or at least self-sufficient.¹⁶⁹ By taking the affluent members of the faith as a default frame of reference, as the subject of Islamic discourse, the poor are Othered—indeed, poverty is treated as an essentially non-Muslim issue—and consigned to the passive role of objects that are to be empathized with through pity and charity. Muslim discourse over the AIDS pandemic, which adversely affects the poor, is another case in point. Esack notes that mainstream Muslim responses to AIDS have, in classic conservative fashion, portrayed the crisis as a form of divine retribution against people who practice the sins of

¹⁶⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 138.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 99.

¹⁶⁸ Esack, 'The Contemporary Democracy and the Human Rights Project for Muslim Societies', 125.

¹⁶⁹ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 34. Significantly, the Qur'an's own stated rationale for fasting is solely to achieve *taqwa* (God-consciousness): 'O you who believe! Fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may attain *taqwa*' (Q. 2:183).

sexual perversity.¹⁷⁰ So not only is there a striking lack of socio-economic analysis behind the spread of the virus, such as the fact that the market actually profits from holding back treatments to victims through patents or even the basic knowledge that the most common form of transmission is not sex but contaminated needles, but the AIDS crisis is treated, too, as a non-Muslim problem. This is a pandemic that apparently affects other people, not us. The very idea of a Muslim afflicted with HIV or AIDS becomes an oxymoron, despite the reality that countless Muslims continue to live and die with the disease. The critical intervention of Esack's hermeneutic, therefore, is that it shifts the locus of Islam from the dominant centre to the much maligned margins, to those people—Muslim or otherwise—for whom poverty and disease, patriarchy and dispossession are inescapable facts of life. Furthermore, this hermeneutical transition in subject, Esack argues, will transform the language of Islam, thereby allowing for a more liberating vocabulary to emerge. Consider the revamping of the term *jihad* (sensationally rendered as Holy War but literally meaning struggle) in the discourse of progressive Muslims involved in the anti-apartheid movement. For these Muslims the objective of *jihad* was neither the Islamist project of creating an Islamic state nor the liberal Muslim project of inner exertion, of attaining spiritual enlightenment from within, but rather—through solidarity and struggle with the oppressed—the establishment of a just social order.¹⁷¹

CONCLUSIONS

Although the substance of the Qur'anic text occupies a central position in Esack's hermeneutic, *praxis* is treated as an equally important text. Esack's emphasis on the Qur'an stems from the fact that it is universally accepted by all Muslims as the actual Word of God, as opposed to the *hadith* and the inherited intellectual tradition, both of

¹⁷⁰ Esack and Chiddy, 4.

¹⁷¹ For the references to liberationist versus Islamist understandings of *jihad*, see Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 107 and Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, 178. For the reference to liberal Muslim interpretations of *jihad*, see Esack, 'In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,' 83.

which are human-made and thus fallible and disputed. Esack does not write them off altogether, however. Instead, he draws selectively from them, privileging the Qur'an wherever a contradiction may emerge. Scripture thus reigns supreme, and extra-Qur'anic texts need to be understood through the framework of scripture. Yet who gets to decide what the Qur'anic message is? In whose context is the text to be understood? It is here that a fundamental difference emerges between Esack's hermeneutical method and those of other scholars, most notably the doyen of modernist Islamic thought, Rahman. For the latter, seventh-century Arabia was the first context to be studied, and therefore historical criticism, in which a double movement theory would allow for the principles of the pre-modern text to be extracted and then applied to the modern context, constituted the 'correct' method of reading the Qur'an. For Esack, however, the most important context is the contemporary one, for the Qur'an was sent for all peoples, irrespective of time and place. But even within the present the text speaks to a more specific context: that of oppression and poverty. The Qur'an, then, is the living speech of a just deity addressed first and foremost to the downtrodden. The text is only truly liberating, moreover, when those who are oppressed struggle against their oppressors, and it is within this framework of *praxis* that the text ought to be engaged: through a hermeneutical dialectic of struggle, reflection, and further struggle. The Qur'an, by the very nature of its own 'progressive revelation', affirms this liberating reading strategy. Truth is never timeless and absolute, therefore, but continuously revealed to those who partake in critical reflection based on struggle. Indeed, within Esack's exegesis, *praxis* functions as the motor of theological enquiry, a central source that is hermeneutically on a par with scripture.

While the seeds of his radical commentary are to be found in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the larger vision of Esack's liberation struggle is a thoroughly comprehensive one, and thus an abiding commitment to solidarity lies at the heart of his Islamic *praxis*. Justice is a fundamental component of the Qur'anic call, commanding humankind to strive towards creating a lasting, egalitarian social order. According to the Qur'an, faith is inextricably linked with the performance of righteous works. In fact, the text makes an explicit, preferential option for the oppressed—irrespective of their belief—promising that they will inherit the Earth. This pledge is sacralised, according to Esack, in the Exodus experience. This is a

problematic paradigmatic move, however, given the overwhelming emphasis that Christian liberation theology has also placed on this event. Because of the universalizing tendency of Christianity, particularly in the academic discipline of Religion, Islamic liberation theology will have to speak to the question of difference, to foreground the specificity of Muslim theology and experience. And in this vein, the concept of *tawhid*—the central tenet of Islam—holds great potential as an alternative, theological paradigm. It is precisely because a genuine commitment to morality is gauged by the ability to be moved by the suffering of others, and not just of one's own community, that the South African struggle, although playing a formative role in Esack's hermeneutic, cannot capture the universality of his liberationist project. Solidarity has been a hallmark of Esack's activism, especially with regard to the struggle for gender justice, combating the stigmatization of Muslims afflicted with HIV/AIDS and supporting the Palestinian cause. Because the categories of oppressor and oppressed are dynamic and conditioned by an ever-changing context, solidarity ought to be principled—what Esack terms, 'prophetic'—so that the progressive Muslim intellectual does not end up reproducing relationships of inequality in her/his struggle for justice. Moreover, the impulse to stand with the oppressed must not be guided by benevolence and charity, but rather by the pressing need to keep one's own humanity (*fitra*) intact, for within contexts of oppression one's *fitra* is compromised if one does not act. The liberation of the Self, therefore, is intimately tied to the liberation of the Other.

Esack's liberating exegesis is significant, I argue, for two reasons. Firstly, he shows the potential of liberation theology to function as a viable, alternative framework to the otherwise deeply problematic discourse of religious dialogue. Interreligious solidarity became a crucial part of the South African struggle against apartheid. Standing next to and being touched by the humanity of the non-Muslim Other compelled Esack to find a pluralistic hermeneutic of liberation, disclosing the dynamism and fluidity of such key Qur'anic concepts as *iman*, *islam*, and *kufr*. The core criterion of salvation in Muslim scripture, Esack argues, lies in one's commitment to justice and not one's membership in a chosen ethno-religious community. And it is this emphasis on interreligious solidarity against oppression that can provide an effective alternative to the discourse of dialogue. What has been strikingly absent in the language of religious dialogue, bent on countering an imminent civilization clash between Islam and the

West, is a critical awareness of global politics. For religious dialogue has failed to address the root cause of world suffering, which is not a result of a misunderstanding between different 'civilizations' but rather the exploits of American imperialism and the brutality of a free-market capitalism that has long ravaged the South. Esack's emphasis on solidarity, therefore, allows the critique of power to act as the point of departure for all interfaith collaboration.

Esack's liberation theology is also significant because it forcefully undermines any essentialist, disembodied claim to 'Islam' by raising the larger question of whose context religion is being articulated within. Challenging 9/11 as the framework, the underlying backdrop within which contemporary Islamic thought has taken shape, Esack insists that Islam needs to be expounded through the context of the two-thirds world. This shift in the subject of one's discourse from the powerful to the powerless, such as the millions of people who die every year because of AIDS will, in turn, raise entirely different questions and spawn a new theological language firmly rooted in justice. So instead of pontificating as to how authentic a particular interpretation of Islam is—a theological obsession of accommodationist Islamic discourse—the progressive Muslim intellectual would ask how such an understanding can speak to the problems plaguing the vast majority of humanity: poverty, hunger, unemployment, homelessness, disease, occupation, death. Although the issue of authenticity is clearly consigned to the edges of Esack's hermeneutic, a radical commitment to justice has deep roots in Islamic history and Esack himself takes great inspiration from the examples of Muhammad and the earlier prophets of the Qur'an. The centring of liberation is a seminal contribution that Esack makes to Islamic thought, for it forces Muslims to confront the elitism and complicity of mainstream Islamic discourse, like its patronizing attitude towards the poor as passive objects to be empathized with and dismissive treatment of the AIDS pandemic as divine punishment and a non-Muslim problem. In so doing, Esack compels Muslims to rethink their Islam as a theology of the margins, as a faith defined by its commitment to the oppressed.