

Searching for an Ethical Muslim Self in Conversation with Islamic Studies Scholarship in South Africa and Beyond

Aslam Fataar
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

This article presents an account of my search for ‘ethical agency’ in interaction with South African-based Islamic Studies scholarship. Based on auto-ethnographic approaches, I reflect on the evolution of my ethical self in a productive engagement with selected sets of Islamic scholarly readings that formed a critical part of such formation. The article attempts to show how one person worked out his subjective responsiveness to unfolding events in the contingent fields of politics, popular culture and social justice-orientated activism. Readings in the history of my religious community, Islamic discourse and contemporary politics are pertinent to the subject’s unfolding ethical stances. The article illustrates how a reflexive engagement with these readings is central to an individual’s ethical discourses and subjectivity. It emphasises “the close relationships between reasoning, freedom, choice, power relations, and the creative influence of tradition in any example of ethical discourse and [self-]formation”.¹ The article discusses three lines of ethical reading that represent how I have been processing my readings in the Islamic Studies discipline with respect

1 Jonathan Schofer, “Ethical formation and subjection,” *Numen* 59, 2012, p.3.
Journal for Islamic Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, 169-191

to my ethical commitments. These commitments were developed in the context of opposition to apartheid and the socio-political exigencies of the democratic period after 1994. I end by reflecting on the shifting contingent terrain of the contemporary period in which the self establishes its ethical Muslim agency.

Keywords:

Ethical self-formation, Islamic Studies, progressive activism, contextual contingency

Introduction

This article offers a schematic discussion of my search for ethical agency, which refers to the exercise of my commitment to participate as an actor in the public domain in pursuit of dignity and fairness. It is the perspective of a lay Muslim's² conversation with South African-based Islamic Studies scholarship and beyond. My primary reference point for this discussion is my quest to sustain an ethical, not predominantly scholarly, voice in the public domain. Such a voice emerged in the context of opposition to apartheid and the pursuit of democracy in South Africa. My ethical self has been formed in reciprocal dynamic interaction between my political commitments on the one hand, and the search for a democratic religious Islamic idiom on the other. My immersion in Islamic Studies literature with a focus on South Africa is founded on my commitment as a democratic and religiously-focused anti-apartheid youth activist. My colleagues and I drew on the available discursive materials of the Muslim legacy and the political discourses associated with political liberation. The conversation between these two discourses was central to the formation of our religiously informed political consciousness. My reading of Islamic Studies literature continued into the current period parallel and at times connected to my becoming an academic. I am a practising academic at a South African university, specialising in the Sociology of Education.

2 Lay Muslim' refers to my identity as a non-clergy person. I did not train as a Muslim religious leader, nor did I pursue the formal study of Islam.

My choice of reading particular Islamic texts is tied to the contingencies of everyday life, especially in response to human rights infractions and the search for social justice amid inequitable local and global circumstances. I have been mining a selection of available Islamic texts primarily because they help me develop interpretive frames to understand Islam's textual discourses and Muslim practices in the quest for a fairer world. Understanding how Muslim discourse is complicit in unjust practices is a crucial motivation for my engagement with Islamic Studies literature.³

My engagement with the literature is based on a 'non-disciplined' reading guided by a commitment to social justice causes. A non-disciplined reading does not ignore discipline-based scholarly inquiry or rigour. It is, however, in the first instance not bound to the scrutiny of a discipline-based immersion in the literature, or by the latest theoretical applications and academic peer-review protocols. A non-disciplined reading is not intent on wilful misrepresentation or based on truncated understanding. It employs open and capacious reading strategies. It enunciates its voice in the extra-academic public domain. In other words, the legitimacy of a non-disciplined reading lies in the domain of public discourse, taking account of the judgments of social movement peers, popular media interaction, and content circulation via social media and digital technology. My popular writings and expressed views are circulated in newspaper articles, sermons, community radio programmes, seminars, symposia, webinars and other presentations in the public sphere. Some of my writings are contained in a recent collection called *Searching for Islamic Ethical Agency in Post-Apartheid Cape Town: An Anthology* (Fataar 2019),⁴ published by the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology based at Stellenbosch University. As I explain in the book, my work is based on "a call for the careful and

3 The religious perspectives that we developed were often in conflict with the mainstream Muslim discourses of the South African Muslim community. This placed us somewhat on the margins of Muslim societal discourses, yet we adopted engagement type strategies that opened 'spheres of influence' in the community for ideas associated with political equality, human rights, and social justice.

4 Aslam Fataar, *Searching for Islamic Ethical Agency in Post-Apartheid Cape Town: An Anthology* (Stellenbosch: Africa Sun Media, 2019).

deliberative generation of dialogical spaces ... for nurturing respectful and inclusive dialogue across historically ossified boundaries”.⁵ Building a society based on this kind of dialogue, I argue, would place Muslims in a position to contribute to securing a planetary future.

Conceptually, I draw on Tayob’s⁶ work on the lives of Muslim activists to make sense of my ethical discourses. Tayob discusses aspects of the religious biographies of Islamic activists in South Africa. He shows how they confronted vilification by mainstream Muslim actors. These activists took on religio-political personas “marked by the adoption of a distinctive choice made within the larger language of Islam”.⁷ They were “confronted by subtle and not too subtle differences within this language. Islamists were forced to navigate sectarianism, but the choice was often not between good and evil, but between competing perceptions of good”.⁸ As I discuss below, specific choices over the interpretation of the good and how best to pursue the good constitute one’s ethical identity. My core claim is that my ethical engagement was sparked and put into dialogue through accessing the scholarly material produced by the discipline of Islamic Studies and a range of other intellectual enterprises. Dialogical engagement with scholarly religious discourse creates a person’s ethical agency.

Dialogue here is used in the Bakhtinian sense of a productive expression of an authentic human life. Language is constitutive of such dialogical becoming. Bakhtin explains that “Life by its very nature is dialogical. ... In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds”.⁹ Humans engage in dialogue in multiple ways and this dialogical engagement manifests what it means to be human.¹⁰ In other words,

5 Fataar, “*Searching for Islamic Ethical Agency*” p. 7.

6 Abdulkader Tayob, “Religion and Life Trajectories: Islamists Against Self and Other,” in *Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present*. Proceedings of the XXI World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Erfurt, August 23-29, 2015 Edited by Christoph Boehinger and Jörg Rüpke. 155-170.

7 Tayob, “Religion and Life Trajectories:” p. 155.

8 Tayob, “Religion and Life Trajectories:” p. 155.

9 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). p. 293.

10 Peter Rule, “Bakhtin and Freire: Dialogue, dialectic and boundary learning,” *Education Philosophy and Theory*, 43, 9, 2011, p. 929.

dialogue is central to what Bakhtin describes as the ethical agent's ideological being and becoming in an open-ended search for authentic human life. The ethical searcher is axiologically charged, emphasising the quest for personal value, learning to value, and searching for higher value. This refers to the search for meaning and identity via the ethical agent's engagement with knowledge, practice, ethics and poetics.¹¹

My non-disciplined religious identity resembles a type of autopoiesis. Smith¹² describes autopoiesis, when applied to people, as a “‘biological theory’, in which living beings are seen as systems that perpetually produce themselves”. In other words, the ethical self is constantly engaging in reflexively adapting to the changing circumstances of living in complex life-worlds. The need to act to secure futures amid these circumstances is pivotal to the individual's autopoietic discourses. This can be viewed as an intellectual mode akin to open adaptation and imagined self-making amid a world of ‘posthuman’ complexity. The ethical self and its knowledgeability are composed in everyday practice, from which the emergent person becomes an ‘ethical doer’, a person who acts in the world. Conversation based on the intellectual processing of extant writings and scholarship – in this case, the non-disciplined engagement with emergent Islamic Studies scholarship in South Africa and beyond – is a central feature of the self's ethical stance in the world.

This article offers three ‘lines of reading’ that have constituted some of the critical contours of my Muslim ethical self. Accessing works produced in South African Islamic Studies scholarship and the broader world is central to the meaning-making discussed in each of the three.¹³ The article ends with a reflection on my search for ethical agency in current circumstances.

11 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). p. 29.

12 John Devlin Smith, “Self-concept: Autopoiesis as the basis for a conceptual framework,” *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 31, 2013, p. 33.

13 The three lines of discussion presented here are chronologically arranged. Yet, they should be understood as three overlapping and interactive themes that make up my ethical persona. While some of the written work referred to in the discussion were more prominent during specific periods compared to others, I view them collectively as playing a formative role during my adult life.

A history-based line of reading: from ontological moorings to newer histories capable of animating new ethical terrains

This first section engages with historical work on Islam in South Africa. Such an engagement, I argue, provides the onto-epistemological grounding for the emerging ethical self. My religious activist consciousness was deeply influenced by writings on the history of Islam at the Cape by men such as Adil Bradlow, Suleman Dangor, Shamil Jeppie, Mogamat Ajam, Yusuf da Costa, Muhammed Haron and Ebrahim Rhoda. Their writing provided a historical understanding of the development of Islam in Cape Town since settlers landed in 1652. It was especially the work of the iconic Achmat Davids which provided my generation with a 'depth of being' and insight into what can be regarded as the community's primordial origins that framed our activist identifications. Davids was the doyen of the cultivation of a Muslim historical consciousness with cultural roots in the transoceanic movement, masjid and madrasah developments, cultural and educational practices, slave history, and the development of Muslim Afrikaans.¹⁴ Not trained as a historian, Davids adopted a method that can be regarded as culturalist, because he focused on the cultural identity of the Muslim community. His work was rooted in the Cape archives and he drew liberally on oral history and folklore. Reading his work gave us a particular cultural-religious identity, a beingness as local Muslim youths with proud anticolonial roots and hybrid adaptability, mixing and meshing spiritual, religious and cultural practices within everyday life.

Recent work on the Al-Azhar University-educated Shaykh Ismail Ganief (Edwards) illustrates this hybrid adaptability. Ganief's story is told by Hoosain Ebrahim¹⁵ and recently elaborated on by linguistic

14 See Achmat Davids, *The Mosques of the Bo-Kaap* (Cape Town: The South African Institute of Arabic and Islamic Research, 1980); Achmat Davids, "The revolt of the Malays' – A Study of the Reactions of the Cape Muslims to the smallpox epidemic of Nineteenth-Century Cape Town," In C. Saunders *et al.* (eds) *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, Vol. 5. 1983. History Department, University of Cape Town. 47-79); Achmat Davids, *The History of the Tana Baru* (Cape Town: Committee for the Preservation of Tana Baru, 1985); Achmat Davids, "The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915: A Socio-Linguistic Study" (MA thesis, University of Natal, 1991).

15 Mogamat Hoosain Ebrahim, *Shaykh Ismail Hanif Edwards* (Cape Town, Mogamat Hoosain Ebrahim Publisher, 2004).

scholars outside the country.¹⁶ Ganief attended Trafalgar High School in District Six, al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, in the 1920s, wrote and/or translated thirty Islamic texts, and helped develop the orthography of the Arabic-Afrikaans script. Therefore, in addition to the role of this aforementioned historical work in inculcating an understanding of the depth of our historical moorings as Muslims in the South African colonial context, it also provided us with a sense of our culturally fluid adaptable practices in harsh, oppressive circumstances. This principled adaptability continues to influence my political choices and ethically-inspired practices.

Two types of historical writing were published over the last ten years that impacted my current understanding and discourses. The first is the histories of the founding Muslim figures, Tuan Guru (Imam 'Abdullah bin Qadi 'Abdus Salaam) and Shaykh Yusuf, written by journalist Shafiek Morton¹⁷ and Law Professor at the University of the Western Cape, Najma Moosa,¹⁸ respectively. Morton's book traces Tuan Guru's history during the 18th century across three continents and finally his banishment to the Cape, where he established the city's first educational institution and mosque. Najma Moosa challenges the provenance of accounts that Shaykh Yusuf's grandchildren became apostates at the Cape after the Shaykh's death. Telling important local histories and contesting popular understandings, these texts are relatively removed from broader debates in historiographical theory and comparable historical work elsewhere. They contribute to the culturalist genre first produced by Achmat Davids by filling in the gaps on aspects of Muslims' history and identity at the Cape during the 17th and 18th centuries.

16 See Iris Hoedemaekers, "The Book that Speaks about the Rules of Grammar: The Arabic-Afrikaans Language" (MA thesis, University of Nijmegen, 2006); Kees Versteegh, "An Afrikaans Footnote to the History of Arabic Grammar: Sheikh Ismail Ganief's Grammar of Arabic (ca. 1958)" In Bilal Orfali (ed.) *In the Shadow of Arabic: The Centrality of Language to Arabic Culture*, (E-book, 2011). pp.177-194.

17 Shafiq Morton, *From the Spice Islands to Cape Town: The Life and Times of Tuan Guru* (South Africa: Awqaf South Africa, 2018).

18 Najma Moosa, *The mystery of the apostasy of Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar's alleged grandchildren: The children of the Rajah of Tambora* (Cape Town: Kampress, 2021).

The second set of historical writing is the interpretive histories written by two women with a different scholarly orientation. Saarah Jappie's thesis¹⁹ offers an analysis of Shaykh Yusuf's transoceanic connections, and her article²⁰ on the community's handwritten kitabs or religious texts focuses on aspects of its literacy culture. Gabeba Baderoon's book is called '*Regarding Muslims: from Slavery to Post-Apartheid*'.²¹ Jappie and Baderoon opened newer interpretations of the Muslim presence at the Cape. They paid close attention to the limits and possibilities of the colonial archive. They provide accounts of Muslim quotidian life, popular culture, visual art, cuisine, jokes and bodily practices. Added to this are the luscious historical fiction of Rayda Jacobs.²² Jacobs draws on her imagination to infuse her narratives with Muslim characters and practices. These works help us turn the historiographical corner into a greater self-awareness of ordinary folk's complexity, creativity and travails. It disrupts what was hitherto a dominant focus on the masculine space of the mosque, madrasah, imam and Sufi shaykh.

What has yet to emerge is a concerted and consolidated historical focus on Muslims in South Africa. This shortcoming is now being rectified by Goolam Vahed's body of historical work. His book, co-authored with Thembisa Waetjen and titled, *Schooling Muslims in Natal: Identity, State and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute*,²³ fills a significant institutional lacuna. Rehana Ebr.-Valley's *Kala Pani: Colour and Caste in South Africa*,²⁴ and Abdulkader Tayob's two books, namely, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons in South Africa* and *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The*

19 Saarah Jappie, "*Between Makassars: Site, Story, and the Transoceanic Afterlives of Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar*" (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2018).

20 Saarah Jappie, "From the Madrasah to the Museum: The Social Life of the 'Kietabs' of Cape Town". *History in Africa* 38, 2011, pp. 369-399.

21 Gabeba Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From slavery to post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014).

22 See Rayda Jacobs, *The Slave Book: A Novel* (Cape Town, Kwela Books, 1998); Rayda Jacobs, *Sachs Street* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001); Rayda Jacobs, *Confessions of a Gambler* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2007); Rayda Jacobs, *The Meccan Diaries* (Cape Town: Double Story Books, 2005).

23 Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen. *Schooling Muslims in Natal: Orient Islamic Educational Centre* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2015).

24 Rehana Ebr.-Valley, *Kala Pani: Colour and Caste in South Africa* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001).

Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, are also significant contributions.²⁵

Several non-South Africans have done interesting work on the socio-political, religious and educational dimensions of the South African Muslim experience during the last thirty years. For example, Ursula Günther and Inga Niehaus²⁶ published on local Muslim politics and gender, and Brannon Ingram's²⁷ treatise on the Deobandi movement includes a focus on the local South African Deobandi network. I worked closely with Norwegian anthropologist Sindre Bangstad, whose book *Global Flows, Local Appropriations*,²⁸ based on his doctoral research, focused on local Cape Muslim culture and politics in the context of globalisation. This work introduced important theoretical debates from the global north that enriched our scholarly perspectives. I co-authored an article with Bangstad titled "Ambiguous Accommodation: Cape Muslim and Post-apartheid Politics".²⁹ It is an analysis of the politics of Muslim elites during the early post-apartheid period. In it, we presented the view that the political discourses of these religious elites are made up of a precarious balance of conservative religious tropes on the one hand, and their alignment with the country's new political ruling classes, on the other.

The extant historical work on South Africa provided fertile ground for connecting with our ontological moorings rooted in communal markers and traditions. Such rootedness has been crucial for culturally imprinting definitions of self-worthiness and authenticity. We have witnessed newer historical and sociological work across a broader

25 Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 1995); Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons in South Africa* (Florida, University of Florida Press, 1999).

26 Ursula Günther and Inga Niehaus, "Islam, Politics, and Gender during the Struggle in South Africa, 1976-1990," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 15, 2, 2002, pp. 87-110.

27 Brannon Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

28 Sindre Bangstad, *Global Flows, Local Appropriations; Facets of Secularisation and Re-Islamization Among Contemporary Cape Muslims* ISIM Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

29 Sindre Bangstad and Aslam Fataar, "Ambiguous Accommodation: Cape Muslims and Post-Apartheid Politics," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36,4, 2010, pp. 817-831.

range of everyday dimensions of Muslim life during the last twenty years. The more recent historical focus on the quotidian dimensions of the community's practices and adaptation is essential for locating the ethical project on complex living in the contemporary period. The older culturalist histories seem to have run out of steam. What is now required are fresh perspectives on the complex composition of the ethical subject in a socio-historical context.

The focus and content of progressive Muslim activism

The second line of my non-disciplined reading and dialogical interaction centres on core texts produced in the 1980s by anti-apartheid Muslim religious leaders who later became academic scholars. These texts signposted the focal content and conceptual (epistemological) bases that provided the outlines for our progressive Muslim activism. In fact, they provided the ethical self with its epistemological focus. Reading modern Islamic texts from the broader Muslim world was essential in substantively developing such a focus.

Mawlana Farid Esack published a seminal article in *Third World Quarterly* in 1988 titled 'Three Islamic strands in the struggle for justice',³⁰ which staked out the political terrain of Muslim anti-apartheid activism. A leading anti-apartheid activist and liberation theologian, Esack argued that each strand had a specific Islamist genealogy, two had strong Middle Eastern roots, and the third adopted a local South Africanist approach. One Middle Eastern-inspired strand was practised by the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa (MYMSA). Its members drew on the Islamist discourses of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan. The second strand was represented by the Qibla Mass Movement, which derived its ideological inspiration from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Inspired by these influences, these two organisations developed their anti-apartheid stances during the 1980s as part of the broad popular uprising against the racist apartheid state.

30 Farid Esack, "Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice," *Third World Quarterly*, 10, 2, 1988, pp. 473-498.

The third strand that Esack referred to was represented by the Call of Islam (COI), an organisation allied to the United Democratic Front, the internal wing of the African National Congress. Esack was a founder member and one of the leaders of the COI. The COI successfully developed a local religious identity and discourses shorn of Islamist and Middle Eastern influences. I was inspired by this organisation's embracing of pluralism, human rights and gender equality. The COI presented its message in the local cultural idiom of multiple South African Muslim publics.

I was an MYMSA member from 1987, and its vice-president from 1991 to 1993. The discursive sets portrayed by Esack in his article provided me with the ideological material to imagine my Muslim activism. Such imagining was part of my organisation's search for a social justice-orientated Islamic perspective. By the end of the 1980s, the MYMSA made a concerted attempt to disavow externalist Islamist ideological influences. Tayob³¹ provides a compelling narrative of the history of the MYMSA and its unfolding ideological commitments. The MYMSA moved away from Islamist frames derived from the Muslim heartlands. Developing contextually focused Islamic perspectives trained on South Africa's human rights and developmental challenges became our primary discursive frame.

The MYMSA members in Cape Town began to read texts that concentrated on Islam and its application in modern contexts. We read texts by Islamic scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun and Faṭīma Mernissi. It was primarily the modernist Islamic perspectives of Fazlur Rahman and his intellectual methodology of interpreting the Qur'ān and other sources in the light of current circumstances that impacted our hermeneutical approaches.³² We were persuaded by his emphasis on systematic historicised readings of the entire Islamic legacy. His perspectives encouraged us to apply rigorous social science-inspired understandings of the contemporary world. Rahman's emphasis on

31 See Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 1995).

32 See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformations of an Intellectual Tradition* (London, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

novel contextual readings of the Qur'an was formative to our attempts to develop a socially responsive Islamic perspective to inform our engagement with local contextual challenges.

In this context, our reading of the BA Honours dissertation of another Muslim anti-apartheid activist and religious leader, Imam Rashied Omar, played an important role in shaping our justice-orientated perspectives. Titled "The impact of the death in detention of Imam Abdullah Haron",³³ the text provided a radical social justice platform for progressive Islam. Omar was the National President of the MYMSA in the late 1980s and led the organisation's search for a local contextual and justice-orientated Islamic approach. Muslim anti-apartheid activists read his thesis widely. It focused on the death in political detention of Imam Haron in 1969. Haron was a revolutionary anti-apartheid activist and a prominent religious leader in a community that broadly failed to support his radical politics. The life and death of Imam Haron inspired the anti-apartheid politics of Muslim youth activists during the 1980s.

I struggle with reimagining Imam Haron as a martyrological figure. I believe we should refuse to trade on a politics of the past that prevents us from engagement with the specificity of current-day discourses and circumstances. Ethical commitments, I contend, should embrace the complex mediating languages of contemporary circumstances and commitment to sustainable futures. I have been using the figure of Imam Haron in my public discourse as a way of sustaining a justice-focused orientation that addresses contemporary ethical challenges such as gender equality and life in the face of the impact of technologically-infused living circumstances.³⁴

As mentioned earlier, reading Fazlur Rahman's books provided us with the conceptual tools to tie our human rights promotion and justice-seeking efforts to our Islamic commitments. Yet, once the Islam and human rights dyad was firmly established, we quickly moved on

33 Rashied Omar, "The impact of the death in detention of Imam Abdullah Haron on Cape Muslim political attitudes" (BA Honours dissertation, University of Cape Town, 1987).

34 Aslam Fataar, *Searching for Islamic Ethical Agency in Post-Apartheid Cape Town: An Anthology* (Stellenbosch: Africa Sun Media, 2019).

to other core human rights-oriented Islamic texts. We read people like Muhammad Arkoun, Rifat Hassan, Leonard Binder and Fatima Mernissi. The high-water mark was our reading of Amina Wadud's, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.³⁵ These texts provided us with insights into modern human rights-orientated hermeneutical approaches for interpreting Islamic texts and discourses. They also offered a sense-making methodology for applying our Islamic commitments to our engagement in social struggles for fairness in changing circumstances. We applied these texts to the unfolding South African constitutional negotiations, which challenged communities to align with the principles of constitutionalism, human rights and democracy. Themes such as interfaith cooperation, gender justice, reconstruction and development, education for development, societal transformation, and Muslim Personal Law became the staple for our progressive Islam-centred readings.

Searching for ethical breathing space

The third line of reading is based on an assemblage of theological strands and religious and credal developments in Islamic history. Such a reading, I suggest, is crucial for cultivating (breathing) space for an ethical Islamic discourse in complex 'postnormal' times.³⁶ In the South African case, our political democracy has been hollowed out by a democratic dispensation characterised by weak state infrastructural capacity to deliver on the expectations of millions of poor citizens. State capture and corruption have eroded the country's ability to address, through its institutions, societal failure in areas that range from unemployment and the lack of education and workplace skills to severe delivery shortcomings in housing, health and the criminal justice system. The early promise that political democracy held for socio-economic development has been

35 Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the sacred text from a women's perspective* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

36 Ziauddin Sardar, "Islamic Futures in Postnormal times", in Ziauddin Sardar (ed.), *The Postnormal Times Reader*, 299-336. (Effusion, United Kingdom: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Centre for Postnormal Futures and Policy Studies, 2019).

replaced by citizens' outrage and scepticism over the country's ability to address its shortcomings.

In the meantime, by 2000, me and my activist colleagues' organisational commitments began to recede. We became professionals, business people, researchers and academics. Many of us tried to maintain an ethical commitment in our various spheres of professional and educational endeavour. In my case, I began somewhat autodidactically to develop and express my ethical commitments. I drew on my earlier ontological grounding and intellectual immersion within the content and foci of progressive Islam during the 1980s and 1990s.

By this time, I was dipping into readings on Islamic history, *'ilm-kalam* (dialectical theology), Sufism (mysticism), and *falsafa* (philosophy), and working my way through various translations of the Qur'an. I favoured Muhammad Asad's monumental translation, *The Message of the Qur'an*.³⁷ In later years I found intellectual succour on the internet and YouTube and in other digital content on Islam. I enjoy the YouTube lectures of renowned modern scholars such as Khaled Abou el-Fadl, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Ebrahim Moosa and Ingrid Mattson. I regularly access webinars offered by the Musawa Facebook-based movement for family justice, which features academic and research-based presentations on Muslim gender and family dynamics.

Significantly, I have participated in a friendship discussion circle with Faaiz Gierdien, Nazeem Khan, Noor Davids, Eghsaan Behardien and Omar Esau for the last eight years. We meet every six to eight weeks to discuss religion. We recently partnered in a conversation with Eghsaan, who co-authored a text titled *A Study of the History and Content of Tawhid*.³⁸ This text is based on notes taken by the co-authors at the informal adult classes of a prominent Cape Town Muslim leader, Shaykh Shakier Gamielien, who studied at Al-Azhar University during the 1920s and 1930s. He served as a senior member of Cape Town's Muslim Judicial Council for more than

37 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1980).

38 Mogamat Redar Behardien, Ismail Williams and Eghsaan Behardien, *A study of the history and content of tawhid* (Cape Town, Usuluddin Publications, Majslisush Shura Al Islami, 2021).

three decades, and later as its President. This text took us deep into the logics of *tawhid* (unicity). It prompted us to discuss Islamic perspectives on predestination, whether the Qur'an is created or uncreated, the nature of God, human free will, religious knowledge, justice and reckoning.

Eghsaan's text further prompted me to delve into the religious and intellectual life of Muhammad 'Abduh, who wrote *Risālat al-Tawhīd*,³⁹ among many other works. *Risālat al-Tawhīd* is considered the summa of 'Abduh's writings. In it, he discusses the role of belief in the oneness of God as central to the Muslim's positive and active assertion that God is One. I came to some tentative understanding that 'Abduh's text could not be read outside the framework of turn-of-the-20th century Egyptian politics. Picchi wrote that 'Abduh was no blind imitator of European thought. Yet his version of *tawhid* may have served a political desire for Egyptian modernisation and social improvement based on core aspects of the European model.⁴⁰ Picchi contends that 'Abduh's main contribution to the history of *tawhid* "can be recognised with this marked shift in emphasis from the theological to the sociopolitical articulation of faith, from a theocentric conception of religion to a distinctively humanist one."⁴¹ His conception of *tawhid* has a strong mechanistic, cause-effect undertow. He emphasised scientific rationalism, positivist science and a model of a forward-looking universalist man (sic). Wael Hallaq's recent book, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*,⁴² convincingly illustrates the limits of a conception of progress implicit in modern Enlightenment thinking. Hallaq argues that such a teleological conception of progress with no logical endpoint must be jettisoned if we are interested in developing a planetary ethics in contemporary times.

'Abduh was a man of his Euro-Arab modernising time. As the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Enlightenment conceptions found their way into his

39 Muhammad Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawhīd* (Epistle on the Unity of God, written 1897) (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1994).

40 Margherita Picchi, "Muhammad Abdu and the Doctrine of Tawhid" In Massimo Campanini and Marco Di Donato (eds.), *Islamic Political Thought*, 67-69 (Maryland, Lexington Books, 2021).

41 Picchi, "Muhammad Abdu and the Doctrine of Tawhid," p. 77.

42 Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2018).

religious and educational philosophy. This in turn impacted on Al-Azhar University's modernisation, where local 'ulama like Gamieldien,⁴³ Ganief and other Capetonians studied. They brought back the rational modern outlook to Cape Town, which in turn affected the credal and performative orientations of a large section of Cape Town's Muslim community.

Our reading of the Egyptian modernist paradigm enabled another nascent conversation, in this case informed by the search for ethical potential in the discourse associated with *'Ilm al-Kalām*. This turn was based on readings of Islamic history from about 100 years after the demise of Prophet Muhammad. I accessed the story of the translation of neo-Platonic texts into Arabic. These texts laid the basis for the first *falsafa* (philosophy) developments in Islamic theology and the disputes over *falsafa*'s impact on Islam. These debates took place in specific historically contingent circumstances. The Mu'tazilites were among the first to respond to the challenges *falsafa* posed to some well-known teachings of Islam. However, they, in turn, were seen overstepping the boundaries of orthodoxy in mounting their defence. Abul al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, the founder of Ash'arism, was initially a Mu'tazili but later disavowed some elements to avoid anathematisation. The foundations of Ash'arism struck a balance between God's power over creation and humans' exercise of their relative free will and agency.⁴⁴ I learnt that history and contingency were always constitutive of these theological developments. The literature describes how dialectical theology was defined and appropriated in contingent circumstances.⁴⁵ A complicated and contested story emerged, yet, what seems clear is that dialectical theology under conditions of emerging Islamic empire conditions provided space for creative, even original, developments in art, science, architecture, literature, and culture.

43 See Eghsaan Behardien, *Shaykh Shakier Gamieldien: scholar, teacher, leader* (Cape Town: Formaset Print, 2014).

44 Jeffrey Halvorsen, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

45 See Binyamin Abrahamov, "A re-examination of al-Ash'ari's theory of kasb according "Kitāb al-Luma'," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2, 1989, pp. 210-221; Jeffrey Halvorsen, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

I am interested in understanding the historical and theological conditions under which such interpretive or translational spaces existed and wherein creativity flourished. And I am considering whether reform of the Islamic discursive tradition should be pursued from the inside, from within the *ʿIlm al-Kalām* tradition, for example. Or whether we should import intellectual resources from the outside, such as the attempt to introduce Latin-American liberation theology into the hermeneutical quest,⁴⁶ or through the “socialist” theological model of Hassan Hanafi?⁴⁷

Esack, for example, developed a fruitful social justice approach to the reading of the Qurʾān based on an Islamic theology of liberation that propagates gender justice and pluralistic relations in the search for societal equity for the benefit of the marginalised and exploited. Manshur⁴⁸ argues that Hanafi’s ongoing work proposes a new theology “through a progressive life perspective rooted in liberation and social justice.” Such a perspective, Hanafi’s argument goes, offers a liberation theology that legitimises social struggle. Hanafi visited South Africa in 1993, presenting papers in which he argued for Muslims to adopt strategies that promote socio-economic change and active citizenship. He called on Muslims to serve as a link between different cultures and communities.⁴⁹

The perspectives advanced by scholars such as Esack and Hanafi hold much promise for the ongoing development of my ethical stance as I seek to animate my ethical Muslim-centred discourses. However, as Halvorsen argues, this type of Islamic scholarship and its associated discourses rely heavily on heterodox sources outside Islam and, therefore, would suffer from a lack of legitimacy and acceptance.⁵⁰ Credibility may thus be a requirement for advancing ethically inspired theological and religious

46 Farid Esack, *Qurʾān, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective Of Inter-religious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford, OneWorld Publications, 1996).

47 Fadil Manshur, “Hasan Hanafi, new theology and cultural revolution: An analysis of cultural intensification,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77, 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6190>

48 Manshur, “Hassan Hanafi, new theology and cultural revolution,” p. 1.

49 Hasan Hanafi, “Islam in South Africa: future strategies and means of implementation,” (paper presented at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 31 August 1993).

50 Halvorsen, “*Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam*,” p.146.

discourses in the public domain. Somehow, ethically-informed discursive work has to be located in the in-between space where theological development can be pursued using knowledge and perspectives from inside and outside the religious tradition. Putting the Islamic tradition in critical conversation with multiple moral traditions would place one in a position to pursue theological and religious relevance in the ongoing pursuit of our ethical commitments. Moosa presents such a view in the concept of '*dihliz*'. This Ghazalian concept locates the task of intellectual renewal in liminal space. Moosa explains the *dihliz* as the symbolic space for an encounter between old and new knowledge thus:

"...the *dihliz*, the intermediate space or the threshold space that Ghazālī identified – one with intersecting boundaries and heterogeneous notions of practices and time – he forged different narratives of religion. These narratives were the outcome of his encounter with both inherited and contemporary forms of knowledge."⁵¹

The methodological and interpretive task is multiple, complex and contingent. The meaning-giving search for autopoiesis entails putting the vast tradition of Islamic thought to work. This is the direction in which my ethical quest is now moving. The final section presents my understanding of an ethically-informed orientation for the self's ongoing agency. It draws on selected literature on Islam's theological and discursive responses to life in current circumstances.

Notes on the Muslim ethical self's insertion into the contemporary social terrain

The contingent terrain for our ongoing ethical activity is complex and contested. The Muslim ethical actor is confronted with developing a conceptual language to inform their religious discursive adaptations to manifestations of social exclusion in these newer terrains. Historically, Islam has had a robust ethical tradition that impacted on its public institutions and practices. This ethical tradition has been characterised by mercy, forgiveness, love and compassion. Beauty and dignity are some

51 Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, p. 27.

of the higher-order defining qualities of the Islamic faith tradition. During the height of the exercise of its rich moral tradition, Islam's regulative regimes and legal practices were based on qualities of beauty, mercy, love and dignity. Its contributions to philosophy, mysticism, literary culture, science and mathematics were made well before the European Enlightenment. In *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*, Muqtedar Khan explains that the ethical governance of *iḥsān* (beauty and excellence) "emphasizes love over law, process (Islamic governance) over structure (Islamic state) and self-annihilation (*fanaa*) over identity and self-assertion".⁵²

For Khan, an ethical approach to inform the responses of the activist self in the public domain is based on a "vision of Islam that emphasizes virtue over identity and ethics over politics, and makes Islam a force for the good in global society".⁵³ Such a perspective requires what Khan terms an ethics of beauty, which emphasises interior excellence, a refinement of the mind and heart, and a vision of public politics and policy based on sacrifice, forgiveness and compassion.⁵⁴ Such a perspective is interdisciplinary and seeks to find a meeting point where mysticism, theory, law and theology can be considered afresh and negotiated within contingent local circumstances.

The Islamicate legacy has provided the world with a creative artistic and architectural tradition that stretched from Baghdad to Andalusia to the Ottoman Empire, Mughal India, Safavid Persia, Turkic China, the Indonesian archipelago, and the coasts and interiors of East, West, North and South Africa. Darke,⁵⁵ for example, provides an illuminating discussion of how Islamic architecture shaped European buildings, from the churches of Paris to Gothic architecture in various European capitals. Islam provided its societies with an integrated and cohesive sense of adaptation and coexistence over time. Islamic societies adapted

52 Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

53 Khan, "Islam and Good Governance" p. 4.

54 Khan, "Islam and Good Governance" p. 5.

55 Diane Darke, *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe* (London: Hurst and Company, 2020).

to multiple forms of dislocation at specific historical moments, whether these were caused by famine, war, expansionism, urbanisation or changing demographic patterns. Islam's ethical and moral coordinates have always been invested, sometimes more visibly and robustly than at other times, in the drama of human existence, survival and adaptation.

Islamic societies have undergone decisive renovation in the encounter with colonial modernity from the late 17th century. The political foundations of Islam's institutions and governmental systems were rearranged. Colonial modernity ensnared Islamic societies' educational and judicial systems. Modernity's impact ruptured Islam's epistemic tradition, and its institutions became dislodged from its ethical grounding. Adaptations were made to newly imposed colonial political governance, education and law. Muslim countries experimented with modern political traditions, with various pan-Arab, pan-Islamic and Ba'athist socialist experiments emerging in the 20th century. The rise of the Zionist state of Israel, propped up by American and Western imperial interests and combined with the discovery of oil in Muslim countries, laid the basis for the imperial politics that dominated the region.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was the first direct countrywide response to imperial domination. The incessant imperial wars in the Middle East caused the death of millions in the region, which laid the platform for the rise of Islamism based on maximalist or fundamentalist political and religious expressions. Al-Qaeda, ISIS and al-Shabab were all movements that rejected Western domination and modernity. These entities propagated a pre-Islamic template that circulated static, premodern expressions of religiosity. In this context, religious discourses underpinned by strongly reactive identity claims often trumped the ethical intent of more universal questions of co-living, sharing and co-operation.

Ethically informed responses struggled to emerge in the face of tremendous change in Muslim societies. Ziauddin Sardar explains that chaos, complexity, globalisation and information technology have created a "*new present that is radically different from all our recent pasts*".⁵⁶ We

56 Sardar, "Islamic Futures in Postnormal times", p. 323.

have entered a period where rapid change, uncertainty and ambiguity are ever-present, and where the individual has tremendous power to do good or bad. In these *postnormal times*, our conventional ways of solving problems do not work. According to Sardar, in postnormal times, we may struggle to develop the systemic and organisational capacity to translate our capabilities into sustainable solutions to our societal problems.⁵⁷ Uncertainty takes centre stage. Since everything is interconnected, complex and chaotic, and changing rapidly, nothing can be described with any certainty any longer. We thus need an Islamic ethical perspective that is fit for our current complex times. Such a perspective would consider the interconnections of a globalised world. Islam should therefore be open to developing an inclusive worldview that promotes equality and plurality at all levels of society. Muslims and non-Muslims would be required to work in partnership with others for a sustainable world and viable futures for all. In such a way, Ziauddin Sardar argues, the emphasis would be on human rights, equal opportunities for women, freedom of conscience and mutuality.⁵⁸ Bringing such a perspective home to more localised conditions and challenges, the challenge is for all faith and non-faith traditions to develop, in alliance, ethically informed social responses to mitigate the impact of complex changes. Such a quest should be based on fidelity to science, sharing resources, addressing poverty alleviation, and witnessing God's justice in our ethical conduct.

Ethical conduct is essential on the terrain of gender justice, where we are confronted with the need to participate in the ongoing struggle against patriarchy and gender oppression. We have to offer readings and interpretations of our sacred texts that respond to the ethical requirement to accord justice to the oppressed among us; women, the poor and the marginalised. Our religious languages should unequivocally call out and act against the oppression of women. The elevation of women's status must become the defining feature of Muslim societies' ongoing practices.

These ongoing adaptive responses are also required in the realm of engagement with digital technology. In our current postnormal times,

57 Sardar, "Islamic Futures in Postnormal times", p. 323-324.

58 Sardar, "Islamic Futures in Postnormal times", p. 323.

digital technology has become ever-present in our life. The smartphone has become an extension of our bodies. A social media presence has defined our self-image, interpersonal communication and everyday reality. Religious discourse has lagged in its responses to guide and inform our digitally connected existences. This is an area for the reanimation of our ethical commitments. Retaining our sense of autonomous individualism and our relations with others is crucial. Using digital technology for the advancement of the public good must become a core part of our responses. Failure to secure a healthy interaction with smart technology and machines will turn us into zombies. Reimagining our humanness in active, critical and productive interaction with the digital world has become one of the most important ethical challenges of our times.

A final terrain of ethical agency worth mentioning relates to our planetary existence. Climate change threatens to exacerbate inequalities globally and to deplete the earth's resources, making sustainable livelihoods unviable. The Qur'an places the earth's survival at its ethical centre.⁵⁹ Humans are expected to play a central role in securing the physical and environmental conditions to secure sustainable livelihoods for our children and grandchildren. Yet our imaginations in seeking ways to secure such a future cannot be limited only to preserving the place of humans in it. A commitment to holistic planetary futures must replace such an anthropocentric view of existence. This involves all animate and inanimate dimensions, living and non-living organisms on this planet, including animals, plants, forests, humans and sea life. We must overcome human egocentrism. In its place, we must imagine our planetary existence as involving in equal measure all the various dimensions of our planetary life. This is where an ethical tradition of beauty, the example offered by Islam and other living ethical traditions must align at their most beautiful and compelling. We require a recommitment to God's beauty, excellence and goodness, as we come together to confront the challenge of sustainable planetary futures.

59 Ibrahim Ozdemir, "Towards An Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective," in Richard Foltz, Frederick Denny and Azizan (eds.), *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, 1-37 (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003).

Conclusion

The article offered an autoethnographic reflection on my ethical self-formation. It specifically discussed my self-formation in the light of my critical engagement with the intellectual perspectives offered by selected Islamic Studies texts on South Africa and beyond. I provided three interactive lines of reading as key to my intellectual engagement. Readings on the religious history of the Muslim community of Cape Town provided me with ontological moorings for my ethical identifications and a platform for the search for epistemological grounds to inform my progressive Islamic commitments. The emphasis on principled adaptation of Islamic languages for understanding and challenging exclusionary practices is necessary for such a platform. Pursuing an intellectual tradition based on putting Islamic religious discourses into conversation with other ethical traditions is a *sine qua non* for working out the terms of our ethical engagement. Living amid uncertainty and complexity in postnormal times requires ethical Islamic perspectives that respond to the complex challenges associated with climate change and digital techno-dominance. Such a task, I have argued, requires us to put Islam's ethical legacy of beauty, compassion and justice to work in the quest to secure the planetary future for humans and non-humans. This is the direction in which my ongoing ethical quest is now turning. Critical reading of relevant texts on Islam and other ethical traditions is crucial to ongoing ethical formation and responsiveness.