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Setting the Stage: Situating the Muslim Liberation Theology

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This *Handbook* emerges from our shared concern about the deep crisis that defines much of Muslim intellectual and theological life. This seems to be a crisis, not of faith, but of a lack of a coherent transformative vision, of independent language and agency, and, perhaps most dramatically, of ethical lucidity. This seeming incoherence of shared thought and action can be recognised in many Muslim thinkers' failure to call for ethically informed actions against readily recognised injustices of our times. This failure has also translated into incoherence of the collective and global Muslim consciousness. Our early conversations with the late Shabbir Akhtar¹ often turned on this predicament: How might Islamic theology and philosophy once again become a living moral and ethical practice rather than a scholastic exercise? His insights, always sharp and uncompromising, inspired this *Handbook* and guided its earliest questions.

Dozens of theological, philosophical and ethical reflections and case studies gathered in this volume tackle this question and, in the process, attempt to bring some coherence to contemporary collective Muslim consciousness. These analyses signal that theology is being restored as an act of trust and resistance increasingly capable of illuminating and articulating the conditions of human life in various parts of the globe.

In taking up this task of making sense of some of the despairs and theological responses produced by both colonial and domestic injustices in Muslim majority and minority societies, we are conscious that the impulse of liberation in theology is not new. Across

1 Shabbir Akhtar was a Muslim philosopher and theologian known for his rigorous engagement with the moral and political dimensions of Islam in the modern world. Educated at the University of Cambridge, he wrote extensively on Islamic theology, philosophy, and interfaith relations, seeking to articulate a confident Muslim intellectual voice within Western contexts. His major works include *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (1991), *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind* (2007), and *Islam as Political Religion* (2010), all of which explore the ethical and political implications of Islamic belief in an age of secular modernity. As contributors to this volume, we were privileged to have vivid and inspiring exchanges with him, and his intellectual courage and moral clarity deeply shaped our vision. Sadly, Professor Akhtar passed away in 2023 before he could witness the publication of this work, to which his thought was a quiet but enduring inspiration.

different religious traditions, moments of moral and political crisis have compelled believers to rethink the relationships between faith and ethics, revelation and history, or liberalism and injustice.² The rise of Latin American Liberation Theology in the twentieth century represents one of the most recognisable and widely discussed articulations of these concerns within the modern theological landscape. Yet, while we recognise its historical and conceptual significance, our point of departure is not continuity and similarities, but constructive engagement and ethical distinction within the so-called Islamosphere.³ We therefore envision Muslim Liberation Theology as an outgrowth of a distinct spiritual, ethical and epistemological matrix, grounded in the Qur'anic paradigm of justice and action. Nonetheless, it is instructive and helpful to reflect briefly on the conditions that gave rise to Liberation Theology in Latin America, as its contextual circumstances reflect unjust conditions and exploitations that are readily recognisable in many, if not most, Muslim contexts today. This reflection is useful as it showcases how faith, ethics and historical struggle can converge into a transformative discourse.

The emergence of Liberation Theology in Latin America, as Christian Smith has shown, was not only a theological development, but also a social movement that highlighted a collective moral response to profound political, economic and ecclesial transformations. This Catholic Liberation Theology should not be understood apart from the structural crisis that afflicted postcolonial Latin American societies in the mid-twentieth century. Here, persistent poverty, military authoritarianism and the Church's entanglement with corrupt ruling elites triggered a theological and social response. These material conditions, combined with shifts in the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), created what Smith terms a 'crisis of legitimacy' or rather a rupture between the Church's moral authority and its social role. Within this disjuncture, the moral imagination of many priests, lay workers and theologians became both rejuvenated and creative. The Church, they argued, could no longer confine itself to sacramental maintenance; it had to re-enter history as a moral agent on the side of the poor and oppressed (Smith 1991).

This call for theological engagement found its defining expression in the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín (Colombia), which famously declared a 'preferential option for the poor'. The statement reframed poverty as a structural injustice rather than a divine test or natural condition. From this moral and political theological reorientation emerged the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas* (1971) articulated the most influential synthesis of these impulses. Gutiérrez defined theology as a critical reflection on human praxis in the light of faith, proceeding from the notion that theology is not a series of abstract speculations, but a response to lived human suffering (Gutiérrez 1973). Theology, in his view, begins after engagement with the world. It is

2 Over time, liberationist thought expanded beyond its Christian origins – taking form in Black Liberation Theology, articulated by James H. Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970); Jewish Liberation Theology, developed by Marc H. Ellis in *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (1987); Dalit Liberation Theology, conceptualized by Arvind P. Nirmal; and even Feminist Liberation Theology, exemplified by Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* (1993).

3 Definition of Islamosphere is found in Sayyid (2019, p. 493), referring to 'the spaces and places in which Islam circulates as the master-signifier.'

born from action and reflection about the divine, and it ultimately returns to action, serving as both critique and inspiration for the transformation of society.

It can be argued that such a liberationist turn in theological engagement represented, and perhaps still represents, both a theological and an epistemological disturbance of traditional Catholic praxis. The locus of theological reflection shifted from universities and clerical institutions to what Smith calls 'grassroots organisational bases' (*comunidades eclesiales de base*), a range of small communities of Latin American workers, peasants and women who gathered to read Scripture through their lived experience (Smith 1991). Such communities turned Scripture into a mirror of their struggles, and the 'beast' of the Apocalypse became the symbol of dictatorship and imperial domination (Rowland 2007). Theology was reimagined as a pedagogy of consciousness, a praxis of hope in the midst of despair.

It became evident that this form of religious knowledge was deeply participatory. Theologians such as Clodovis Boff and Carlos Mesters described it as an *epistemology of praxis*, that is, a mode of knowing grounded in the lived experience of the poor (Boff 1987; Mesters 1983). In a similar way, Zoë Bennett (2007) termed it a 'praxis-based epistemology', where knowledge arises through the dialectic of action and reflection. Bennett argues that the 'hermeneutical privilege of the poor' meant that the Divine truth discloses itself from below, through those who suffer and experience injustice. Knowledge of God, therefore, became a moral act and to know meant to commit oneself to liberation.

What is more, in Smith's sociological reading, this theology succeeded not merely because of intellectual innovation, but because it mobilised new ethical and organisational capacities among the vulnerable in Latin America. Catholic Liberation Theology transformed discontent into collective moral agency, or what he calls 'moral mobilization under religious symbols' (Smith 1991). This process of linking transcendent meaning with social praxis converted despair into hope and faith into resistance. It seems that its enduring significance lies precisely in this liberatory synthesis, in which theology, as a moral movement, redefined what it means to know, believe and act as a human.

This redefinition also subverted the traditional hierarchy of theological praxis itself. For instance, social impulse for orthopraxy was here viewed as preceding the Church's desire for orthodoxy. As Rowland (2007) and Bennett (2007) emphasise, theology became answerable to the historical moment, reclaiming truth from abstraction and returning it to the realm of solidarity. In this way, Catholic Liberation Theology reimagined the theological vocation as both critical and compassionate, or rather, an intellectual and moral practice inseparable from the struggle for justice.

As we already declared, the birth of (any) theology of liberation is inseparable from the experience of crisis. Just as the convergence of poverty, repression and ecclesial complicity in Catholic Latin America made religion an instrument of renewal, so too the Muslim world, for some time now, faces conditions that call for a comparable awakening. Over the past century, Muslims have increasingly lived under an intensifying system of (neo-)colonial and repressive domestic domination. Unleashed some 25 years ago, the Euro-American 'War on Terror', intensified these regimes of control and their proxies in which Muslims became both the pretext and the object of violence. The numerous military intrusions into Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries were and are still driven by imperial logics that reach across Southwest Asia, North and West Africa, and South and Central Asia. The

proliferation of drone and proxy warfare in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and the normalisation of securitisation of Muslim socio-political agency, are mirrored within majority Muslim societies themselves. There, regimes dominated by internalised colonial power-logic consolidate their rule through ruthless repression against anyone or anything that might even remotely threaten or criticise their hold on power, including those who advocate for ummatic solidarity and unity.⁴ Deepening repressive strategies across Muslim-majority societies have produced not only a paralysis of action, but also of thought and a sort of moral fatigue and defeatism among domestic intellectual elites. It seems to us a situation in which the twin forces of callous authoritarianism and intellectual vassalage have hollowed out the languages of faith and justice.

Take, for instance, the brief hope of the Arab Spring between 2010 and 2013 that was quickly extinguished by counter-revolutionary forces and by the Euro-American hegemons who could not accept autonomous and indigenous Muslim agency. What was initially celebrated as the dawn of renewal in the early 2010s soon became a theatre of despair and destruction where foreign intervention, sectarian manipulation and cynicism devoured the liberating energy that had been released (Brownlee et al. 2015). Today, this repressive and violent trajectory reaches its nadir in the genocide in Gaza, where the annihilation of an entire population has confirmed not only the moral bankruptcy and cruelty of most of the Euro-American political establishment, but also the level of ethical degradation and hollowness of values among Muslim leadership and their religious allies (see Bishara 2024; Nijim 2023; Shehadeh 2025). Meanwhile, across the Euro-American and other societies, Muslims continue to endure the effects of structural Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, where the manifestation of piety is more often than not construed as a security threat and where citizenship becomes conditional on loyalty to the dogma of the proverbial state.

The cumulative effect of these interwoven processes has been the systemic reduction of Muslims, both in historically Muslim societies and in diasporas, into populations that are no longer seen as political subjects but rather as objects of surveillance and control. This condition of managed existence, imposed through coercive apparatuses and moral delegitimation, strips communities not only of their sovereignty but also of their right to narrate their own ethical horizons. What remains is a landscape of enforced passivity, where the capacity for collective action is neutralised and interpretive agency is outsourced to institutions that neither represent nor respect the spiritual and moral integrity of Muslim life.

4 On this point, it is essential to note that many contemporary Muslim regimes actively work to undermine transnational *ummatic* solidarity through the nationalization and secularization of Islam, recasting religious identity as a state-managed national category (Galija and Kostić 2021, pp. 121–124). This process is often coordinated with epistemological engineering and security apparatuses that discipline and securitize Muslim subjectivity (Kostić 2024, pp. 612–615). Such identity restructuring also produces ethno-nationalist hierarchies within Muslim societies, giving rise to forms of intra-Muslim racialization and exclusion directed against those who fall outside the dominant ethnonational identity (Костић 2023; Kostić 2025; Костић 2026). In this regard, Malcolm X provides a powerful counter-model. As Poljarević shows, his mature political theology grounded solidarity not in race or ethnicity, but in the universal dignity of the oppressed. After the Hajj, Malcolm X reframed struggle from a racial conflict to an ethical one, identifying the enemy not as a people but as any system that denies God-given human worth – thereby offering a paradigm capable of resisting racial and ethnoreligious supremacy and affirming transnational, ethical solidarity (Poljarević 2020).

Against this backdrop, the urgency to reclaim epistemic and political sovereignty or at least autonomy, is not merely a matter of cultural survival; it is an intellectual imperative.

Thus, these crises, as in Latin America during the post-World War period, reveal the urgency of a new theological thinking. A Muslim Liberation Theology, therefore, emerges as a struggle for epistemological, ethical and intellectual sovereignty, reclaiming the vocabulary of resistance through renewed language and grammar of faith. This theological struggle represents the Qur'anic impulse to inform, reform and warn humans in the hope of reminding them of their moral accountability. This is, we argue, foundational for the ethical action of humans and their responsibility before the Divine. In this attempt to retrieve intellectual sovereignty, committed Muslims have an opportunity to bear witness to justice amid oppression through translating theology into living acts of liberation.

1.1 What Is in the Name?

The task of articulating a Muslim Liberation Theology requires not only retrieving the ethical and epistemological grammar of Islam but also interrogating the very language through which we name this endeavour. The choice of the term Muslim rather than Islamic is not incidental but conceptual. It signals a shift from system to subject, from abstract tradition to living embodiment. 'Islamic' may designate a civilisational corpus or an institutional framework, but 'Muslim' emphasises the situated, accountable subject who bears the *amāna* of faith within history. This choice is not merely terminological; it is theological. It reflects the conviction that liberation theology, if it is to be faithful to its sources, must arise from the experience and praxis of Muslims themselves – from those who struggle to live the Qur'anic message as an act of trust, fairness and hope in an unjust world.

As argued by many, we live today in a world grappling with intersecting crises: streaming genocides, automation of AI weapon systems, neo-imperial death-throws, global trade wars and epistemic colonisation, all wrapped up in the deep ethical crisis (Bauman 2013; de Sousa Santos 2014; Hallaq 2019; Mignolo 2011; Shaw 2016, 2025).

Each of these predicaments calls for a response rooted not merely in critique but in the clear articulation of alternatives. This *Handbook* provides an introduction to the discussion of such options, highlighting that some already exist within pockets of the contemporary and ethically attentive Islamosphere. Through the multitude of voices in those pockets, Muslims themselves, conceived as historically situated moral agents, actively embody, interpret and reimagine this ethical tradition in concrete struggles for justice and freedom. The subsequent chapters in this volume articulate a variety of ways in which liberation theological discourse is articulated, something that emerges from the lived practices of afflicted peoples rather than being derived exclusively from the Islamic textual tradition.

To this end, the *Handbook* introduces a significant methodological and conceptual shift that moves us away from the influential category of 'Islamic Liberation Theology', as notably framed by Asghar Ali Engineer (1990), Shabbir Akhtar (1991), Farid Esack (1997), Hamid Dabashi (2008) and others, towards a more specific analytical framework of 'Muslim Liberation Theology'. Although this might initially appear to be a mere semantic refinement, the distinction entails a necessary epistemic and ethical recalibration. This

introduction sets itself a task: to clarify the substantive implications of this distinction, hopefully providing a coherent philosophical framework for liberation theology.

We argue that in contemporary debates about religion and justice, language is never innocent. Terms carry histories, embed assumptions and distribute authority. So, when we ask whether ‘Islamic Liberation Theology’ or ‘Muslim Liberation Theology’ better captures a movement of ethical and material resistance grounded in Islam, we are not merely debating semantics. We are determining where the centre of moral gravity lies. Is it in the system that speaks, or in the subject who struggles?

To describe a theology as Islamic is to invoke a tradition: revelation, jurisprudence, scholasticism, orthodoxy or its inverse, heresy. The term often suggests a framework that is already constituted, whose primary task is interpretation or defence. Such a framework can function as a gatekeeper that confers legitimacy, identifies deviation (from claimed orthodoxy) and reifies theological principles into doctrine, law or institutional authority. In this rendering, a committed Muslim’s role tends to become passive, as if: the tradition instructs, the faithful obey. This is but one way to participate in and experience tradition.

We propose an emphasis on the meaning of (liberation) theology. That said, Islamic tradition is not merely a deposit of an evolving body of knowledge and practices; it simultaneously represents a method, or a way of seeking, discerning and living ethically in the world. Such a ‘living’ is most visibly enacted by Muslims who inherit specific histories within their contexts, but it is also lived in confrontation with structural violence and in response to the Divine commands through morally charged acts of interpretation and resistance. In this light, Muslim Liberation Theology carries conceptual and ethical content that captures such aspirations for and acts of resistance. The concept centres the moral subject, not as a vessel of doctrine, but as an agent of (ethical, political, social and spiritual) liberation through commitment to the principles of Islamic tradition. Such articulation of liberation affirms that theology arises not only from scholastic exercises and intellectual discourse, but *most likely* from below, from within the lived tension between divine trust and worldly afflictions.

This emphasis on naming is therefore not cosmetic; it is primarily methodological. Framing liberation theologically as a committed Muslim recentres agency and responsibility in the believer him/herself. It resists potential abstraction, reminding us that revelation does not float above history but moves through it as interpreted, embodied and sometimes contested content of ethical action. For instance, where the term ‘Islamic’ can possibly risk becoming a badge of authority or a bureaucratic category, the term ‘Muslim’ hopefully reclaims the theological imagination for those committed to the principles such as justice and mercy from within their ethical subjectivity.

The distinction then between Islamic and Muslim becomes even sharper when we engage the metaphysical commitments that underlie liberation theology in contexts where Muslims engage with socio-political issues. For instance, for the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane, the human being is not merely a legal adherent but a trustee (*mu’taman*), entrusted with divine meaning, ethical responsibility and the labour of embodying revelation in history. Central to this vision is *amāna* (trusteeship), through which liberation becomes not a mere political demand but a spiritual vocation (Abderrahmane 2017). Perhaps this can be translated as: resistance without purification becomes mimicry, and a claim to power without trusteeship becomes corruption.

Abderrahmane's trusteeship paradigm (*al-nazariyya al-'itimāniyya*) provides the meta-physical backbone for this move.

For Taha, ethical subjectivity does not begin with doctrine or legality, but with entrustment, which is the conviction that the human being is accountable not only to revelation but also to the ethical labour of embodying it. This labour is neither neutral nor disembodied. It is enacted through *dhikr* (remembrance), *'amal* (ethical action) and *tazkiyya* (spiritual purification), all of which resist the hollowing of faith into identity or formality. This insight recalibrates liberation itself. Liberation is no longer a horizontal contest between political actors or ideologies. It becomes a vertical calling: an obligation to uphold the trust placed in human beings to enact justice (*'adl*) and to embody dignity (*karāma*). Such a framework refuses both the liberal celebration of pluralism as passive tolerance and the Islamist reduction of the Divine will to a juridical code. It posits, instead, a pluralism of ethical struggle, grounded in prophetic example and spiritual accountability rather than in institutional validation.

Similarly, Shabbir Akhtar insists that divine command is not reducible to rules but is an invitation to moral transformation. In his account, ethical responsibility is neither culturally contingent nor historically convenient, it is divinely imposed. Muslims are morally rational beings called to actualise God's justice in a fractured world (Akhtar 2010). Akhtar's rational theism complements this ethical metaphysics by grounding liberation in divine justice. For Akhtar, the imperative to resist oppression is not a sociological convenience but a theological necessity. Human reason, in his view, is capable of recognising moral truths, but it must be animated by divine command. Yet, where Akhtar privileges individual moral reason, Muslim Liberation Theology also emphasises the collective dimensions of agency, those enacted through community, history and shared struggle. For both thinkers, the theological subject is central: one who responds to the Divine not merely through submission, but through morally intelligible action. They inadvertently hint at a model of liberation theology that is coherently grounded, ethically oriented and politically aware (Abou El Fadl 2001). It resists the symbolic inflation seen in some postcolonial theologies that valorise martyrdom without anchoring resistance in sustained ethical reasoning. It also sidesteps the institutionalism that reduces Islamic tradition to state-sanctioned orthodoxy.

This is why theology, if it is to remain faithful, must emerge not only from scripture but also from experience. Do Muslims not engage revelation from within specific contexts? Indeed, their approaches are shaped by context, suffering, failures, hope and struggle. Thus, when liberation thinkers interpret the Qur'an through the lives of the oppressed, through poverty, colonial occupation, racialisation, marginalisation or oppression, they are not innovating from outside of Islamic tradition. They are continuing their ethical task from within it. In this light, Muslim Liberation Theology names not only the religious source of a theology but also its ethical orientation. It signals that the tradition lives insofar as it is enacted by those who dare to ask whether an idea is just, not merely whether it is authorised. It shifts the question from 'Is this Islamic enough?' to 'Is this faithful to the trust that we (claim to) bear?'

To be clear, this is not a rejection of the term Islamic. It is instead a reorientation of the sources of agency in liberatory action. Islamic tradition, with its principles, remains the horizon, that is, the revelatory grammar of justice, mercy and human dignity. But this grammar is spoken anew, from within lives that seek to live its meaning, as it were. In this

sense, we argue that theology is not a closed system, but a way through which responsibility and a continuous series of attempts are articulated in order to make the Divine imperatives intelligible in times of crisis.

In this way, the chapters in this volume suggest that what is needed today is not another systematic or analytic theology but an ethical orientation that remains accountable to revelation and responsive to the world. In other words, Muslim Liberation Theology does not merely describe who is doing theology, it signals the kind of theology that is being done. It is a theology of resistance to injustice from the grassroots and from the margins, finding inspiration in fidelity to trust and a movement deriving its material and spiritual strength from the afflicted who believe that the Divine does not abandon the oppressed. In this sense, it is not the Islamic that liberates. It is the Muslim who dares to live by Islamic principles as liberation. That is not a semantic distinction. It is a theological one.

1.2 A Possible Objection: The Risk of Undermining Theological Authority

It is, nonetheless, important to acknowledge a concern that may arise in response to our proposal to reframe Islamic Liberation Theology as Muslim Liberation Theology. One concern is that this shift, while well-intentioned, risks becoming overly preoccupied with terminology at the expense of praxis.⁵ In contexts where liberation is an urgent ethical imperative, the distinction between ‘Islamic’ and ‘Muslim’ may appear as a technical nuance, one that could possibly distract from the concrete work of resisting injustice and transforming lived realities.

A second concern relates to the substantial symbolic and theological weight of the term ‘Islamic’. To describe a theology as Islamic is not merely to invoke tradition; it is to assert that the project is grounded in sacred authority and that it speaks not just from human experience, but in fidelity to divine justice. From this perspective, dropping the term ‘Islamic’ may unintentionally concede theological ground to institutional powers that have long monopolised the right to define Islam. Rather than challenging that monopoly, the shift to ‘Muslim’ might be seen as relocating the discourse outside the realm of authoritative tradition.

Yet another concern related to previous experiences from the long-standing debate between ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Muslim feminism’ has shown that language matters. While the former seeks to reclaim and reinterpret Islamic tradition’s sacred sources in the pursuit of gender justice, the latter is often read as locating its ethical commitments outside of religion, sometimes even in opposition to it (see Barlas 2002; Margot 2002). In that context, ‘Muslim’ has at times been associated with secular or human rights-based frameworks that do not necessarily engage Islamic theology on its own terms. By analogy, some may fear that privileging ‘Muslim’ in our theological framing could risk a similar drifting away

⁵ Authors are grateful for their private correspondence with Shadaab Rahemtullah and his critical comments on parts of this chapter.

from the revelatory foundations of Islamic tradition and towards a more secularised or external critique.

These concerns should not simply be dismissed; they deserve careful attention. They remind us that our task is not only to name but to preserve the integrity of the tradition that underpins the entire liberatory project. Any re-centring therefore must do justice to Islam's divine claims, even as it seeks to reclaim its meaning from the ground up. The concerns remind us that theology, particularly in traditions shaped by struggle, must not lose sight of its central aim and that is to speak meaningfully into the lives of those suffering injustice. The concern that our emphasis on renaming – from Islamic to Muslim Liberation Theology – risks becoming a mere lexical detour is a fair one. Again, when we speak of Muslim Liberation Theology, we are not moving theology out of the sacred but pointing to how the sacred is lived in times of crises, how it is interpreted, remembered and enacted under conditions of oppression.

Take, for example, the prison imam who draws on Qur'anic narratives to affirm the dignity of incarcerated Muslims. He may operate under the banner of institutional 'Islam', but his theology is no less faithful or significant or liberatory for that. Or consider the domestic worker who invokes just and equal treatment before the Divine as a reason to resist racial hierarchies that degrade her labour as a claim of universal equality of creation and the importance of justice. In both cases, revelation is not abstracted into a system; it is lived as manifestations of responsibility and trust. More concretely, the term 'Muslim' (in Muslim Liberation Theology) names the subject who lives this metaphysically embedded trust in each soul-bearer.

The concern that dropping 'Islamic' might cede ground to those who already monopolise Islamic discourse is not unfounded. But this is precisely why re-centring matters. Institutional religion has long used the term Islamic to authorise narrow readings, sometimes to sanctify authoritarianism, and more frequently in the 21st century, to delegitimise dissent (see Williamson et al. 2023). Reclaiming the tradition, then, must begin not by appealing to those same gatekeepers, but by affirming the authority of those who live Islam with moral courage. Once more, this does not mean we disown the 'Islamic'. It means we resist the reflex to define theology solely from above, through *fiqh* councils, formal scholasticism or state-sanctioned categories.

As such then, the term 'Muslim' centres the ethical subject, not in opposition to Islamic tradition or its principles, but as its entrusted bearer, shaped by historical urgency. This theological orientation is often whispered in grief, practiced in resistance or carried in solitude. Naming that burden rightly is part of our responsibility. So, 'the Muslim' in this paradigm is not an abstract actor or legal adherent, but a bearer of trust (*amāna*) who is conscious of the struggle before her and also one who is summoned by revelation and implicated in history.

Such conceptual synthesising situates Muslim Liberation Theology well within the broader conversation on epistemic decoloniality. At the same time, it does not merely resist imperial domination in cultural terms, as in Dabashi's aesthetic critique, but reclaims the vertical axis of knowing, a form of *ma'rifa* that centres the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) as both the source and the aim of liberation. Here, decolonisation is not only the unmaking of Eurocentric categories, but the reactivation of Islamic ethical knowledge as an alternative way of being in and knowing the world. This is why the insistence on 'Muslim' over 'Islamic' is more than a linguistic preference; it represents a theological direction. In this

vision, therefore, the ethics of naming becomes part of the ethics of struggle. Muslim Liberation Theology does not only name the one who thinks theologically, but also the one who suffers and acts, whose trustworthiness is measured not in verbal articulation of dogma, but in how justice is pursued, mercy practiced and trust upheld. In doing so, this framework resists both romanticised defiance and depoliticised piety, as evident in a number of chapters in this *Handbook*.

Consider this, after 2013, Egypt offers a stark case in which a theology of liberation must think from defeat rather than after victory. In a carceral landscape of disappearance, torture and the banal piety of jailers, the operative question shifts from ‘what method liberates?’ to ‘who is at stake and how do they live?’ Quisay’s ethnography of former detainees shows that praxis condensed into what prisoners called *ṣumūd* (steadfastness) and an ‘ethics of survival’ between open confrontation and quietism: memorising the Qur’ān when printed copies were banned, reconstructing congregational prayer across solitary cells, performing prayers ‘in the head’ when purity and time were policed and practicing *tadabbur* (devotional contemplation) as a way to let scripture read their suffering rather than to import a prefabricated ‘liberationist’ hermeneutic into the text. In that crucible, theodicy became practical: worship named the prison a ‘false god’ that claimed *kun fa-yakūn* (‘be and it is’) over life and death, and re-asserted divine action without presuming automatic triumph for ‘the oppressed’ (Quisay 2023). This is another path of liberation, performance of small acts of care, guarded dignity and scriptural contemplation as embodied refusal, neither blessing tyranny nor romanticising resistance, but staying human within a system designed to unmake the human.

Yet this very path exposes an important tension. If survival becomes the limit of our imagination, then the horizon of liberation collapses into the management of despair. The risk is that ethical endurance, detached from collective transformation, turns into a language of pacification. From the standpoint of Muslim Liberation Theology, faith that does not confront structures of oppression risks transforming God-consciousness into resignation and mere survival-mode existence. Any theology that confines liberation to the interior, however refined, leaves systems of oppression and exploitation intact.

A similar risk appears in a religious tradition that insists on the ego as the fundamental and first dictator. This insight carries moral and spiritual depth: every structure of domination indeed begins with the self’s illusion of sovereignty. But it becomes theologically and politically evasive when it transposes a historical, social and political struggle into a *purely* spiritual or interior register. Muslim Liberation Theology, as conceptualised above, recognises that the ego’s will to power and material gain manifests not only in human actions of selfishness, but also in empire building, colonial oppression and exploitation, market dominance and state control of the entire spectrum of human existence. It is therefore not enough to invoke the ambitions of ‘the ego’ (protection of one’s social position and material safety) as an alibi for silence before blatant injustices and oppression. The purification of the self and disciplining the ego therefore accompany, not replace, the struggle for justice. In other cases, spiritual practices risk becoming a mirror of oppression.

We would therefore suggest that inner and outer liberation are not stages but coextensive dimensions of one moral vocation. The self is not delivered from history but formed within it, which suggests that *dhikr* (remembrance) and *amāna* (trusteeship) bind worship to

(any) action. This means that remembrance is indeed ethical (and spiritual) when it manifests in justice-seeking, and that trusteeship is ethical only when it confronts cruelty and corruption within the given capacity of a human agent. Another example is that spiritual refinement (*tazkiya*) does not wait for politics to change; instead, it animates change by disciplining motives, enlarging solidarity and sustaining *ṣumūd* (steadfastness), even under (social, economic and political) pressure. Abou El Fadl argues that to remember God rightly is to refuse Pharaoh, naming the *ṭāghūt* (usurping power), protecting *karāma* (dignity) and perhaps even repairing *‘umrān* (the social habitat) (2001). The result is neither a privatised piety nor a naked activism, but a covenantal praxis of mutual critique in which *jihād al-naḥs* (inner struggle) and *amr bi-l-ma’rūf wa-nahy ‘an al-munkar* (enjoining right and forbidding wrong) are inseparable disciplines. It can be argued that spirituality in this framework (where theology resumes its work as liberation) becomes responsibility, and remembrance becomes resistance.

1.3 From Naming to Collective Struggle

This *Handbook* proposes a deliberate shift from Islamic Liberation Theology to Muslim Liberation Theology. Again, this conceptual proposal is not rhetorical. It centres the bearer of trust, the one who does theology under pressure and insists that the Divine does not stand neutral before injustice. This positioning situates theological analysis as answerable to revelation *and* to those whose lives are formed by the tradition.

A subtle question that runs through these pages tries to identify what ethical grammar underlies contemporary Muslim activism and how it can become a method for rethinking liberation within modernity? The chapters in this volume attempt to answer this question from many places yet return to the trusteeship (*amāna*) of humankind. These scholars do not chase uniformity of terms or doctrine. They demonstrate in a variety of ways how Muslim liberation work lives and evolves across geographies, histories and intellectual traditions. Over thirty contributions present Sunni and Shī‘ī reflections grounded in distinct schools yet drawn to a common moral horizon. Readers will encounter ethnographies of everyday resistance, close readings of divine justice, spirituality and metaphysics and sociologies of power, class and exclusion. The range is deliberate: Black Muslim movements in the United States, anti-colonial thought in North Africa, Muslim feminism, Muslim minorities in Europe and Latin America negotiating surveillance, assimilation and belonging. Together these studies display one orientation that reanimates the ethical spectrum of the Islamic tradition through struggle, memory and action.

This breadth is not incidental. It reflects the claim that Muslim Liberation Theology is grounded in the plurality of Muslim lives and struggles. The aim is not to build a singular doctrine, but to articulate a horizon of trust, where committed Muslims, as historically situated moral agents, reclaim their agency to interpret, contest and embody the values of faith (*īmān*), justice (*‘adl*), mercy (*raḥma*) and thereby trustworthiness (*amāna*). Here, theology does not merely explain injustice, corruption, colonisation and oppression; it resists them. It also suggests that scholarly responsibility includes reading revelation through the wounds of concrete suffering, while engaging in conversation across traditions and geographies.

What is more, the liberatory impulse of theology seeks hereby to recover the transformative energy of faith not as abstraction but as lived commitment, and where mosque, street and university are united in a shared labour of moral renewal. The authors of the chapters gesture, in a variety of ways, towards a living theology that is sometimes shaped in prison cells and dark dungeons, but also within protest marches and other public articulations of dissent. They do not ask whether such ideas are ‘Islamic enough’ or if they are institutionally approved; instead many of them ask whether we, as a collective, are faithful to the trust we bear. In that spirit, this volume does not seek definitive answers or to adjudicate the label. Instead, it offers an opening, an invitation to think and to act in liberatory ways.

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