

# THE TIME OF EPISTEMIC DOMINATION: NOTES ON MODERNITY AS AN OPPRESSIVE CATEGORY

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**Abstract:** Critically engaging with many writings – some recent, some old – this essay brings to light the monumental connections between notions of time at the heart of modernity and scholarship on Islam as epistemic domination. The thesis it foregrounds is that decolonizing knowledge cannot proceed with continuing fidelity to the dominating time of secular modernity. The essay, therefore, argues that scholars should inquire into Islamic concepts of time rather than uncritically apply the notions of temporality supplied by West and modernity. To illustrate how Islamic notions of time work in practice, it ends with two examples from “modern” history.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Iqbal, Islam, modernity, the Qur’ān, time

The question that guides this essay is: if academic inquiries rest on a hierarchical time-space matrix with time spatialized and space temporalized, does not critique (Ahmad 2017a) entail examining that very matrix? This essay seeks not merely to cover the works under discussion but to generate future inquiries. At its center is the relationship between knowledge and time. Pursued from a decolonial framework, its contention is that rather than apply the concepts of time supplied by West and modernity, works on Muslim traditions and cultures should first inquire into and then employ Islamic conceptions of time.

This thesis stands in contradistinction to Aziz Al-Azmeh’s (2007). Wedded to the view of history and time – the details of which he keeps opaque in the same way as his faith in the Enlightenment appears without any qualification – bequeathed by the Enlightenment, for Al-Azmeh any perspective that does not pay homage to it is straightforwardly particularist, anti-universalist, irrationalist, culturalist, romantic postmodernist, organicist, “primitivist”, “nativist”, and a “neo-romantic historiography” (2007: 110, 111, 115, 131, 116). Explaining the rationale, he argues that such perspectives “privilege *sentiment* over structure, organic continuity in history over change and *progress*, communitarian *particularity* over *universalism*” (emphasis added). The

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adjectives without quotation marks in the sentence preceding this one often appear as nouns in Al-Azmeh's text and to which he assigns his own particularizing meanings too. To defend "historicism" of the Enlightenment, he presents the "Arab-Islamic tradition" as an example of "culturalism" (Al-Azmeh 2007: 118). That Al-Azmeh's own standpoint is also culturalist, affiliated to the culture of the European Enlightenment to which he seldom applies his skills of critique, is left unregistered and unmarked.

The essay is organized into three sections. The first section critically (and variously) assesses works by Abullahi An-Na'im, Şerif Mardin, SherAli Tareen, Fabio Vicini, and others. It focuses on Tareen's book as an exemplification of how notions of time central to West's modernity crucially shape and inform most works on Islam. To bring this theme to the forefront of the analysis, here I introduce readers to the larger goal, argument, methodology and context of Tareen's work. Having identified the assumptions and working of secular modernity's time in this and other works, including my own, the next section comparatively outlines the notions of time in Islamic tradition. Here I critique Westernizing ideas of time evident in Souleymane Diagne's text on Muslim modernist thinkers in conversation with Western tradition. Continuing with Diagne, the third section subjects his argument that Islamic tradition postulates "time is God" to a thorough critique. Since Diagne takes Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), poet-philosopher of the subcontinent, as a source fundamental to his argument, I read Iqbal to institute a counter-argument that time and God are not one and the same. I conclude this section with two examples illustrating Islamic concepts of time. The first example is drawn from the work of Iqbal and relates to his comparison of Geneva and Mecca as exemplifying two different notions of temporalities. The second example pertains to a radically different reading of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, India, by Rahat Indori – a popular Indian poet who died during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here I compare Indori's deployment of Islamic notion of time with Hindu as well secular conceptions of time to interpret the 2002 pogrom. With a sketch of the contours of future works, particularly the comparative ones, in my conclusion, I summarize and reinforce my argument.

## The Competing-Complementing Spectrum

In an enlightening article, sociologist Şerif Mardin (1991: 116–17) wrote about the momentous transformation of the Ottoman Empire under the Western gaze. Evocatively titled "The Just and the Unjust", in it, he discussed how its historical culture split, especially from the eighteenth century onward, into two: the culture of the administering palace elite on one hand and that of the administered masses on the other. The split occurred in many domains, including in the literary and the religious. In the latter, the rift only accelerated with each dose of Westernization, manifest between *sharī'a*, which the populace felt attached to, and *qānun*, the secular realm of law emanating as fiats of the Sultan from the palace.<sup>1</sup> In terms

of social-political actors, the rift pertained to madrasa-trained *‘ulema* (scholars) or Sufis and technicians and bureaucrats of the palace. With reference to the sixteenth-century Prince Sezade Korkut, Mardin interpreted that rift, including the time of Kemalism, as representing “the team of the just” and “the team of the unjust” respectively.

SherAli Tareen’s *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* is a comprehensive historical exploration relating to the team of the just in the subcontinent under the British rule, where Mardin’s distinction between the just and the unjust expressed itself differently. Shah Ismail, a nineteenth-century scholar-reformer-activist of Delhi, distinguished *siyāsat-e-imānī* (faith-guided politics) from *siyāsat-e-sulṭānī* (worldly politics).<sup>2</sup> Theoretically elegant, descriptively rich and skillfully marshaling sources in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and English, Tareen’s book is scholarship in its finest form, setting a benchmark for future scholars in religious studies and beyond. At the core of his intervention is the rivalry between two important Sunni groups known as Barelviīs and Deobandī, names derived from places (both in north India) influential figures of each group were identified with. The themes of rivalry concerned modes of prayer; conceptions of God as absolute transcendence and possibility of Him lying; status of the Prophet Muhammad as a human and if he or any dead but spiritually exalted (*valī*) could work as an intermediary between God and humans; whether or not Prophet Muhammad had the knowledge of the hidden (*ghayb*); nature of relationships of the living with the dead; propriety of ritualized celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (*mawlīd/mīlād*); and more.

Traceable to nineteenth-century north India, this two-century-old rivalry continues to (mis)inform lives of contemporary Muslims across the nation-states of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and other adjoining countries. In the southern state of Kerala, analogous terms used for the Barelvi-Deobandi rivalry are Sunni and Mujahid. Let me note that all Kerala Muslims are Sunnis but unlike their Hanafi counterparts in the north, they follow the Shafai *maslak* (school of thought or path; see below). In Kerala, Sunni, then, refers to “traditionalist” Muslims positioned against Mujahid. The word Mujahid comes from Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen, an organization established in 1920s. Mujahids criticize un-Islamic customs and stand for reforms against what they deem as *shirk* (Miller 1976; Osella and Osella 2008: 317–21). To return from the south, the inclusion of which would have expanded the book’s scope, to the north, the rivalry at its extreme has led to denunciation of the others as outside the fold of Islam and non-cultivation or de-activation of social relations, particularly marital ones.

Given that the rivalry is not only between groups both of whom are Sunnis but also followers of the same Hanafi *maslak*, it has puzzled so many. Legions of books and pamphlets have been written on it. Most are by partisans of each group showing validity of their own position. Tareen’s book is the first thorough academic treatment

of this subject from a sophisticated framework that eclectically draws on insights from anthropology, intellectual history, Islamic studies, political theory, religious studies, area studies, and other fields. In addition to being objective – with the realization that in the absence of a universally agreed standard the notion of what is objective is itself subjective – it reads the rivalry in a fresh light. Through its long journey spanning over 450 pages, it identifies flaws in the conceptual edifice of many scholars (e.g. Shahab Ahmed, Ayesha Jalal, Aamir Mufti, Francis Robinson, and Pnina Werbner) as well as boldly affirms its intellectual debt to others (e.g. Ananda Abeysekara, Talal Asad, Ebrahim Moosa, David Scott, and Qasim Zaman).

To account for the rivalry, Tareen focuses on *'ulema* and their texts. As his approach is hermeneutical, typical variables like social class or the rural-urban dynamic receive scant attention. Risking the charge of oversimplification, one may say that the book tracks textual critique amongst four *'ulema* over two centuries: Shah Ismail (1779–1831) and Ashraf Ali Thanvi (1863–1943) from the Deobandī group and Fazl-e-Haq Khayrabadi (1796–1862) and Ahmad Raza Khan (1856–1921) from the Barelvī one. Two other prominent *'ulema* are Shah Waliullah (1703–63) and Haji Imdadullah (1814–99). While Waliullah lived well before the rivalry began, he is important because both Barelvīs and Deobandīs (Ahl-e-ḥadīṣ too; indeed, most *'ulema* in the subcontinent) consider him as their intellectual ancestor. Imdadullah, known less as a scholar like Khan or Thanvi and more as a Sufi, is significant for he strove to bridge the gulf between the two groups – such that both took him as endorsing their own claim. Since the rivalry involves deep philosophical-theological themes pertaining to the Qur'ān, *ḥadīṣ*, and exegesis thereof, an exposition on it cannot remain limited to India or to *'ulema* mentioned above. Closely reading texts in multiple languages, Tareen shows an impressive grasp of the foundational and ancillary sources of the faith across ages and the regions. For instance, his analysis takes him to philosopher Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388) of Andalusia and Jalaluddin al-Suyuti (d. 1505) of what is now Egypt. His key contention is that the Barelvī-Deobandī rivalry should be understood as “instantiations of competing political theologies” (15) or as “moments of contestation between competing rationalities of tradition and reform” (377).

On many counts, this is a brilliant proposition: deftly analyzed, meticulously sustained, and convincingly substantiated. It lays to rest the prejudice, which I too differently entertained as a teenager (on which, more below), that the position of Barelvīs is less scholarly than that of Deobandīs. In contrast, Tareen shows each position as rational. The framework of competing rationalities also liberates readers from the earlier dominant but tedious arguments that depicted Barelvīs as lovable Sufis and syncretic and Deobandīs as loveless legalists and rigid. In the policy realm, especially during the ongoing Global War on Terror, it was mapped along the lines of good versus bad Muslims. Similarly, the proposition rightly

does away with the modernization dogma that, with the tempo of urbanization, custom-laden, folk Islam in the countryside will disappear or become peripheral. The polarity between scripturalism and mysticism (Geertz 1968; Gellner 1981) served as the axis of this scholarship.

While the thesis of competing political theology and rationality is persuasive, there is more to it. In addition to being *competing*, that rationality is also considerably *complementing*, as chapters 10 and 12 on Imadadullah and Manzur Nomani (1905–97) demonstrate. To Nomani, on the issue of hidden knowledge (*ghayb*), Khan and Thanvi stood side by side, not apart from each other (322).<sup>3</sup> My point about *competing-complementing* spectrum is further reinforced by Tareen’s own fine illustration of what a *maslak* (path/orientation) is (174). Breaking it into three variables – a) knowledge and its sources, b) hermeneutics, and c) practice – he observes that as they belonged to the same *maslak*, the differences between Barelvīs and Deobandīs lay not in a) but in b) and c). What I am suggesting is already there in Tareen’s text, albeit as a tension of sorts on the cusp of eruption. In his Table of Contents, part one and part two are titled as “Competing Political Theologies” and “Competing Normativities”. To state the obvious, actors competing are distinct groups of Deobandīs and Barelvīs, their relations characterized by divergences. This premise persists until chapter 9. Chapter 10, though placed in part two, is strikingly named “Convergence”. The short part three with a lone chapter, “Internal Disagreement”, is named “Intra-Deobandi Tension”. Thus disagreements *within* replace those *between* Barelvīs and Deobandīs. My point is that the non-clarity about the logic and structure of chapters is perhaps due to the assumption of Barelvīs and Deobandīs as *competing* rather than also *complementing*. Let it be said, if perversely, that the competition strikes such a chord between these two groups rather than others also underlines their complementary nature.

Anchored surely as it is in ideas and beliefs as Tareen avers, sociologically the rivalry, however, is also constitutive of the identity of a *maslak* as in-group. This identity rests on a sense of proximity without which the rivalry will lose its coherence. To the surprise of many, even the fiercest polemic between two or more parties presupposes the existence of, even a consensus about, that which is the subject of controversy. Tareen’s focus on competition alone is probably also on account of an unclarified notion of “polemic” (and its derivatives) deployed all through his prose in a largely negative sense. A word or two on polemics is thus in order. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2021), polemic means “a strong verbal or written attack on a person, opinion, doctrine”. Derived from Greek *polēmos/polemikos*, meaning war and warlike (Crewe 2004: 136), polemic is seldom viewed positively, particularly in the academy expecting its recruits to display mutual courtesy. From this premise, or so it appears, Foucault (1984: 381, 382) remarked that he did not “like to get involved in polemics”, preferring to conduct

“discussions”. He stated that a polemicist “possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking”. In this gesture of disavowal by Foucault, Crewe (2004: 138), however, notes a concealed “polemic against Habermas”, including the polemical nature of Foucault’s own position. Contra Foucault, Crewe goes on to show how polemic was useful and integral to knowledge in the sixteenth-century England.

Talal Asad (1993) titled the final section of *Genealogies of Religion* “polemics”. Like its other sections, it is valuable on its own as well as to the overall book. Radiant with sagacity and sensitivity, the chapters of polemics on the Rushdie affair contributed to an entire new way of understanding politics, religion, literature, and more. Despite the dictionary definition, a polemicist’s insistence on her position is not always because she alone possesses the truth. Quite the contrary! Skeptical of polemical exchanges where will trumps intellect to claim victory, Schopenhauer (d. 1860) cautioned against the presumed certainty among the warring polemicists. In *The Art of Controversy*, he also noted their positive élan in arriving at truth: “Should we abandon our position at once, we may discover later on that we were right after all” (2008: 5; also see, Dascal 2017).<sup>4</sup> Without this philosophical uncertainty, it is impossible to grasp the discourse of convergence either by Imdadullah or by Nomanī.

To spotlight the ferocity of rivalry, Tareen opens his book with the only current example, that too from India (not Pakistan, see below). In 2006, a Barelvī *‘āilm* in Moradabad issued a *fatva* asking his followers to renew their marriage vows because, having earlier prayed behind a Deobandī imam, their faith had become corrupted. But there is also reality other than the Moradabad *fatva*. Knowing each other’s *maslak* well, marital alliances are also founded between Barelvīs and Deobandīs. Here is an example, ontologically subsidized. Before they got married, while the family of my mother was reformist/Deobandī, my father’s was Barelvī. As a child, I recall elements of the rivalry Tareen dwells on discussed in the family. But rivalry as an ideology does not fully account for the praxis of accommodation: now tense, now dense. Initially educated in a Deobandī madrasa and as a teenager who did not regard them quite right, I also took part in events of *mavlīd/mīlād* (especially, at my mother’s instruction). As one of the few educated kids in my village, I also sang *n ‘āt* (hymn) in those events.

To iterate, Barelvīs-Deobandīs are actors not only competing against but also complementing each other. Those who see the simultaneity of competing and complementing as a contradiction might examine what constitutes an understanding as well as contradiction. Another crucial issue Tareen’s book opens space for critical discussion is the question of time-space, which I attend to below.

Winning a prize by an author for his work is surely an achievement. No less important is to know what the prize is for. In my view, the fact that this book won

the American Institute of Pakistan Studies Book Prize (University of Notre Dame Press 2021) seems to undo the depth, significance, and time-space template of its own exposition. With its focus placed squarely on unpartitioned India, it has very little, if anything, to do with Pakistan as a nation-state and to which the prize owes its affiliation and filiation. In fact, early on Tareen tells his readers that his book is about “the colonial context”, not about “its postcolonial afterlives” (5). The question, then, arises: is the prize based on the space-centered nationality of the author, territorial mandate of the awarding institute, or the book’s subject? Throughout Tareen terms pre-partition India as “south Asia,” often prefixing it with “Muslim” (64) to stress his subject matter, while taking “Indic” (59) as nearly a synonym for Hindu. Like the colonial term “Middle East” (Ahmad 2011b), “South Asia” is geo-strategic and born out of the armory of a positivist time-space matrix hooked to national interests. Consider the book *Does South Asia Exist?* published by the Walter Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, an institution of the Stanford University whose goal, as on its copyright page, is to “influence the US policy toward the Asia-Pacific”. Its three editors (Dossani, Sneider and Sood 2010) are from the fields of banking, journalism (as foreign correspondent), and spying, the last one “earlier headed the Research and Analysis Wing of India’s external research intelligence unit” (book’s back cover).

It is this precise geo-strategic idea of time-space emanating from the modern-secular-colonial matrix within which An-Na‘im’s account of “competing visions of history in internal Islamic discourse” operates. With no concern about an alternative concept of time integral to Islam and pledging loyalty to the time of secular modernity, he presents what he calls “alternative visions of history” (An-Na‘im 2007: 145). Uncritically accepting the twentieth-century geo-political categories of the Middle East, Sudan, Nigeria, West Africa, and so on, he urges African Muslim communities to fashion visions of history alternative to “the Golden Age of Islam, which is really the history of the Middle East” (An-Na‘im 2007: 147). Describing the Golden Age of Islam view of history, “determined by . . . early Muslims”, as a “historical hegemony”, he argues that Muslims such as those in the sub-Saharan Africa should resist it by “advocating alternative visions of history” anchored in the “local and global environment” (An-Na‘im 2007: 145). Such an analysis, in some respects similar to Bashir’s (2014) made later, generates a number of questions. For this essay, I limit myself to underlining its one implication. This amounts to fragmenting Muslims’ history – in its full diversity and attentive to local differences and specificities – along artificial regional and territorial silos so as to subjugate it to the dictates of modernity’s political time. In so doing, the idea that modernity’s time is not the only time and there are notions of time other than modernity’s simply go past An-Na‘im’s analytical frame. That he regards total critique of colonialism as “untrue and unfair” and makes a fervent appeal to



acknowledge “the positive contributions of colonialism” (An-Na‘im 2007: 147) is no less important to acknowledge here.

Moving beyond An-Na‘im’s exposition on colonialism marked by the dyad of positive-negative, readers of this journal hardly need a reminder about the fact that colonialism is equally a mode of knowledge consisting, among others, of definitions and classification (Cohn 1996; Mamdani 2012; Mignolo 2002). The sheer force of this knowledge, including its protocols about time and space, continues to condition the so-called post-colonial nation-states. Consider the case of Turkey. In the Ottoman context, Mardin (1991: 123–6) insightfully discussed the embrace of positivist notion of knowledge propagated by the newly established military and political academies. The main carrier of this positivism was the team of the unjust, which devalued the morality-informed idea of knowledge, *‘ilm*, associated with *‘ulema*-Sufis, and fiercely privileged Western knowledge as *funūn*. In this grand scheme of positivism (of Émile Durkheim too who greatly influenced Turkish intellectuals) social relations became “things”. This positivism became nationalism in the political arena. Thus, to deploy the twentieth-century term of South Asia by taking it temporally backward and call the nineteenth-century Jalal Shah, a Sufi of Delhi, “a South Asian Muslim” (63) derails Tareen’s laudable goal of writing against “Western imperial desires” (384) and “hermeneutic of submission” (34). Moreover, it violates the vision of the book’s protagonists like Sayyid Ahmad (d. 1831), an anti-colonial scholar-activist whose politics was anything but tethered to a deified, nationalized territory (68–9). My point is that the book certainly deserves a prize but one from an institute about the subcontinent as a non-nation-state. That this has not happened – can it? – is telling commentary on the time of nation-state as a space (or an open prison if you will). At work here is how the national and epistemological borders substitute each other to prostitute knowledge qua knowledge.

### **Time in/of Modernity, Time in/of Islam**

To continue with the time-space matrix, in pages ahead I make some observations about modernity as a temporal anchor in Tareen’s book. Explaining its title, he writes that Prophet Muhammad was central in the competing discourses of Barelvis and Deobandis. Quite right! Here too the issue, nonetheless, is not simply his persona but also the time that Prophet lived and the concept of time he was a messenger of. As for adding “in modernity”, its defense comes not from accounts of protagonists the book is built on. It is author’s own choice (or constraint). The figure of Muhammad, writes Tareen, “assumed unprecedented urgency in the modern colonial environment” (9). That is, dethroning of the Mughal sovereignty and British occupation of India made *‘ulema* aware about the boundary of their



faith, of which the Barelvī-Deobandī rivalry was an upshot. There is no denying the political upheaval caused by Western colonialism the world over, the sub-continent included. My point is, why call it modernity to privilege the time of the “Christian era” (Hodgson 1974: 20)? Following this logic, what shall we call the time of *‘ulema* who reconfigured the boundary of their faith after the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, capital of the Abbasid Caliphate? With the caliph killed, sovereignty subverted, destruction inflicted on Baghdad, rampant famine and plague, for *‘ulema* that time too was urgent. Many in and beyond Baghdad indeed thought that the world was nearing its end (Anjum 2012:173–5). Notably, calls for reform by figures like Muhyi al-Din al-Nawawi (d. 1277) in the thirteenth and those by Ismail and others in nineteenth century bear similarities.

Before I may get misread, let me clarify that the making of modernity as a temporal anchor in Tareen’s discourse is far from unique. For instance, in his important new book anthropologist Vicini (2020: 198) asks how the Muslim reform project is “rooted in a strengthened sense of religious awareness in a modernizing world?” It is safe, then, to say that modernity as “an ideological notion” (van der Veer 2013: 656) crucially informs scholarship writ large.<sup>5</sup> My own earlier work was hardly an exception (Ahmad 2009). Due precisely to this, in my later monographic examination of critique (*naqd/tanqīd*) in Islam, I deactivated modernity as a temporal anchor. I formulated a genealogy of critique alternative to the Western one in which modern European-Christian knowledge was/is regarded as *the* source of critique. My alternative genealogy was in resonance with the Islamic notion of reform (*iṣlāḥ*) as critique from the time of the first prophet, Adam, through Moses and Christ to the final one, Muhammad (Ahmad 2017a). Differently extending this inquiry, here I ask what might the study of Islam look like when it uses Islamic rather than secularist-modernist notions of time: “the time of the West” in which “time means the movement of the West” (Mitchell 2000: 7, 8). This proposal gains salience for decolonizing knowledge cannot proceed with continuing fidelity to the notion of time beholden to modernity and to which all other terms (be it progress, freedom, rationality, or nation-state) pledge their loyalty. From Kant (2007) to Foucault (2007) and as theorized by the likes of Giddens (1990), modernity, like the Enlightenment, is a temporal concept. As such, it is not simply a stage in history; rather, it is the staging of West’s history to which non-West must subscribe. This idea of time and its division – neatly distributed as past, present, and future – into antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity is indeed foundational to West’s self-definition (Asad 1993: 18).

Historians take it as a virtue to “historicize” nearly everything (cf. Hirschkind 1995; Mahmood 2006). Along this line, in asking “what is Islamic history?” Thum (2019) adopts the Western aporia of time. That there are conceptions of time different from and not seamlessly amenable to Western-modernist ideas of time fly

past him (and doxa). Beyond the hackneyed view that time is linear in West and circular in East, especially in Hinduism (Böwering 1997: 56; Goody 2006: 18), below I offer preliminary notes on concepts of time in Islam.

The common word for time in Arabic is *zamān* (also in Urdu, Farsi, and Turkish). However, it does not figure in the Qurʾān, which uses *vaqt* and *al-sāʿa* (see below). The word *tārīkh*, widely used for history in Arabic and other languages, also does not occur in the Qurʾān (Falaturi 1979). Here, we should note that the Qurʾān is not a “document” (2001: 428) as Rosenthal took it in the vein of a historian; nor is the usage of time in it systematized or monolithic. It employs a rich vocabulary for time in “practical ways” (Böwering 2001: 278). While some have made a case for a “Qurʾānic concept of history” (Siddiqui 1965), others deem it futile, arguing that history in its Western understanding is foreign to it (Falaturi 1979). More to the point, to think of time through an Orientalist-style lens of “lack” – as Böwering (2001: 286) does when he writes, “the Arabic Qurʾān does not exhibit . . .” – is disorienting.

Most scholars maintain that the tripartite division of time into past, present, and future does not resonate properly with the notions of time in the Qurʾān. In the Qurʾān, present is far from a distinct category independent from past and future. The three instead are “one” ensemble where “no distinction can be made between past and contemporary” (Rosenthal 2001: 430, 441). Unlike three tenses in Indo-European languages, Arabic differentiates time in two ways: as complete, *mādī*, and incomplete one, *mudāraʿ* (Böwering 2001: 286; 1997: 60). Indian philosopher-statesman Abul Kalam Azad wrote about Abu al-ʿAlaʿ al-Maʿarrī (d. 1058), an Arab poet-philosopher. Commenting on his division of time (*zamāna*) into yesterday, today, and tomorrow, Azad doubted the separate existence of present (*ḥāl*). To him, only past (*māzī*) and future (*mustaqbil*) were prime temporal references, of which present was an additional continuation, *tasalsul* (Azad 1996: 248–9). As a scholar of Islam, Azad stressed the concept of time in the Qurʾān (of which he also wrote a *tafsīr*), different from its rendition by al-Maʿarrī or later by al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun. The absence of present as a sovereign entity in and of itself is, therefore, not absence of just one tense; rather, it institutes a different dynamic of time with profound implications for past and future alike. Rendering Greek philosophical ideas of time into Arabic – aión as *dahr*, chrónos as *zamān*, diástasis as *mudda*, and kairós as *vaqt* (Böwering 1997: 59) – does not say much about the Qurʾān’s own understanding of time.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the Qurʾānic weltanschauung of time beyond the trite triad of past-present-future is to attend to its fundamental message. God called for submission to Allah, as the Islamic motto has it, through His revelation. The revealed message as *huda* (guidance) aimed to enact an all-round morality-driven reform (*iṣlāh*) of all. To this end, the Qurʾān does use “before” and “after”, which,

however, can be pinned neither to a definite temporal slot nor to a fixed space (Rosenthal 2001: 434). Himself beyond time connoted by *azal*, duration sans beginning, and *abd*, duration sans end, time begins with God's creative fiat of *kun* to fashion the world and humans. From the moment of the divine command of *kun*, be, to the end of time, *yaum al-qiyaama* (the day of resurrection, which figures 70 times in the Qur'an) and *yaum al-hisab* (the day of reckoning, which appears four times) time forms one continuum with no precision of chronology or periodicity. As the goal is to reform in the light of *huda*, itself beyond history, nature of events in the Qur'an is edifying, not temporally quantifying to fit the tenets of modernist-modernizing historiography. So is its causality, the crux of which is "spiritual imbalance" (Siddiqui 1965: 25) and eclipse of moral compass rather than the predominant modern and exclusive variables of economy, demography, or the like. Noting such distinct properties of events in the Qur'an, Abdoldjavad Falaturi (1979: 69) observed:

As Fashioner of the where-time (*vaqt*) he could have allowed Noah to appear before Adam, Jesus before Abraham, and Muhammad before all the others; and nonetheless the goal of creation, surrender to God, would not have been altered. For it would have made no real difference if one preached here and another there the same enduring message.

To a modernist mind, Falaturi's remark about supra-time, supra-space nature of events about lives of Prophets in the Qur'an may appear odd. Read otherwise, they all are oriented to a definite time to come, known to no one but God alone: the last "hour (*al-sā'a*)" and "the last day, *al-yaum al-ākhir*" (mentioned 48 and 26 times respectively) (Hasson 2001: 136). The word *al-sā'a* also denotes too short a span of time when, for instance, one asks: what time it is, *kam al-sā'ah*. The last hour/day refers to God's assessment of deeds by humans and His judgement about reward and punishment. This is how the past and the future are conjoined as a continuum of time from the moment of creation, *kun*, to the moment of the final judgement.

If all this seems too abstract, let us move to less abstract aspects of time. Unlike the lunisolar pre-Muhammad calendar, Muslim calendar is lunar and distinctive to Islam (Böwering 1997: 63). The beginning and end of the twelve months (*shahr*, sing.), of which only Ramadan finds mention by name in the Qur'an, rest on the sighting of the moon (*qamar*). As the sunset and advent of the moon are conjunctive, the former marks the end of the day and beginning of a new one. In contrast to the Gregorian calendar in which midnight starts the day, in Islam post-sunset forms the first part of the day (Stowasser 2014). To return to the moon, Böwering (2001: 284) describes it as "actual measure of time" in the Qur'an. Like day and night, paired with the sun (*shams*), the moon figures 27 times and crescent (as a

plural) once. One *sūra* of the Qurʾān is named “The Moon”. At once, a measure of time and God’s creation, the moon too prostrates before Allah. The Qurʾān also mentions the moon appears in Joseph’s dream (Varisco 2001: 414–16). Disregarding its place in Muslim literary-popular cultures for now,<sup>7</sup> relevant to note is how the moon, born out of the divine fiat of *kun* that marks the beginning of time, itself disappears on the day of the judgement, the end point of time.

Such is the moral universe of time in the Qurʾān. This is what Louis Massignon (1957: 108) meant when he described the Islamic idea of time not as “continuous ‘duration’” but as a “constellation”. Its constellational nature implies a multiplicity of notions of time in the Qurʾān. In some respects, it is teleological because all the prophets, including the final one, Muhammad, brought the same message oriented to one goal: submission to God. Falaturi hypothetically disturbs the chronology of prophets to stress the primacy of their message but he does not quite undo the thrust either of its teleology or of linearity. As for the dominant notion of tripartite division of time into past-present-future, one may hastily conclude that, since there is no present tense in the Arabic grammar, what matter are only past and future. As I showed earlier through discussion of Abul Kalam Azad, it is not so much a matter of the absence of present qua present, but its different dynamic in which the present as an entity entirely in and of itself stands unstable anchored in and informed by past as well as future.

The discourse on time in Islamic tradition *vis-à-vis* the one in modernity stands in marked distinction to the argument by Diagne whom I mentioned earlier. Diagne’s (2018) book is rather short. That Wittgenstein wrote his books “as a tweet” (*The Economist* 2021) appears true for Diagne, only that the latter comprises several threads longer than Twitter’s character limit. Diagne’s prose is an excellent guide to the art of saying more in fewer words, or, after the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, how to condense a river into a goblet. It was first written in French as *How to Philosophize in Islam?* The English subtitle, *Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition*, not its title, *Open to Reason* (2018), he tells readers, explains its subject. This seems wooden, though. Of its nine chapters, six deal with Muslims’ engagement with pre-modern Greek philosophy and last three with modernity (ix; page number without an author later refers to Diagne 2018). It is true that the construction of the modern West rests on it usurping the classical Greek heritage. But to echo West’s self-narrative by taking pre-modern Greek philosophy as Western is odd (Ahmad 2017a). So much about the (sub)title!

Diagne’s book deals with responses to modernity from “modernist” Muslim “reformers” (xi): Jamaluddin Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Amir Ali (d. 1829), Abdel Raziq (d. 1966), and poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). At “the heart” (xii) of Diagne’s thesis is Iqbal, taken as “a horizon of all modernist philosophy in Islam” (91). My critical appraisal of Diagne is also

via Iqbal. Since Diagne's treatment of him is too brief here, when relevant I refer to his 2010 book on Iqbal, which is even shorter: 71 pages long.<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing responses to modernity, Diagne identifies two approaches: "modernize Islam" or "Islamize modernity". Dismissing both, he instead argues that "time [of modernity] is not exterior to religion but its texture" and "time is not . . . a trial that religion must overcome, but constitutes its own self-deployment: time is God" (85). To realize this is to "move toward reform" and "openness" (97). Diagne claims that this formulation is alternative to both "adopt" and "adapt" stances to modernity. To appreciate Diagne's intervention, it is essential to know his larger assumptions, including silences. It is astonishing that Diagne builds an argument about reform without inquiring into Islamic ideas about it. Thus, to what degree is the idea of reform among modernist thinkers, Diagne's concern, in tune with the Prophets' mission, which the Qur'ān describes as enacting reform (*iṣlāḥ*)? It is also puzzling that in Diagne's text there is no reformer in the past two centuries from the category of *'ulema*, Tareen's protagonists. Is it because *'ulema* as "traditionalist" cannot legitimately figure in a text about "modernists" even as both are concerned about reform, albeit differently? Or is this absence due to *'ulema* being not philosophers whom Diagne privileges? If so, then, we are back to the old question about the sharp boundary between philosophy and theology. Equally surprising is Diagne's use of Christian term. With no qualms, he speaks of "Islamic sects" (xi). From Max Weber and others, we learn that "sect", pitted against Church, is peculiar to Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Since Church as an institution is alien to Islam, why deploy sects to philosophize about Islam?

Diagne's preoccupation with modernist thinkers also owes to an Orientalist assumption about "stagnation" among Muslims and their thinking as "static" and "rigid" (2010: 53, 48, 52) – a premise laid to rest long ago by Hallaq (1984), who does not figure in either of Diagne's books. This premise, like the expulsion of *'ulema* as "traditionalists", is clearly woven into a modernizing-Westernizing idea of history based on three-fold division of time into past, present and future (2010: 12 and elsewhere). This becomes stark, inter alia, when the reform he vouches for is nothing else but a staging of the Reformation in Europe. Here Diagne mentions Iqbal's critical reading of the Reformation as territorial-nationalization of Christ's universal message; yet, he proceeds to justify it by separating "particular contents" of the Reformation from its "ethos" (2010: 54). How is that surgical separation possible? That the Reformation was also a violent program simply bypasses him. Though Iqbal did not put it in these terms, he anticipated the argument later made by Terpestra (2015) who analyzed the Reformation as a gigantic agenda for religious-national purification resulting into expulsion, exile, and the plight of refugees. How the time of modernity serves as the pivot of Diagne's own argument is further evident when he asks: "Is there such a thing as an 'Islamic' State or are Muslims free to invent the political institutions that correspond to their time and allow them to live in open, democratic societies?"

(ix-x)? The opening syntagma “Is there such a thing as an ‘Islamic’ State” not only throws doubt on the option of an Islamic polity, its successor expels this option from the realm of “freedom” because the model Muslims are asked to invent are “open, democratic societies”. Saying nothing about political theory of democracy, the history of which is soaked in exterminatory violence against aboriginals from Australia to the Americas – not to mention the vehemence of the forever war waged against “Islamic terrorism” by democracies – Diagne gives no empirical clue about what he calls democratic, open societies. That democratic societies are national-territorial and built on principles and practices of othering, both internally and externally, is also effaced. So is the West-led process of de-democratization of polities in the non-West (Ahmad 2011a, 2017b). The coercive nature of the whole sentence in which the operating idea of correspondence is one-way traffic from West to Muslims comes to its full glare in Diagne’s advice to Muslims to invent institutions that “correspond to” (on which, see below) the scripted time of West and its democracy.

### Islamic Concepts of Time in Action

To recall, the axis around which Diagne’s entire discourse revolves is the idea that “time is God”. Unreferenced here, he takes it from Iqbal: “Do not vilify time, for time is God” (90). His earlier book mentions its source as a *ḥadīṣ* cited by Iqbal in his 1930 *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*: “Do not speak ill of time, for time is God” (2010: 15). Notwithstanding the difference in the wordings of translation in each, in the latter the Arabic word for time is *dahr*. As stated earlier, *dahr*, however, is not coterminous with time qua time; it is an aspect of time rather than time in itself. Surprisingly, Diagne does not discuss the term “*dahriyūn*”, used by Massignon I cited earlier. For Massignon, *dahriyūn* referred to “philosophers who divinize Duration, *dahr*” (1957: 108). I encountered a similar meaning of *dahr* in my fieldwork in Aligarh, India (see below). To believing Muslims, communists were *dahriya* because they did not believe in the time beyond their own lives: i.e. the day of the judgement as the end of time to come. Far from being new, this meaning partakes in and draws on the tradition. In 1888, Dipti Nazeer Ahmad (1831–1912), the first novelist in Urdu, wrote *Ibnul Vaqt* (see Figure 1). Literally meaning “son of time”, in the Urdu dictionary (*Fīrozulloḡhāt* n.d.) *Ibnul Vaqt* means a rank opportunist. Within the context of the novel, it is the name of its central character, who is a high-level civil servant in the new British bureaucracy. Westoxicated by the culture of the British rule and with his faith shaken, *Ibnul Vaqt* goes to the extent of changing his appearance and dress to imitate the British. In contrast, confident of his tradition and a practicing Muslim, a relation of him does not. The relation holds a series of discussions with *Ibnul Vaqt*, attempting to convince him that science and faith are not polar opposites. *Ibnul Vaqt* intervenes to argue that



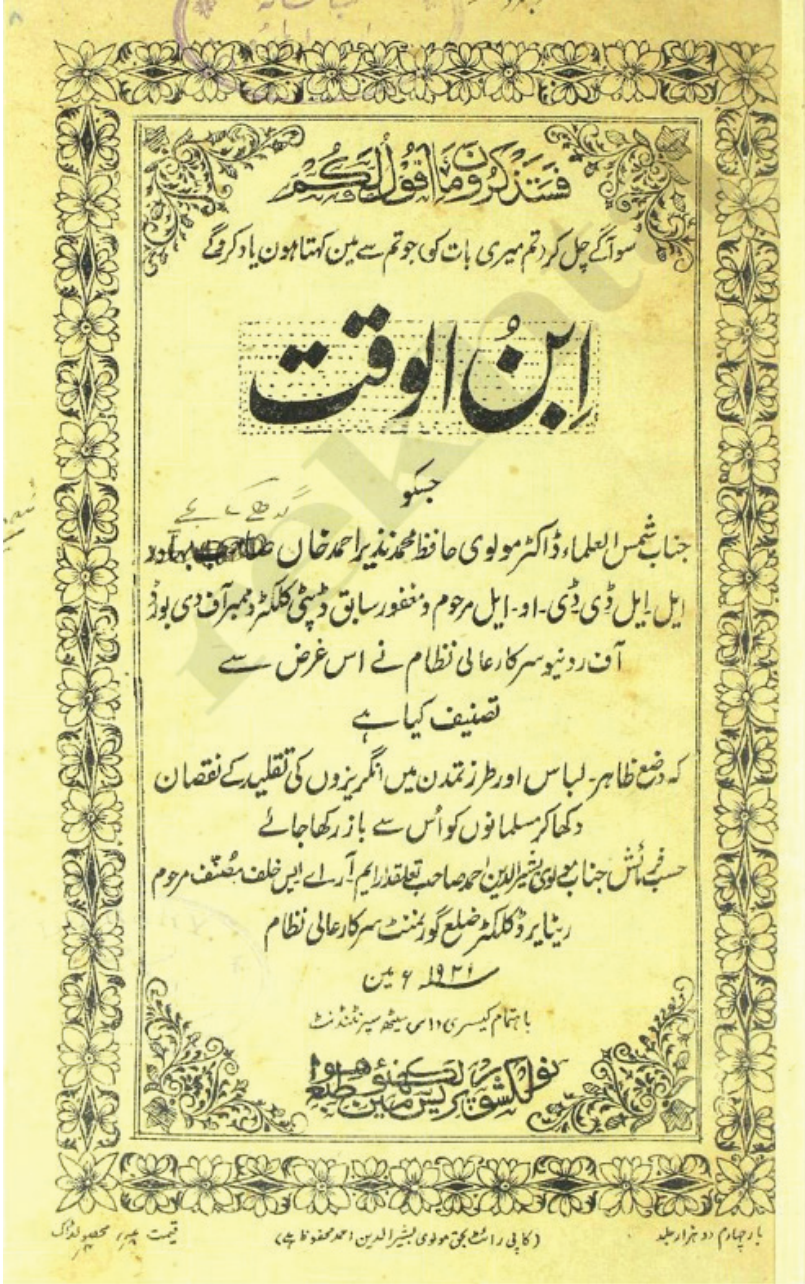


Figure 1 Cover of Nazeer Ahmad's *Ibnul Vaqt* published in 1888; source Rekhta (n.d.)



the pace with which science, especially medicine, has made progress it is likely that humans will abolish death to control life. At that point, the relative says: you imply, God forbid, that humans would become God. *Ibnul Vaqt* fires back: to a *dahriya*, God does not exist (Ahmad 1980). Tellingly, Ahmad the novelist himself was a top rank servant in colonial bureaucracy.

To come back to Diagne's proposition about "time is God", from the perspective of this essay, time is a creation of God. So, the created and the creator cannot be the same. Many have written about Iqbal's interpretative and translation lapses in equating time with God, a position he later modified (Azad 1981; Ishrat 2002; cf. Ahmad 2002), most notably in his poetic work *Zarb-e-kalīm* (The Staff of Moses), published six years after the prose work Diagne cites to validate his thesis about time being God. Diagne describes, rightly so, Iqbal's philosophy as "philosophy of movement". Missing from this description, however, is Iqbal's own movement from one notion of time to another. *The Gift of the Hijaz*, Iqbal's final poetic anthology, also shows this movement as it deactivates earlier synonymy between God and time (Azad 1981: 41). Iqbal announced his revision forcefully in *Zarb-e-kalīm* as follows: "God is neither time nor space" (1936: 7). In it, Iqbal indeed declared a war against time. Published in 1936, two years before his death, the title on the cover of *Zarb-e-kalīm* is inscribed (unusually, one should say) with a succinct explanation: "That is (*y'ānī*), declaration of war against the present age (*davr-e-ḥāzīr*)." Iqbal's declaration (see Figure 2) serves as a double critique. It upholds the belief in absolute transcendence of the divine by keeping the creator and the created apart rather than making them one as "time is God" has or may have in readings by Diagne or others. And contra Diagne's advice to Muslims to invent institutions "that correspond to their time and allow them to live in open, democratic societies", Iqbal unveils horror at the very base of democracy. In so doing, he instructively and metaphorically summons a concept of time different from the regnant time of West.

In a poem in *Zarb-e-kalīm*, "Geneva and Mecca", Iqbal called into question the precise principle on which the League of Nations was founded by the champions of democracy. He lamented the effacement of "unity of Adam/humanity, *vaḥdat-e-ādam*" in an age when nation-state was becoming a norm. He concluded the poem asking: "Mecca has dispatched a message to Geneva / Should there be a unity of humankind or unity among nation-states? (1936: 54). Iqbal's message to Geneva, the headquarters of the League of Nations, is not only heir to the message of Islam, it is equally a call for instituting a different notion of time in the continuous acts of reorganizing the common good. What Iqbal was actually asking for was not "reform" of Muslims alone, as Diagne reads the goal of "modernist" thinkers, among them Iqbal, but reform of non-Muslims, Westerners/

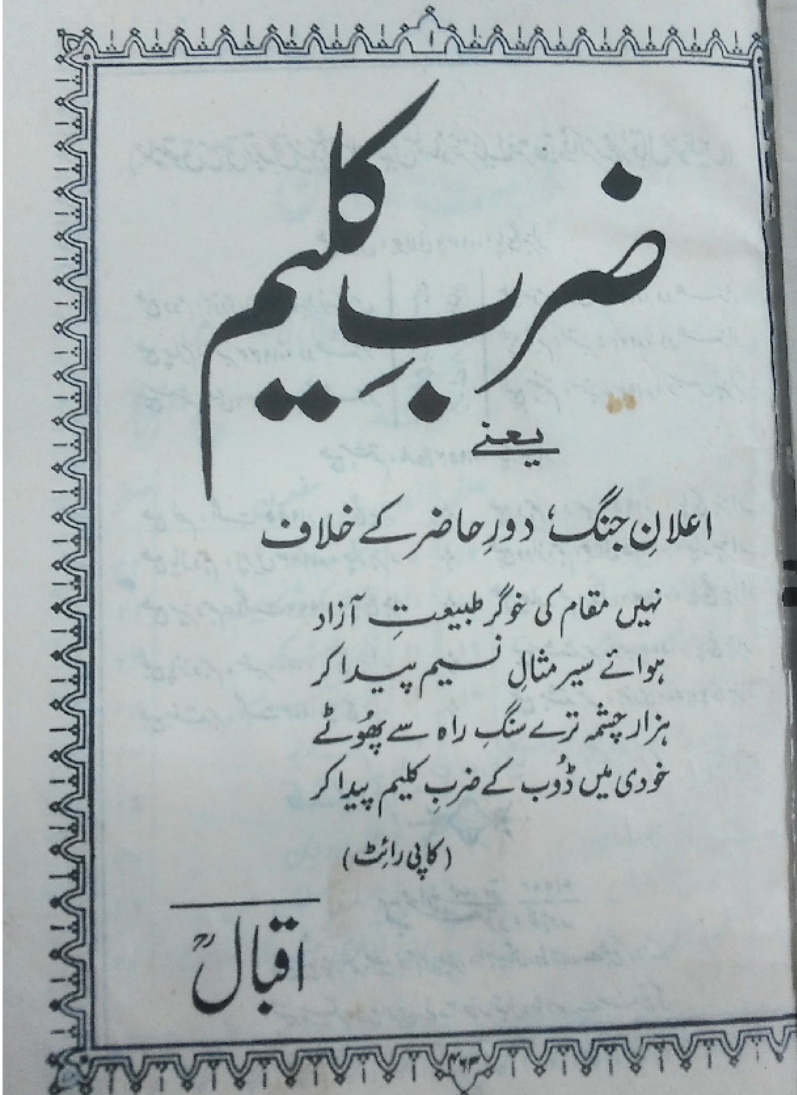


Figure 2 Cover of Zarb-e-kalim (1936) declaring war against the current age; source (Iqbal 1936). I thank Muhammad Furqan Butt of the Government College, Lahore, for this image

Christians, too. This reform is at once within and without and quite a detour from the time of the Reformation in Europe Diagne speaks of. That Iqbal had already sensed, in 1936, the destructive power of nationalism soon to be unleashed on an unprecedented scale in the form of World War II should not be lost. Thus seen,

Iqbal's "Geneva and Mecca" is a more robust expression of correspondence than Diagne's use of it, which, I argued earlier, is a one-way traffic. To clarify, my use of correspondence draws on Tim Ingold (2021). It remains unclear if Diagne's idea of "correspond to" relates to a specific philosophy.

I just showed how in the poetics of Iqbal Geneva and Mecca epitomize two ideas of time. To close this essay, I give another example. Different from the first one but flowing from the concept of time enunciated throughout this essay, this too is from a poet, Rahat Indori, who died in 2021 due to COVID-19. Indori also wrote songs for Bollywood. Through his appeal to the unity of Adam, Iqbal invoked the Islamic idea of time began as it did with the command of *kun*, Adam being the first human as well as prophet God created. Employing the notion of the day of the judgement to come, Indori pointed to the end of time.

As a student enrolled at University of Amsterdam, I did my doctoral fieldwork in Aligarh, India, when the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom took place in Gujarat. During the fieldwork, I attended a nightly public poetry session in the annual Aligarh Exhibition (*numā'ish*) held after the pogrom. Amidst much applause, Indori recited his poems. One couplet read:

*Qalam vālo siyāsī zulm kī rūdād likh denā*

*Qayāmat jab bhī likhī ho Aḥmadabād likh denā*

People of the pen, record the tales of political horror [the Gujarat pogrom]

When you write catastrophe [*qayāmat*], write Ahmedabad.

(Quoted in Ahmad 2013)

To Indori, Ahmedabad, the capital of Gujarat and one of the deadliest theatres of the state terror in 2002, symbolized catastrophe (*qayāmat*). Importantly, *qayāmat* here does not refer to the day of resurrection *per se* but the catastrophe preceding it. Moreover, while the calamity preceding *qayāmat* in the form of the sun darkened, the mountain turning, the sea set on boiling, and the stars thrown down is divine (Hasson 2001: 138), the one in Indori's poetry is human. Precisely for this reason, the deployment of the divine metaphor of *qayāmat* marking the end of time to describe the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom that is human is of such significance within the ambit of this essay. To appreciate its significance, let us compare it with other readings of the pogrom. The most commonly used terms in Indian public sphere for it are "riots" and "communal violence", both traceable to the history of British rule; ergo, they bear the sign of modernity and its axiom of time. Some also use "majoritarian violence", which, similar to riots and communal violence, directly belong to the grammar of nationalism, itself a marker of

colonial modernity's political time in which the nation-state is the contemporary apogee of the political form beginning with the band and passing through the tribe and chiefdom (Ahmad 2022; Ahmad and Kang 2022).

Different from these ubiquitous terms are “fascism” and “pogrom”, though rarely used in the public realm. Clearly, fascism and pogrom emanate from the political history of Europe and thus bear the signature of time of modernity (its dark side, to some). There is another term used, exclusively by Hindus, to describe the 2002 pogrom: a sign of *kaliyuga*. In Hindu traditions, four cyclical ages or aeons (*yuga*) of cosmic time are: Kreta or Satya Yuga, Treta, Dvapara, and Kaliyuga. While the first one is the finest, the last one is the worst (Chattopadhyaya 2018: 97; also see Chattopadhyaya 2007). The current age of the Kaliyuga, the Dark Age, marked by anger, chaos, fighting, and hatred, began after the demise of Lord Krishna. Divinely willed though it is, even in *kaliyuga* God chooses some people to do virtuous deeds. Many regard Narendra Modi, who ruled Gujarat at the time of the pogrom, as such a chosen person. Rather than appreciate his work of “development” and “good governance”, so goes the reading of the 2002 pogrom, Muslims as outsiders to the Hindu social order based on *dharma*, opposed him to spread the chaos intrinsic to the time of *kaliyuga*. The pogrom was the consequence of maintaining “order” by teaching Muslims a lesson in the time of *kaliyuga* signed by disorder (Ahmad 2017c, 2019).

## Conclusion: The Time of Reckoning

With a critical engagement with some important publications, the fundamental aim of this essay has been to demonstrate the monumental connections between the notions of time central to secular modernity and their effect (and affect) on scholarship on Islam. I showed how the constitutive temporal axioms of modern-Western knowledge shape and color our understandings of Islam. Against this pervasive trend that often applies modernist conceptions of time to study Islam, I preliminarily outlined the Islamic notions of time. My principal thesis has been that scholars should concern themselves with researching about the significance of ideas of time in Islamic tradition rather than habitually rely on and apply the dominant notions of temporality supplied by West and its secularizing modernity. Integral to the deeds and beliefs of Muslims worldwide is not only the “objective”, measurable, visible time of here, now, and this-life but equally the unquantifiable time that lies after death. A thesis such as this one is indispensable to the goal of decolonizing knowledge and to break free from the epistemic domination constitutive of the Western-modern knowledge apparatus. If it has not already been so, let me make it clearer that my position here is neither of a substitution between the notions of time in the project of secular-Christian modernity and those in Islam

nor of a stark antagonism between the two – in some respects, they may overlap; in others, they may significantly diverge.

My use of the term epistemic domination in this essay is at once related to and different from its current employment. For instance, in theorizing “epistemic oppression”, Kristie Dotson (2014) does not consider, certainly not the ways in which I do it here, conceptualization of time and its mobilization as co-constituents of that epistemological asymmetry. Likewise, Charles Mills (2014) mostly takes the notion of modernist time for granted and then examines its racialization (within the epistemic bound of that time he calls “white time”). In contrast, this essay has subjected the very constitution and notions of Western-modern secular time to a systematic critique. Rather than stop there, it has gone a step further to draw an outline of what an Islamic notion of time is. Stressing the constellational nature of time in Islam, it also offered empirical examples of how Islamic notions of time work in practice. To state the obvious, the ideas in this essay are preliminary and exploratory. More work is required, especially works with comparative and interdisciplinary, even interdisciplinary, weight.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, comparative as this essay is, its thrust is admittedly somewhat uneven in that its treatment of time in the Hindu tradition is not as extensive as is its treatment of time in Islamic and Christian-Western ones.

In sum, this essay has made initial gestures that the time of the epistemic domination in the form of the regnant notions of time central to the project of secular modernity is almost over, or it ought to be. It is time to work instead for a different notion of time that is alternative to time as dominantly construed. That is, nothing less than an alternative idea of time the depth, capaciousness, and texture of which lyrically speaks to the rays of the sun, the light of the moon, and twinkling of the stars, so as not to confuse the infinitude of the cosmic light with the finitude of dualistic signs of traffic light routinely exhibited in serialized, quantified, monetized time.

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anonymous reviewers for their constructive and encouraging criticism, including the suggestion to engage with Rösen's (2007) volume. I am alone responsible for the position this essay advances.

## Notes

- 1 Excluding Arabic ones, I transliterate other non-English words as per the rule of Urdu (Ahmad 2017a: xiii-xv), which is closer to Arabic and likely legible to supra-nation-states readers this essay is written for. In writing names of individuals and places, I do not follow the transliteration rule. All page numbers without an author's name in this section refers to Tareen (2020).
- 2 Cf., Tareen's renditions of them as salvation and imperial politics (106).
- 3 On Nomani's engagement with Abul Ala Maududi (d. 1979), see Ahmad (2017a: Ch. 5).
- 4 On Jacques Rancière's notion of polemics, see Chambers (2008: 56n31).
- 5 The contemporary shift from modernization-Westernization, of which volumes by Imtiaz Ahmad (1978) and Daniel Lerner (1958) were paradigmatic, to modernity has not considered the question of time the way this essay dwells on. The point about modernity as an ideological notion should not deflect our attention from the fact it is also quite a colossal material reality embedded in a network of powers and institutions, most notably in "free" capitalist market and the nation-state (Asad 2003: 235).
- 6 Study of vernacular understanding of *vaqt*, *dahr* and *zamān* (on which, more below), as of other words about time, in diverse languages of Muslim cultures is wanting. In a presentation at Columbia University, Diagne (2019) discussed *jamaano* in Wolof and *zaman* in Swahili.
- 7 In translating stories by Skybaba from Telugu into English, Suneetha and Bhrugubanda (2016: 7) mark the "distinctive" symbols of the moon and the moonlight among Muslims but do not tell readers how and why. In Melbourne where I taught for many years, Muslims from the subcontinent used to organize a festive gathering, "moon night, *chāñd rāt*," to mark the end of the Ramadan and the advent of 'eīd. There is a blockbuster Bollywood film, *vaqt* (time). Composed by Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi, this 1965 movie has a powerful song all about the philosophy of time.
- 8 To my knowledge, this book on Iqbal is the first by a Senegalese (also an African?) scholar.
- 9 Weber (1946: 302–22) discussed sects and the Church in many writings, including in *Religions of India*. For a quick overview, see (Swedberg and Agevall 2016: 307–08). On misapplication of sects to Hinduism, see van der Veer (1987: 683 ff.).
- 10 To readers who may find it paradoxical that while outlining Islamic notions of time, this essay had to also use ideas of times in modernity, I submit: to critique a paradigm using its own vocabulary in order to develop an alternative does not amount to reproducing the former.

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