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ARTICLE

Blessed Be the Strangers: An Islamic Ethical Framework for the Anthropocene

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Abstract
This paper considers a famous eschatological Prophetic ḥadīth, 'Blessed be the strangers', to develop an Islamic ethical framework for the Anthropocenic moment. I survey Islamic sources to offer a phenomenological portrait of strangerhood, ranging from classical Islamic literature, homiletics, prophetic reports, and modern reflections by Muslim scholars and ethicists. I argue that to perceive the world physically as strangers, to embody the speed, unfamiliarity, and sensibilities of a stranger, can cultivate ethical practices that better attend to structural violence and harm, and are better capable of reducing and redressing it. Specifically, I aim to contribute to the growing inter-religious effort to resist 'structural evil'. I demonstrate how the central importance afforded to avoiding harm in Islamic law makes the latter an untapped resource for creatively resisting harm structurally. I suggest that the ethics of strangerhood allow practitioners to develop the attunement necessary for tapping into law's potential for structural change.

Keywords
Islamic ethics, subjectivity, strangerhood, phenomenology, speed, attunement, harm, repair

Reorienting

All is not well in the world. In the wake of a global pandemic, the continued unfolding of Palestinian genocide, and the pernicious persistence of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and ecological destruction, religious traditions have been forced to reckon with this contemporary moment through new terms and scales.[1] The highly complex, integrated, and structural form of human violence against other humans and the more-than-human world is forcing a rethinking of religious ethics in order to rise to the gravity of the occasion, implicating how religious practitioners think about theology, human agency, eschatological temporalities, and visions for the future, earthly and otherwise. While there seems to be no agreement on when this Anthropocenic epoch began, the term is used to define a period in earth's history where human agency begins to play an equal role to natural forces, becoming a geologic actor through "the mining of fossil fuels, the production of nuclear waste, littering of the oceans, and other activities."[2] As contentious as its definition and timeline may be, the concept

1 In using the term genocide, I am following the formal reports of several respected organizations and institutions. Amnesty International, in its December 2024 report, concluded that Israel's actions in Gaza, including the widespread targeting of civilians and destruction of essential infrastructure, constitute genocide ("Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza," https://www.amnesty.org). Similarly, in its report dated 14 November 2024, the United Nations Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices asserted that Israel's methods, such as the use of starvation and deprivation of essential resources, align with the legal definition of genocide ("UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war," https://www.ohchr.org). The Associated Press reported on December 19, 2024, that Human Rights Watch asserted that Israel's restrictions on water and other resources in Gaza amount to acts of genocide ("Human Rights Watch says Israel's restriction of water supply in Gaza amounts to acts of genocide," by Adam Geller, https://apnews.com). Finally, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, also concluded in a March 2024 report that Israel is engaging in genocidal acts against Palestinians (Francesca Albanese, "Anatomy of a Genocide—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 25, 2024 [https://www.ohchr.org]).

2 Delf Rothe, "Governing the End Times? Planet Politics and the Secular Eschatology of the Anthropocene." *Millenial Journal of International Studies* 44 no. 2 (2020), 146. See also Paolo Bocci, "Planting the Seeds of the Future: Eschatological Environmentalism in the Time of the Anthropocene," *Religions* 10, no. 125 (February 2019), 1-14.

of the Anthropocene helpfully identifies the scalar magnitude of human intervention in the world that distinguishes our contemporary moment.

In critical studies of post-colonialism and racial capitalism, the Anthropocene is entangled in the history of colonialism as an act of expansivist pillage. As colonialism created the conditions for the global development of capitalism, it subjected more and more peoples and land to the logic of market commodities, and "destroyed the biodiversity it encountered."[3] Given the systemic nature of these global transformations, theologians and religious ethicists are rethinking human moral agency. Specifically, they attempt to situate a believer's agency in the world against what Cynthia D Moe-Lobeda calls "structural evil."[4] Under current global conditions, it is argued that we cannot continue to think about ethics in terms of individual virtues and failures, or privatized notions of sin, love, and spirituality. In the same vein, Axel Takács argues that "between historical consciousness and political theory, society has the tools to recognise that injustice, inequity, and violence . . . [are produced through] systems and structures of economic and political power [which] nefariously oppress the marginalised in ways beyond the powers of the healing ointment of individual acts of charity."[5]

Outside of academia, important voices have been spreading the gospel of structural evil/sin, such as the joint effort led by Pope Francis and al-Azhar's Grand Rector Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, outlined in the Vatican document *Fratelli Tutti*.[6] Yet across the world, the business of empire continues as usual. What is missing from this vision? Perhaps the answer is to be sought in how we should and should not think about eschatology, divine agency, and human responsibility. Moe-Lobeda argues that a deprivatisation and revision of "the basic flaws of Christian ethics" is necessary to cultivate a "critical mystical vision" that enhances a believer's capacity to see "what is … what ought to be … and God's presence within creation."[7] Takács insists on an ethical commitment to individual "virtues and charities" in tandem with imperatives for "political movements of liberation sanctified by a spirituality that

3 George B. Handley, "What Else Is New? Towards a Postcolonial Christian Theology for the Anthropocene." *Religions* 11 no. 225 (May 2020), 5.

4 Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 19.

5 Axel Marc Oaks Takács, "Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others: On *Fratelli Tutti*, Friendship (*walāya*), and Muslim-Christian Co-Resistance," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 32, no. 1 (2022), 55.

6 Takács, "Drawing Near to God," 33.

7 Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 19.

renders us helpless without God."[8] Likewise, Paulo Bocci cautions against a pessimistic and fear-driven vision of eschatology that motivates an escapist focus on the afterlife, a starkly different understanding that early Christian's belief in a "promise of radical change and of the revelation of the secrets written in heaven."[9] For Delf Rothe, thinking about the Anthropocene in apocalyptic terms that advance an "we are all in this together" narrative "conceals social antagonisms in the present"—which are the continued legacies of the European colonialism—and the ecological devastation colonialism already subjected many peoples across the world to.[10] Likewise, Takács warns against neoliberal visions that "blind us to the production mechanisms of economic and political inequality."[11]

Taking my cue from these projects, I argue that the Islamic notion of strangerhood offers a rich conceptual history from which to draw an ethical framework sensitive to our Anthropocenic moment, and deeply attentive to the structural terms of modern evil. Following in these thinkers' footsteps, I outline productive ways of thinking about eschatological visions of strangerhood in order to sustain the kinds of theological and political tensions necessary for applying this ethical vision to everyday practice. These tensions include individual vs. collective practice, divine vs. human agency, and public vs. private ethics. I suggest that the entanglement of ethics and legal norms in *sharīʿah* (divine law), and the centrality of the concept of *ḍarar* (harm) in Islamic law afford a new avenue for addressing the structural nature of sin/evil head-on. However, in order to fully appreciate and activate this resource, I suggest that we think about strangerhood as a phenomenological state of being.[12] Put simply, if structural evil endures partly through its invisibility, I look to strangers to ask how their perception of their surroundings can cultivate an embodied practice of deep vision, allowing us to develop attuned perceptual capacities and moral competencies, unlocking the structural potential of Islamic law. I begin

8 Takács, "Drawing Near to God," 55.

9 Bocci, "Planting the Seeds of the Future," 10–11; Rothe, "Governing the End Times?" 157.

10 Rothe, 146.

11 Takács, 34.

12 This is a work of constructive theology firmly within Sunni discursive traditions, that is nevertheless concerned with ethical subject formation and offering a framework for a good life for whomever may wish to engage with it, on their own terms. I therefore take liberty with pronouns to reflect that I acknowledge my own positionality and my interlocutors' and that I appreciate thinking about human collective action interreligiously, and I use honorifics throughout the essay that reflect my own relationship with historical Islamic figures.

with a review of popular (mis)visions of Islamic eschatological literature and the place of strangers therein. Next, I review the conceptual history of the Islamic stranger to ground my phenomenological intervention. I then turn to apply this conceptualization to practice, selecting the example of socio-economic harm to reflect on how Islamic law can generate collective resistance to structural evil, powered by strangerhood-based *baṣīra* (deep vision).

Eschatological Visions

Muslims have always engaged the vast Islamic tradition to make sense of their contemporary moment, to relate it to the early Muslim community and the historical context occupied by the Prophet (*ṣ*) and his Companions.[13] They seek guidance on how Islamic history has unfolded, on the place of the "now" in that history, as well as on the question of how Muslims can best conduct themselves in their given contexts, developing appropriate ethical practices. Eschatology, or the branch of Islamic thought concerned with the signs of the end times, is one resource on which Muslims have consistently mapped their realities.[14] Across Islamic history, Muslim scholars and lay believers alike have opined about their historical moments, wondering if they were living during the End Times.[15] Although I do not speculate about the temporal location of our moment on eschatological timeline, I find this literature useful for its identification of increased practices of harm and

13 This symbol *ṣ* denotes the honorific *ṣallā -llāhu* ʿalayhī *wa-sallam* (peace be upon him).

14 For conceptual and creative purposes, I am only interested in those Islamic eschatological traditions concerned with the end of times building up to but excluding any concepts of Armageddon and episodes from the Afterlife. In the language of the tradition, I am concerned with the "Lesser Signs" that are associated with a rise in corruption (*fasād*), and which precede the appearance of the Anti-Christ and the return of the Messiah. For a list of the Lesser Signs, see Bronislav Ostřanský, "The Lesser Signs of the Hour: A Reconstruction of the Islamic Apocalyptic Overture," *Oriental Archive* 81, no. 2 (2013), 235–382. For a more general investigation of the topic, see Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

15 As Cook notes—and I would qualify as most but not all—lesser signs "consist of events that almost everyone can agree are actually happening. In reality they have always been true…during every generation of Islam…as is clear from reading the historical literature of Islam" (David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005], 50).

corruption.[16] If we are to construct an ethical framework that seriously meets the challenge of our present moment, and the unprecedented scale of harm that we can empirically observe around us, we must draw on the relevant conceptual resources. In its attention to harm and the sustained Islamic imperative to act ethically despite human and cosmic finitude, I find eschatological traditions suitable for the task.

One such eschatological tradition consists of a prophetic *ḥadīth* (report):

بدأ الإسلام غريبا وسيعود غريبا، فطوبى للغرباء.

Bada'a al-Islām gharīban wa sayaʿūdu gharīban fa-ṭūbā l-il-ghurabā'.

Islam began as strange, and will become once again strange;
so blessed be the strangers.[17]

Narrated through multiple chains of transmission, the identity of the strangers varies from one narration to the other. In his study on this *ḥadīth*, Youshaa Patel notes that in narrations where the Prophet is asked to divulge who the strangers are, he is reported to have said 1) "those who have left their tribes;" 2) "reformers at a time when the masses have become corrupt;"

16 Eschatological traditions emerged with and were subjected to the same disciplinary formation of the Ḥadīth corpus and sciences that developed, for example, in contradistinction to prophetic biography (*sīrah*), the discipline of exegesis, or the customs (*sunan*) of early companions, jurists and caliphs writ large. The eschatological corpus is thus to be found in the compilations of *ḥadīth*, the most famous of which, for example, is al-Bukhārī's book of trials (*fitan*) (no. 94) in his larger *Ṣaḥīḥ* canon, or the book of the same name in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (book 41), or the more recently discovered and published manuscript that is dedicated exclusively to the topic: *Kītāb al-Fitan*, by Naʿīm bin Ḥammād al-Marwāzī, ed: Samīr bin Amīr Al-Zuhairī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Tawḥīd, 1991). For an outline of the development of the *Ḥadīth* discipline, see Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); see also Christopher Melchert, *Formation of Sunni Schools of Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); also G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance, and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

17 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 130–31, *kitāb al-*īmān, *ḥadīth* no. 232, *ḥadīth* no. 145 and 146; Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾut et al., 50 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risala, 1995–2001), 6:325, ḥadīth no. 3784, 11:230–31, report no. 6650; Abu Abd Allah Muhammad b. Yazīd al-Qazwīnī, Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, ed. Bashshar ʿAwwad Maʿrūf, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1998), 5:468–69; Abu ʿIsā Muḥammad b. ʿIsā al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-kabīr*, ed. Bashshar ʿAwwad Maʿrūf, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1996), 4:371–73, *abwāb al-*īmān, section 13, ḥadīth no. 2929 and 2630.

3) "those who love my Sunna and teach it to others;" 4) "A virtuous minority amidst a corrupt majority;" and 5) "fugitives of faith. They will gather with Jesus, the son of Mary, on the day of judgment."[18]

Standard Sunni interpretations of the *ḥadīth* in modern popular platforms highlight the prediction that Islam will become an unconventional practice near the end times, such that very few people will remain steadfast in the faith, that these Muslims will be marginalized in society and will be considered strange and foreign from mainstream culture and practice.[19]

18 Youshaa Patel, "'Blessed are the Strangers (*ghurabā'*)': An Apocalyptic Hadith on the Virtues of Loneliness, Sadness and Exile," in *Hadith Commentary: Continuity and Change*, eds. Joel Blecher and Stefanie Brinkmann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 85.

19 By *standard* I am here referring to a number of nonacademic or scholarly discourses where I locate this practice: in Friday sermons and popular preaching, in contemporary online Muslim apocalyptic literature, and in everyday conversations with and amongst Muslims, particularly on Islamic blogs and platforms. Martin Nguyen notes the continued "figurative allure of these ḥadīths…in contemporary Muslim discourses. They punctuate Friday sermons, religious study circles, and the rhetoric of popular preachers and spiritual teachers." See Martin Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal: the displaced, the racially disenfranchised, and the Islamic prophetic," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds., Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 138. As for the second category, Ostřansky correctly identifies the modern rise and genealogy of this genre, which draws as much from classical eschatological traditions as it does a "set of Western borrowings" as it runs against the conceptual and functional limitations of the former. See Ostřansky, "The Lesser Signs," 235. Cook further highlights the limits of drawing inferences about popular eschatological belief from these select but easily accessible print and online publications, given the dearth of research on popular belief, particularly on the reception of modern apocalyptic scenarios of the kind he studies in his monograph. See Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, 230. For a very recent example of the conventional rhetorical tropes, the approach of identification, as well as some critical departures, see the following lecture given by Omar Suleiman, a popular and sophisticated Muslim preacher in the US, on the topic of companionship in strangerhood: "Be in This World a Stranger or a Wayfarer" (www.youtube.com). While the notion of strangerhood is present in *Shīʿī* thought, and my analysis has been met favorably among *Shīʿī* colleagues, I exclude it from the present analysis for two reasons. First, I am far less familiar with secondary scholarship on, as well as primary sources of, *Shīʿism*. Second, the concepts of occultation (*taqiyyah*) and the absence of the Imam complicate the notion of strangerhood as they implicate—with respect to matters of justice, loyalty, and devotion—individual Shīʿī believers and the community as a whole differently and offer a rather different and distinct eschatological vision. For studies on contemporary Shīʿī apocalypticism, see David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2021); Cook. "Messianism in the Shiite crescent," in

This interpretation can be of tremendous comfort and encourage patience in the face of real ostracization and persecution experienced by many Muslim communities around the world. As Ostřanský's study of Islamic apocalypticism notes, this mode of thought emerges as a "mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil in a world created and led by the Divine Will, with apocalyptic discourse resolving this problem of evil by proposing that the final judgement is fast approaching, which will result in the forces of evil receiving their punishment while the forces of good will reap their reward."[20]

While I do not disavow this interpretation, given that oppressed Muslims draw comfort and inspiration from it, I find some of the uncritical assumptions made by Muslim scholars and lay believers with respect to this *ḥadīth* to be antithetical to the Islamic work of ethical cultivation of a virtuous self. As both Cook and Ostřanski note in their studies, one of the most common ways modern Muslims read these traditions is to identify themselves with a particular group, or to identify, often in the context of criticism and polemics, their opposition with a group that is condemned to failure or punishment. Consider for instance, condemnations of Saudi Arabia's mega urban expansion of the area surrounding the *kaʿba*, the sacred site of Mecca, as the actualization of the prophecy that in the End Times the barefoot nomads and sheepherders (that is, the people of the Arabian Peninsula) will erect high buildings.[21] Furthermore, traditional Muslim scholars have condemned the democratization of access to religious knowledge in eschatological terms, invoking the tradition predicting that critical matters of religion will become delegated to people who are modest in learning, as well as "fools or simpletons."[22] As for self-identification: in some Salafi circles, this involves adopting the markers of "the victorious group (*al-ṭāʾifa al-manṣūrah*)" and "the saved sect (*al-firqa al-nājiyah*)."[23] Nguyen notes that "the estrangement at the heart of the hadith [of the strangers] validated the estrangement felt by foreign fighters willing to fight and die for the Islamic state."[24]

Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 11 (2011), 117; and the last section of Chapter 6 in Bronislav Ostřanský, *The Jihadist Preachers of the End Times: ISIS Apocalyptic Propaganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

20 Ostřansky, "The Lesser Signs," 262.

21 Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature,* 51; Ostřansky, 258.

22 Ostřansky, 262; Cook, 50.

23 Ostřansky, *The Jihadist Preachers of the End Times*, 7.

24 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 137.

Simply identifying with a social or religious group found in eschatological portraits is a static and passive reading of the *ḥadīth* that claims knowledge of the identity of self and other. This is not an ethically attuned orientation; it further fails to offer an agential and critically reflexive approach to these traditions as ethical resources, viz., to live ethically in the world today, if we take the prophetic charge seriously. Then, instead of resorting to identity politics, we must ask, "how does one become a stranger?" I believe it is significant that the Prophet (*ṣ*) used a formulation that emphasized an agent, a stranger, over its quality, strange/strangeness. This implies that the emphasis should be on the characteristics, behaviors, and practices of that person who is called a stranger—in other words, their ethical and spiritual subjectivity. Instead of assuming that we already are strangers, accepting it as an eschatological designation or a social marker, I argue that our intention should be to *become* strangers, intentionally inhabiting and embodying strangeness as a prophetic *praxis,* where *prophetic* denotes a social-critical posture and an ethical sensibility rooted in religious commitment.[25]

To do so we first must conceptualize the strangers: what do they look like, how do they relate to themselves and others, how do they think, behave, and conduct themselves in the world? Drawing on a number of premodern portraits, the early Muslim community, and modern sociological reflections on the figure of the stranger, I offer a set of characteristics that I believe define a stranger's subjectivity. I then use this portrait to revisit the ethico-legal concept of *ḍarar*. I illustrate how a believer's embodiment of stranger subjectivity can help us achieve better understanding of the scale and reach of harm we practice on a daily basis, which I believe is unprecedented and specific to our historical moment. While harm is a ubiquitous concept in Islamic ethico-legal thought, I consider questions of moral theory, ontology, and epistemology embedded in this apparently straightforward moral principle. Drawing inspiration from Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and configuring the relationship between strangerhood and harm,

25 I use *praxis* to refer to a practice that is informed by some kind of a conceptual framework. Regarding *prophetic,* see Mark Cladis, "Romantic Nature," in *Nature and Literary Studies,* eds. Peter Remien and Scott Slovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 156. Martin Nguyen highlights the distinction between using the term *prophetic* to refer to emulating the prophet's custom as opposed to inheriting the theological marker and role of prophethood—a distinction that I follow: "From the religious standpoint, I am using 'prophetic' in its sense of *sunna* (prophetic custom) rather than *nubuwwa* (prophethood). In other words, I use 'prophetic' according to its ethical dimensions within Islam, rather than its religious one." Martin Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 147.

I redefine harm as the underlying logic of domination characterizing the Anthropocene. By considering the entanglement of law and ethics, I intend to show how behaving like strangers should first be understood as a collective praxis of the whole Muslim community, not the work of the marginalized, and second, how it can help us, in our varying individual and collective capacities as stewards, to become attuned to redressing harm wherever it exists in our milieu, replacing it with practices that are *ṭayyib* (that which is beneficial, good, or wholesome in acquisition or production).

Portrait of a Stranger

The figure of the stranger has been known to humankind perhaps since time immemorial. It appears frequently in Near Eastern cultures, particularly with respect to norms and rules of moral conduct.[26] The Biblical tradition addresses the duties of mercy and hospitality towards strangers, and the Old Testament particularly reminds the Israelites "that they themselves once lived a life of misery and oppression, languishing in a foreign and hostile land."[27] Several prophets have been physical strangers (in escape or exile) as well as being estranged from their people for a part of their journey: Ibrāhīm (*ṣ*), or Abraham, parts way with his idolatrous community and establishes *tawḥīd* (monotheism) "as a stranger in a foreign land;"[28] Yūsuf (*ṣ*), or Joseph, is estranged from his family for years, and experiences both trials and blessings throughout his stay in Egypt; Mūsā (*ṣ*), or Moses, escapes Egypt when he is warned Pharoah is conspiring to kill him and dwells as a stranger in Madyan for at least a decade; and Yūnus (*ṣ*) or Jonah, is forsaken when he abandons his people, devoured by the whale, before he repents, is forgiven, and is sent to lead another community. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, the *gharīb* (stranger) was both a problem and a common literary trope.[29] Members of Arabian society "recognized and pondered" the problem of the stranger "as an intruder

26 Joseph Ellul, "'The Stranger Who Visited Me:' The Concept of Hospitality in Islam," in *Le Migrazioni Umane Nel XXI Secolo* 1 (February 2014), 43.

27 Ellul, 43.

28 Ellul, 44.

29 The noun form of the word means "the stranger or foreigner," while the adjective has a wider semantic range that includes (as Lewis explains) "foreign, alien, peculiar, exotic, remarkable....It derives from an Arabic root (gh-r-b) which evokes exile or diaspora, being far from home; as well as oddity, peculiarity, uniqueness, and marvel; and the western compass point." Franklin Lewis, "Response," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 149.

among genuine tribal members," while they worried less about the individual who intentionally left his clan.[30] In poetry, the separation of the lover from his beloved configured the lover into a stranger, if only "in the imagination." It is perhaps this tradition that spurned depictions of the stranger as one that dwelled in misery.[31]

In medieval Islamic thought, the stranger held a distinctive socio-religious valence, or what Yousha Patel refers to as a "broader episteme in premodern Muslim social imagination."[32] In his study of the stranger, Franz Rosenthal argues that ideally, no Muslim was ever a stranger in the land of Islam, since the marks of belonging were drawn differently than they are by nationalities and state borders today.[33] Yet, the figure of the stranger continued to generate contemplative thought. The stranger was pitied for his weakness and lack of protection. An individual was afforded dignity and respect amongst his family and people, and found nothing but a humbled status, vulnerability, and more often than not, poverty, in strange lands.[34] On the other hand, one reason for which one could become a stranger was to escape tyranny or injustice at home.[35] Gradually, the stranger became a fecund literary category that made its way to a number of Islamic writing genres and disciplines, particularly *ḥadīth* and the literary genres of *adab* (prose and belles-lettres). While scholars of *ḥadīth* were concerned with strangerhood in terms of piety and early community politics, the concept of the stranger developed further in literary genres in alignment with the expansion of those disciplines beyond the conventions and cultural needs of the scholars and piety-oriented.[36] Accordingly, we see in the work of *ḥadīth* compilers and commentators, such as Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), reflections on strangers as a "small group of the righteous amongst a large group of the wicked" and strangerhood as a "call to forsake divisive

30 Franz Rosenthal, "The Stranger in Medieval Islam," in *Arabica* 44, no.1 (January 1997): 35–75 at 39.

31 Rosenthal, "The Stranger in Medieval Islam," 40.

32 Patel, "Blessed are the strangers," 80.

33 Patel, 36.

34 Patel, 44, 48.

35 Patel, 50.

36 For more on these disciplinary and historiographical developments, see Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (1994); Christopher Melchert, "The piety of the Hadith Folk," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, No. 3 (August 2002): 425–39; and Armando Salvatore's "Secularity through a 'Soft Distinction' in the Islamic Ecumene? *Adab* as a Counterpoint to *Shari'a*," in *Historical Social Research* 44, No. 3 (2019), 35–51.

forms of particularism."[37] Conversely, in the 10th century, the "literature on exile and alienation began to emerge as a genre of its own in Arabic."[38] The most remarkable extant example is the *Book of Strangers*, an anonymous compilation of fragmentary graffiti left by strangers across Islamic lands. The verses reflect on the stranger's "fundamental dilemma of belonging," for the stranger, unlike most people, "belongs nowhere."[39]

The figure of the stranger denoted aspects of human alienation from the world and longing for the Divine; the stranger could thus be approached through the register of piety. Estrangement became a metaphor for humanity's temporary stay on earth. In that sense, Muslims specifically, and humanity in general, are strangers "always and everywhere."[40] Rosenthal traces this general principle to the inward religiosity cultivated by "ascetics and mystics [who] adopted it not only as a metaphor but also as a lifestyle. To be a stranger, in this reading, is to be a stranger from this world, because one actually belongs to another one. To exercise a deliberate distance from the pleasures of the world, and instead, to dedicate oneself fully to God, was the ultimate marker of estrangement.[41] A Muslim, in this conception, is always already a stranger as much as they are in this world, but not of it.

Strangerhood provided premodern Muslims with a common conceptual language and a powerful rhetorical tool. Unsurprisingly, the exact contours of the term were contested and contextualized to meet different purposes. As Patel notes, the figure of the stranger was used to encourage the cultivation of virtue and "spiritual detachment."[42] After the 10th century, scholarly interest in the concept begins to revolve around defense of different narratives of early Islamic history and orthodoxy. In fact, "nearly all commentators" reflected on their condition as strangers, as "outcasts whose virtue was unknown to the ignorant masses."[43] Returning to the *ḥadīth* of *gharābah*, it is worth remembering that the different narrations glossed the meaning of strangerhood differently, allowing narrators to choose an interpretation that "aligned best with their subjective worldview, rhetorical

37 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 141; for an overview of this topic, 141–43.

38 Franklin Lewis, "Response," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 153.

39 Patel, "Blessed are the Strangers," 80.

40 Patel, 55.

41 Patel, 59.

42 Patel, 82, 94.

43 Patel, 96.

objectives…[and] social circumstances."[44] In drawing on this *ḥadīth*, I employ my own rhetorical gestures in order to constructively place it in conversation with the Anthropocene.

Accordingly, for my purposes there is more to the stranger than its premodern registers. Seeing Muslims as always already strangers does not map onto the *ḥadīth* adequately. If that were the case then identifying Islamic practices with strangeness would have been invariable throughout history, unlike the three segments the *ḥadīth* describes. In the words of the Prophet, Islam began as *gharīb,* and it began as such with him and the handful of Companions who believed in his message. The designation was not solely one of identity, migration, or occupation of strange lands. The majority of the early Muslims were Arabs, natives of the tribes of Mecca. Nor were they simply orienting themselves away from the pleasures of the world. They did not, like the later ascetic, travel as nomads, enacting what it meant to be a stranger to the entirety of the world. The early Muslims remained in Mecca for the first ten years of the propagation of Islam. The first *hijrah* to Ethiopia was a very short episode in the 22-year span of revelation. Even with the more substantial *hijrah* to Medina, they were not strangers in foreign terrains. Nor were they necessarily on the margins of their communities: they varied in degrees of wealth and social status, some were Arabs, and many were *mawāli* (clients of Arab tribes, thus much lower in rank and socio-economically vulnerable).[45]

What then was *gharābah* (strangerhood) in nascent Islam? A stranger imports qualities into the group which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.[46] In the first instance then, the Prophet Muhammad (*ṣ*) was a stranger when he received transcendent revelation, an unusual source of knowledge for his community. Yet the content of revelation was not

44 Patel, "Blessed are the Strangers," 86.

45 This portrait and the following paragraph draw on my readings of Qur'anic verses revealed in the Meccan period, as well demographic information and the general timeline that appears in Sunni literature, particularly the biographies of the prophet, and which is not necessarily the subject of controversy for scholars disinterested in the Orientalist question of the origins of Islam. I am also restricting my timeframe to the very earliest period to avoid conflicting accounts due to sectarian debates; as far as I know the claims in this paragraph are not sectarian (that is, accepted by one sect but rejected by another). Nevertheless, this is not a historical analysis of the origins and early years of Islam in seventh-century Arabia—for neither is this the purpose of this paper nor does the scope and space limit allow for such a tangent.

46 Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in Kurt Wolff, translator, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402.

entirely foreign; it had precedent, not only in the revelations of the (Jewish and Christian) *ahl al-kitāb,* or *People of the Book*, with whom the Arab had reasonable interactions, but also the larger cosmology of Divine revelation, which the Qur'an frequently invokes as carrying signs for those who contemplate.[47] It was not the novelty of the Qur'anic revelation that made Muhammad (*s*) a stranger, but that revelation oriented him away from his people's idolatrous practices, and by questioning the legitimacy, epistemology, value, and benefit of these practices, he compelled his people to confront themselves and the constructed nature of those practices. He exercised a social, if not physical, distance from their practices that questioned their familiarity and made him conceptually a stranger amongst his people. As Cynthia Coe notes, what drives the fear of the stranger is not simply the fear of that which is foreign and unknown, but it is a fear about how a certain kind of foreignness can have the effect of dissolving established boundaries between that which is designated as familiar vs. unfamiliar, with all the political, economic, and moral implications of these social designations. "It is a fear that we might no longer feel at home in our own city."[48] It is precisely this last notion that drives my particular configuration of spatial and conceptual strangerhood here.

The more revelation the Prophet (*s*) received, the more his practice sought to deconstruct and de-normalize the customs of pagan Arabia. It took the form of critiquing their idolatry, which rationalized their tendencies to exploit and harm. More and more verses condemned prevalent manifestations of greed, abstinence from charitable giving and redistribution of wealth, the usurpation of the rights and inheritances of orphans, the burying alive of newborn females, Arab prejudice or discrimination against non-Arabs, and other injustices. Islam (and the early Muslims) started out as a *gharīb* in that it estranged itself from the very conditions in which it emerged and confronted them where necessary. Although the Prophet's (*s*) followers were part of that pagan community, they distanced themselves from its practices, defamiliarizing years of embodied habits by examining its harmful consequences and questioning its legitimacy.

Based on these portraits I now outline the practices I take to be central to a stranger subjectivity today. I divide these into two components: their comportment, and the effect of that comportment on their surroundings.

47 On this matter, see Chapter 1 of Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*.

48 Cynthia D. Coe, "Strangers and Natives: Gadamer, colonial discourse and the politics of understanding," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35, no. 8 (2009), 931.

There are three main qualities I wish to highlight regarding the distinctive comportment of the stranger. First, the stranger is always seeing things as if for the first time. Much as actual strangers must assess the unfamiliar terrains or communities they stumble upon with novel eyes, so does a stranger amongst their community approach the unfamiliar with a strange distance in order to more *profoundly see* and *deeply understand* where these practices came from, what sanctions them, and whether they beget benefit or harm. Second, strangers are at the threshold of their community, constantly measuring the practices in their milieu with the yardstick of revelation. They defamiliarize the familiar to ask: what forms of *jāhiliyyah* (a kind of tyrannical injustice against oneself and others, rooted in ignorance) are prevalent in my environment today and how might I be participating in it?[49] How close am I to the prophetic ideal? How can I draw closer? If the non-believers of seventh century Mecca had their *patriarchy*—the "forefathers" they so frequently invoked whenever the Prophet (*ṣ*) condemned a practice as harmful or unjust against God or His creation, and so did the various groups who came before, whose stories are narrated in the Qur'an—then who are the patriarchs of my society's practices? Third, because strangers do not have the privilege of familiarity and believing they safely know their surroundings comfortably well, they are invariably slow in their actions, having to deliberate, investigate, and draw on disparate sources of information in order to make decisions.

With regard to the effect of their comportment upon others, their presence "embodies otherness…upsetting [the] previously unproblematic existence" of those among whom they dwell.[50] It raises concerns about

49 Qur'anic use of the term contrasts it with Islam, justice, and makes it synonymous with doing injustice to oneself by worshipping false deities, rejecting revelation, or otherwise incurring God's anger and desertion.

50 Tibor Dessewffy, "Strangerhood Without Boundaries: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge," in *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996), 604. While hospitality is a corollary topic to the figure of the stranger, I do not directly consider it in my analysis as it usually pertains to how one is supposed to behave towards the stranger, less so how one can enact strangerhood oneself. Indeed, the plea for hospitality is a continuous one of compassion and a taming of the self from subjecting the stranger to "myriad judgments" simply by virtue of being a stranger. See Cynthia Coe, "Strangers and Natives," 922. That being said, the hospitality with which we may be exhorted to treat strangers shares in some similarities with what I take to be the emergent sensibilities that one cultivates by virtue of behaving like strangers in their own milieu—an attuning to others and one's relationship to them, a defamiliarization of habit and many unexamined given, and a critical interrogation of what the self knows and what it is ignorant about. In her analysis of Gadamerian hermeneutics (which is self-reflexive on questions of pre-judgments

the established socio-economic relations and their viability and stability.[51] Importantly, recognizing their vulnerability and unfamiliarity with their surroundings, strangers eagerly seek the kindness and friendship of others and identify with alterity. Contrast this vision of raw vulnerability with the experience of a tourist, whose passport affords a guarantee of a return to their country, whose experience of the place they are visiting may be mediated through guides and travel agencies, and who have the luxury of remaining at a surface-level engagement with their surroundings. Instead, this perception of fragility may encourage strangers to "expand [their] circle of friends beyond those who share [their] socio-economic, racial, and religious identities."[52] If the tourist is guaranteed safety through their ability to opt out of their trip whenever they so choose, a stranger's security is better sought in deepening ties of intimacy with their surroundings.

How do these qualities compound into an ethical praxis? In an essay on the sociology of knowledge, Tibor Dessewffy identifies the lack of customs as the one aspect that drastically differentiates a stranger's experience from their former everyday life:

> We can no longer rely on the *routines* that help us through the labyrinth of everyday communication; the automatisms that smoothly control our behaviour are no longer operative. The newcomer, from the moment he realizes that he has fallen into a foreign environment, becomes tense and *alert*: he must begin to *learn.*[53]

This emphasis on alertness, the need to learn, and the inability to fall back on routine, results in the stranger developing a more perceptive, critical, and intimate knowledge of their surroundings and the often-invisible relations that constitute the fabric of their social reality. It results in a temporary

and how we come to understand phenomenon), Cynthia Coe argues that this framework is "therapeutic." While it does not guarantee proper treatment of strangers, "it goes some way towards understanding it," for the "ideal of dialogue" and constant engagement with the other that it presents makes us more humbly aware of our "historically effected consciousness, [our] own finitude and the heteronomous origins of our attempts at understanding, [and makes it] less likely to impose our fantasies upon others when we are aware that they are fantasies" (Cynthia Coe, "Strangers and Natives," 931).

51 This was a recurrent, though implicit theme in Rosenthal's exploration of medieval Islamic literature of strangers, which I considered above.

52 Takács, "Drawing Near to God", 44.

53 Dessewffy, "Strangerhood Without Boundaries," 605.

removal of the "veil of familiarity"—not for the intent of alienation, isolation, or physical distance, but to interrogate how much about our reality we truly know and understand, and to yield a more authentic, attuned, and critical form of empathy.[54] I take this deeper way of seeing and exercising *baṣīrah* (discerning vision) to develop a dynamic and aware engagement with the world and its surroundings, of the kind the Qur'an encourages humankind to practice with its exhortations: do you not see, do you not think/contemplate, do you not discern?

The portrait I offer here shares many features with two contemporary Anglophone reflections on the stranger by scholars who identify as Muslim: Ebrahim Moosa and Martin Nguyen. Both scholars are concerned with finding correlations between the perennial category of the stranger and modern iterations as a starting point for thinking about ethical application to contemporary questions: for instance, invoking the *ḥadīth* of strangerhood, Moosa "understands the hadith to be speaking to Muslims today and gesturing to cycles of religious renewal,"[55] while Nguyen states that "at the most basic level, the desperate migrant is the Gharib defined by the Arabic lexicographers as the 'one who is far from home.'"[56] They are both also concerned with extrapolating features to a stranger comportment that surpass the spatial and physical element of being a foreigner in a foreign land/among foreign peoples. For instance, Moosa employs the notion of exile, to which a stranger is often subjected, as a resource for struggling against colonial epistemicide.[57] He finds in physical exile the leaving of one's home, interacting with different peoples and climates "in order to see the world through the lenses of new experiences," which lend, in their richness, the stranger subject the ability to "speak truth to power."[58] Yet again, the very experience of exile is what counts for Moosa, whether one "embraces physical exile, or if exile is experienced merely as a mental estrangement from society or community;" ultimately, the value of a subject that behaves

54 Cladis, "Romantic Nature," 151. For reflections on the perils of superficial, quick-fix, and identification-driven empathy that often results in the very annihilation of the other who is the object of empathy, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), particularly the discussion in chapter 1.

55 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 139.

56 Nguyen, 141.

57 The term denotes the figurative "killing" of a particular epistemology and ways of knowing that are intimately tied to or associated with ways of being and beliefs, often Indigenous and subjected to modern colonialism.

58 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 278.

as though they are in exile is in their ability to "view things in a way that a domesticated and complacent gaze may fail to observe."[59] Nguyen thinks about strangerhood multivalently: Muslims are strangers in as much as "we are being asked to refocus on the life to come…our home, so to speak, lies not in this world…but with God in the Hereafter." Notwithstanding, he argues that the Prophetic conduct suggests that "our humanity is best fulfilled when we [simultaneously] actively embrace and inhabit the life of the stranger."[60]

While indebted to these studies, I aspire to go beyond them in how I conceptualize the stranger grounded in a concern to offer a framework general enough that it can be adopted and fine-tuned by all Muslims, irrespective of their positionality. While Moosa's conceptualization of strangeness centers resistance to colonial epistemicide and Nguyen's "that space of minoritization and marginalization," my conceptualization goes beyond the limits of spatial marginalization. First, this limit places the burden of responsibility on a select few, whereas I propose a communal praxis carried out by every individual. Afterall, if learning from the disenfranchised can sober others to their privilege, how can the disenfranchised themselves actively take up the strangerhood agency? Second, thinking about strangers as individuals on the outside risks slipping into physical isolation and alienation. I prefer to think of strangers as inhabiting a liminal space, akin to Moosa's concept of the *threshold*, with one foot in and the other outside of the community's customary boundaries. Finally, Nguyen draws primarily from the experiences of the displaced and the racially disenfranchised, encouraging us to provincialize our experiences and to identify with alterity. In thinking about strangerhood perceptually, I wish to highlight the inverse relationship between speed and depth.[61] As a measurement of the relationship between distance and time, speed denotes how quickly or slowly we spend in any given place, with any given person. Since deep and empathetic intimacy can only result from sustained engagement, attention, and attunement, speed emerges in this understanding as an ethical practice. Granted, not everyone can afford to sustain a slow

59 Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination,* 279.

60 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 141.

61 My thoughts on ethics as a perceptual practice draws from Sandra Laugier's work on Ordinary Language Philosophy, the ethics of care, the invisibility of gendered care work, and ethics as a perceptual practice; see Sandra Laugier, "The Will to See: Ethics and Moral Perception of Sense," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34, No. 2 (2013), 1–19; and "Wittgenstein and Care Ethics as a Plea for Realism," *Philosophies* 7, No. 4 (2022), 1–18.

mode of survival to the same degree. Nevertheless, grounding stranger ethics in perceptual and temporal practices opens up the spaces where this sensibility can be cultivated beyond spaces we typically think of as transformative of our worldviews. It is also my hope that grounding intimacy in the practice of deep and intentional familiarity can offer a way to think about intersectionalities and hierarchies of vulnerability; for example, how an exploited worker can identify and rectify in themselves gender or racially based acts of harms against others.

Strangers Today

In this section I illustrate by way of example how seeing and orienting ourselves towards the world in the manner of strangers can help us recognize the specific forms of harm that are simultaneously produced by and producing our daily practices. I focus on examples of socio-economic relations that enable the modes of production and consumption characteristic of the capitalist world economy today, because these relations are the most invisible to our view. There is something especially dangerous about these modern practices, in as much as causing harm is not only a by-product of their operation, but is also inherent to their logic. Sustaining the cycles of production and consumptions at their current speed, global reach, and magnitude, is only possible through mechanisms that systematically neglect or oppose the welfare and benefits of certain human populations, animals, and environmental ecologies—all of God's creations.

Why is being attentive to harm such an urgent ethical matter for Muslims, and why do I emphasize our responsibility to become better aware of it? Harm is a category that occupies an integral and important position in Islamic discourses. How Muslim scholars have thought about it and its corollary, *maṣlaḥa* (benefit), reflects early developments in Islamic moral theory and theology, later developments in Islamic law, and modern intellectual responses to colonialism and modernity. The Arabic term denoting harm, *ḍarar*, is a multivalent term that lexically denotes "harm, injury, hurt, mischief, or damage."[62] In Islamic law, the term refers to whatever causes injury, damage, ailment, or prevents the attainment of benefits and general welfare.[63] As Luqman Zakaryah notes in his study

62 Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book 1 (Lebanon: Librairie du Luban, 1968), 1796.

63 Mathew Hanser, "Understanding Harm and its Moral Significance," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 22, No. 4 (August 2019), 859.

of Islamic criminal law, "*ḍarar* is precisely the opposite of *nāfiʿ* (benefit)."[64] Beyond this tautology however, harm is that which is inflicted on others, and which constitutes an infringement of their rights. The question of harm, then, necessarily implicates notions of justice and injustice. If justice is understood as the upholding of rights and the execution of obligations that brings about an orderly society and maintains a balance of rights and responsibilities, then the accrual of benefit and the prevention of harm can be understood as both the outcome and the purpose of the dispensation of justice.[65] It appears that a utilitarian framework underlies Islamic ethico-legal thought. However, a crucial distinction lies between moral epistemology (how we know what is good) and ontology (the nature of the good and who assigns it). If in a utilitarian framework harm and benefit are defined as the maximization of pleasure and reduction of pain, Islamic thought corresponds good and evil with benefit and harm, understood in terms of individual and communal well-being.[66]

I suggest that understanding the relationship of harm to justice in Islamic thought is better sought if we compare it to Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. In her recent book *Justice for Animals*, Nussbaum argues that "a society is minimally just only if it secures to each individual citizen a minimum threshold amount of a list of central capabilities, which are defined as substantial freedoms, or opportunities for choice and action in areas of life that people in general have reason to value."[67] Nussbaum is concerned with showing that injustice against an animal is constituted as any act of harm or more generally wrongdoing, either deliberately or through neglect, that prevents it from "striving to get something at least reasonably significant to her life."[68] I read Nussbaum's framework to be compatible with the Islamic conception of harm. She gestures to the "good ends" that constitute a life properly lived by a given animal, without necessarily locating the epistemic source of that goodness in any religious

64 Luqman Zakaryah, *Legal Maxims in Islamic Criminal Law: Theory and Applications* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 145.

65 For a review of conceptions of justice, governance, and the good life in medieval political thought, in the influence of the Greek tradition of political theory, see Charles E. Butterworth, "Ethics in Medieval Philosophy," *The Journal of Ethics* 11, No. 2 (1983), 224–39; see also Patricia Crone's *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2004).

66 George Hourani, *Two Theories of Value in Medieval Islam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 270.

67 Martha Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 80.

68 Nussbaum, 6.

thought. Nussbaum's recognition that each animal, then, has a "form of life" resonates strongly in my mind with the Qur'anic injunction that God's creatures are "nations like yourself [that is, humans]" (Q 6:32). She explains that this form of life "involves a set of important goals towards which they thrive…each animal is a teleological system directed towards a set of good ends centering around survival, reproduction, and, in most cases, social interaction."[69] In relocating the definition of harm and benefit away from the subjectiveness and anthropocentric reference of pleasure and pain, her framework allows us to think theistically (and hence Islamically) about the immorality of domination. If every individual, human, animal, or otherwise, has a form of life endowed by God, that constitutes a particular life cycle and divine regime, then domination leads to harm whenever this divine order or life-law is disrupted, the life of the individual in question is diverted towards exploitative purposes, and the set of rights endowed it by God are transgressed.[70]

What, then, is the moral significance of harm in our contemporary moment? Many studies, scholarly and journalistic articles, and reports, too numerous to be exhaustively referenced here, have been written about the various ways global economies are based on and perpetuate harmful practices. These studies identify harm being directed towards human populations, particularly working class and post-colonial populations, domesticated animals for human consumptions, and the larger ecologies of wild animals, plants, land, and other living organisms.[71] Mohamed Ghilan for instance offers a detailed public-facing study of the different forms of harm inherent to practices in the food industry that inflict undue pain and suffering on animal populations, particularly those reared on mass-scale factory farms.[72] Here as in many industrial settings, cutting costs in order to

69 Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals,* 1.

70 For more on the idea of harm as a loss of certain things that are good to have, see Mathew Hanser, "Understanding Harm and its Moral Significance."

71 See Lia Blanch and Amin Amirul's report on Bangladesh's Garment Industry for International Union Rights "The Right to Strike" 20, no. 2 (2013)l, 12–13; see also Anu Muhammad, "Wealth and Deprivation: Ready-made Garments Industry in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 20–26, 2011), 23–27. For a broad overview and emphatic case studies on the question of animal welfare in the Anthropocene, see Martha Nussbaum's *Justice for Animals*, particularly the Introduction and Chapter 1.

72 Mohamed Ghilan, "The Halal Bubble and the Sunnah Imperative to Go Vegan," *Al-Madina* (May 16, 2016), www.almadina.org.

maximize profits is achieved at the expense of humane treatment of animals, and the provision of safe conditions and fair compensation for workers.[73]

Others have pointed to the global garment industry, where once again accumulating more and more profit takes the shape of employing cheaply produced but toxic dyes, growing materials that deplete natural resources on which smaller communities rely for their livelihood, and offshoring production to the Global South where primarily female labor is severely underpaid and overworked to produce non-durable items in very dangerous working conditions, often leading to mass accidents and deaths.[74] Moreover, these items are deliberately designed to be non-durable so that they can be sold cheaply enough to generate a continuous profit-generating demand. Overproduction means that most items produced on a mass scale end up in landfill sites. We can draw similar conclusions on almost all modern industries that employ extractive practices, depleting and permanently damaging ecosystems, and instigating competition over resources leading to conflicts and civil wars, particularly in post-colonial countries, thus expanding the category of *al-mustaḍʿafūn* (those who are weakened and disempowered).[75]

From these diverse sources I want to focus on what makes these modern practices so unprecedented in the magnitude and extent of harm they generate. Our age is not the first where humans have on occasions found it profitable to inflict harm on God's creation. For example, a couple of studies authored by Necmettin Kizilkaya on animal welfare in premodern Islamic legal manuals identifies instances where Muslim jurists name and prescribe certain behaviors in human-animal relations such as "allowing animals to rest, not overloading them, and not harassing them [that] are related to the basic Islamic principle of preventing harm."[76] Kizilkaya further

73 Ingrid Mattson, "Eating in the Name of God," *Islamic Horizons* (March/April 2010), https://isna.net.

74 See, for instance, in descending order of recency: Human Right Watch's reports on labour rights in the garment industry, https://hrw.org; Kieran Breen, "Cleaning Up Fast Fashion," *RSA Journal* 166, No. 2 (2020), 34–37; "Fashion's tiny hidden secret," United Nations Environmental Program website (March 13, 2019); Daniel Soyer, "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now," *New Labour Forum* 4 (Spring–Summer 1999), 35–46.

75 For an overview of theories of resource extraction and ecologically unequal exchange, see the section on extractive industries in Thomas K. Rudel, J. Timmons Roberts, and JoAnn Carmin, "Political Economy of the Environment," *Annual Review of Sociology* (August 2011), 225.

76 Necmettin Kizilkaya, "They Are Communities Like You[:] The Rationale for Animal Rights and Welfare in Islamic Civilization," İnsan *Ve Toplum Dergisi* 11, No.

mines juristic opinions dispensed at the request of individual Muslims in the Ottoman period regarding fair treatment of animals to highlight that a robust and attentive understanding of animal welfare can be found in premodern juristic writing that is responding to very real instances of harm involved in the extraction of benefits such as farming and trade.[77] These non-binding opinions were also supplanted with legal regulations and codes as part of the Ottoman administration, particularly of the markets.[78]

That's not quite what we are dealing with today. The key difference which characterizes our era as Anthropocenic is domination. It is a condition under which social relations are realigned and human relationship to the more-than-human world is reconfigured in ways that are primarily extractive, instrumental, and constitute unequal exchange. In these conditions, many "forms of life" are entirely purposed to instrumentally feed into, support, and sustain an ever-expansive regime of market-constructed desires masquerading as needs.[79] They are, in fact, "false needs" which Herbert Marcuse, in his *One-Dimensional Man*, juxtaposes with "true needs"—those "vital human requirements for food, lodging, clothing, and meaning at some ecologically sustainable level of culture."[80] Underlying this regime is a conceptual framework that is centered on constructed notions of efficiency and scarcity. I say constructed because it is the discursive result of the invasion of a neo-Malthusian "vernacular" to political, social, and administrative structures and functions, sustaining the belief that "socio-ecological relations must be understood through a naturalized vocabulary of limits…decline and collapse."[81] Tied to this framework is how we approach technology and technical advances as a "means to conquering [this] scarcity."[82] This technological rationality, and the concomitant instrumental approach to science and nature is so discursively powerful that, in our

2 (June 2011), 14.

77 Necmettin Kizilkaya, "Be Gentle to Them: Animal Welfare and the Protection of Draft Animals in the Ottoman fatwā Literature and Legislation," *Religions* 11, No. 10 (2020), 518.

78 Kizilkaya, "Be Gentle to Them," 9.

79 "[F]alse needs...are imposed on individuals not to meet truly vital requirements but rather to perpetuate the powers and privileges of vested interests that benefit from such domination and destruction," Timothy W. Luke, "One-Dimensional Man: A Systematic Critique of Human Domination and Nature-Society Relations," *Organization and Environment* 13, No. 1 (March 2000), 100.

80 Luke, 97.

81 Jonathan Beacham, "Organising food differently: Towards a more-than-human ethics of care for the Anthropocene," *Organization* 25, No. 4 (May 2018), 534.

82 Luke, 99.

Anthropocenic moment, it has also become our political rationality.[83] It is precisely the exploitation of nature in advanced industrial society that produces an immediate surplus of material wealth that structures political practice (in both democratic and undemocratic societies) and empowers the "vested controlling interests to co-opt, buy-off, or immobilize" demands for liberation and an alternative regime of care for oneself and others.[84]

While there is no consensus on the exact nature and directionality of the causal relationship between technological change and the development of Capitalism, it is reasonable to extrapolate from this analysis that technological capability is at least one of the factors that enables the current reconfiguration of relationships I discussed in the previous paragraph. I do not find anything especially or distinctly pernicious in the nature of modern humans; our conception of modernity as exceptional is only true discursively, and to be sure, Qur'anic conception of man as a species, while predominantly negative, does not differentiate between epochs. Humanity's struggle against its insatiable tendencies is the same, regardless of time, space, and context. It is an insatiability that is composed of haste, anxiety, myopia, forgetfulness, and a constant search for what is more, and which may manifest whether one had at his disposal a rudimentary tool of technology or the means of industrial societies. But the shape, form, and outcome of this insatiability will differ depending on the material capabilities available at hand.[85]

As a regime of domination undergirded by the expansive technological capacity for environmental engineering and manipulation, what makes the Anthropocene distinctive is that humanity's self-interest becomes expressed exclusively as a function of the exploitation of other humans and the more-than-human world. If, in pre-capitalist societies the self-interest of its members was, for the most part, aligned with their limited resources (in terms of ownership of animals and land, workers in their employment and slaves or servants in their care, and their surrounding environment), precisely because the material conditions of their moment allowed for certain configurations of inter-human and human-nature relations, then modern technologies of production, by constantly invading previously unproductive social and physical spaces, repurpose the various "forms of life" and their

83 Luke, 99.

84 Luke, "One-Dimensional Man," 98.

85 For Qur'anic description of the nature and tendencies of humankind, see Asad's translation of 10:12, 17:11, 17:83, 17:100, 21:37, 39:8, 41:49-51, 70:19, 89:15, 90:4, 95:4-6, 96:6, 100:6, and 103:2.

teleological end-goals for the sole purpose of surplus accumulation. In other words, if premodern livelihood depended on respecting natural cycles of growth and restoration, if limitations on both resources and mobility enforced socio-economic practices that were in harmony with the welfare and reasonable treatment of workers, animals and the surrounding environment, then the constellation of technologies associated with modernity, by contrast, unleashed restrictions on mobility and access to resources.[86] Consequently, production could be reorganized on mass scale and at higher speeds, supporting the accumulation of massive wealth, profits, and luxuries, which in turn became the defining characteristics of human interest in the modern era, or Marcuse's "false needs." This is not an argument for technological determinism if by that one means that our contemporary moment was always inevitably meant to emerge as it has; nor is it a call for an uncritical eco-maternalism, an approach that "risks romanticizing 'nature' as purely benevolent."[87] Rather, it is a recognition of the importance that material conditions play in the shaping of history, and what distinct configurations of life, ideas, and even morality, these conditions enable. Being and behaving as a stranger means that we must recognize the perniciousness of the underlying logic of capital and the structuring of modern life, as well as how far we directly or indirectly contribute to and profit from this configuration. This knowledge, this new way of seeing, demands nothing short of experimentation in alternative ways of organizing and configuring social and economic activities that will necessarily be smaller, less "productive/efficient," and slower.[88]

How can this new way of seeing come about? Despite the ubiquity of harm in modern socio-economic practices, many of us remain unaware of it, perhaps for a whole lifetime. That is because the complex nature of social organization, the division of labor and the urban expansions that support our current existence, and the speed with which modern life operates, all keep us removed at a distance from most sites of production, where most harm is being inflicted. Imagine a model of livelihood where small communities lived and worked in close proximity to each other and

86 For example, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2014), particularly Chapter 1, which considers Capitalism's constant onslaught upon sleep as a previously untapped unproductive spatio-temporal aspect of a worker's day, constantly seeking ways that allow workers to reproduce and sustain themselves, as well as consume, with less and less sleep.

87 Beecham, "Organising food differently," 542.

88 For an ethnographic example of what alternative food organizing looks like, see Beacham's "Organising food differently."

to where their commodities were being produced and consumed, where neighbors knew each other and could easily observe each other's livelihood practices. Now imagine our moment, where many of the basic life processes like food cultivation and processing, garment production, waste disposal, etc., are either happening in large factories, in faraway areas, or even overseas, where the only thing that stands for these complex socio-economic relations and practices in our sight is the commodity we buy in the supermarket or, perhaps now more frequently, online. This distance that affords us to make quick consumer decisions, to buy things on the go, to not worry about basic life processes so that we can get on with our work or other responsibilities, is the exact distance that also hides the relations of harm we regularly, and usually unknowingly, support or benefit from.

Here is where I find behaving as strangers to be useful in both revealing these hidden practices, and in thinking about how to ethically respond to them. A stranger is slow, they do not buy the first thing they see on the shelf, and do not click the buy online button in the blink of any eye. They deliberately pause to ask what's behind the commodity they are viewing or holding in their hand. They behave as if they are buying an item for the first time, every time. Because they are strangers, and therefore have neither knowledge, familiarity, nor custom to fall back onto, they take the time to learn about things around them. They wish to see things deeply and clearly, and so they try to identify the invisible relations hidden within a familiar-looking environment. Strangers, because they are not habituated or accustomed to their surroundings, despite how familiar and natural those may seem, are always questioning the nature of their reality.

Just as these practices allow us to better understand our social milieu and the forms of harms we might not be attentive to, they can also guide more thoughtful, reflective, and ethical consumption. Again, making slow decisions after much research and contemplation on what ethical businesses or sources are available to deal with, buying durable items that will last longer and do not need quick replacement with more perishable items, prioritizing mending items over replacing them, finding non-harmful ways to dispose of waste in their vicinity, looking out for the disempowered in their community, frequently checking on their working conditions, using their connections and relations to advice and admonish those they have access to take better care of their employees, to improve their business practices and to alleviate forms of harm—all of these are examples of every day ethical practices mediated by resolute and deliberate slowness and attention to ourselves, our impact on others, and our surroundings.

While strangerhood is a universal injunction, it is all the more imperative for those of us who profit from the comfort that these modern socio-economic practices afford us. Precisely because we do not have to worry about the provision of many of these basic life processes, because we now know at what expense it has afforded us comfort, and because we now understand how the infliction of harm has been the organizing principle of modern human livelihood, to live ethically as Muslims requires the patient and persevering intention to engage in the world against the deeply ingrained logic of self-interest and greed. It requires pushing back, each according to their subjective capacities, against forms of ease that we identify as harmful to others, and to continuously seek ethical alternatives that prioritize welfare and harmony of well-being within human populations and across humans, animals, and the environment alike. What these actions that are intended to remove harm will look like, will depend on the subjective position of each individual and the resources and power communities possess. As Ingrid Mattson notes, ethical responses range from developing and consuming alternative ethical sources to engaging "broader policy discussions about these issues and promote legislation regulating the [industries] at large."[89]

Strangers All

I wish to return to Islamic law in order to revisit how individual ethics can be translated to collective efforts to resist structural evil. During the post-classical period, jurists developed a philosophy of divine law, denoting the underlying objectives of legal rulings, and the extent to which new rules could be developed. Central to this formulation are notions of the attainment of benefit and the prevention of harm.[90] Thus al-Ghazālī, and

89 Mattson, "Eating in the Name of God," 24.

90 The place of benefit and harm in Islamic law is a fascinating reflection of the entanglement of theology, law, and moral theory, and particularly of the enduring Muʿtazilī influence in Islamic thought. George Hourani identifies two theories of value, the Muʿtazilī framework may be called objectivism, whereas theistic subjectivism is most closely associated with the Ashʿarīs (Hourani, *Two Theories of Value*, 269). The distinction ties in the two schools divergent conceptions of God, emphasizing some of His attributes over others, moral ontology, epistemology, and the problem of evil. Muʿtazilīs, often referred to as rationalists by modern scholarship, understand moral value to be inherent to the object/act that is discernible by the ʿaql (a discerning faculty) or what we call the mind; for them, humans are entirely responsible for their actions, so that punishment and reward is entirely the result of their deeds in the world, and thus they emphasise God's

later Al-Shāṭibī, canonized the concept of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* (objectives of

justice and wisdom. Justice meant that God would not punish or reward unless the human was allowed absolute free will, and wisdom entailed that what was morally good or bad corresponded to what was beneficial and harmful to humans, and that similarly, divine law prescribed what was good/beneficial and proscribed what was evil/harmful. Ashʿarīs on the other hand, take issue with the Muʿtazilī implication that God is held to objective rules of morality, and right and wrong. They, on the other hand, emphasise His omnipotence, and locate the nature of good and evil in what He defines as such (Hourani, 270). While Muʿtazilism was primarily a theological movement, it was clear that they supplied a theory of ethics that allowed the jurist, as a human being, the capacity to discern the moral nature of things, and subsequently an objective good "including a real public interest and real justice," and thus it could potentially support *ijtihād alraʾy*, or the exercise of judgment (Hourani, 272). The only obstacle to that theory is that while human reason may be able to discern the good and evil that pertained to welfare in this world, the mind could not opine on what constituted benefit and harm for the soul in the afterlife. This is one of the reasons Hourani offers to justify the eventual Ashʿarīs victory over Muʿtazilī moral thought. But I take there to be a clear and enduring Muʿtazilī influence that has been "domesticated" in Islamic law precisely through the adoption of benefit and harm as the conceptual and discursive foundation undergirding the objectives of Islamic law. Ahmed El-Shamsy traces Muʿtazilī influence in the learning and formative studies of a generation of Shafʿī scholars who were some of the first to write on the *uṣūl al-fiqh*, or theory of jurisprudence (Ahmed El-Shamsy, "The Wisdom of God's Law: Two Theories," in A. Kevin Reinhart and Robert Gleave, eds., *Islamic Law in Theory* [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 20). While Wael Hallaq has spoken generally of the Great Synthesis of traditionalism and rationality in his book *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), El-Shamsy highlights the specific Muʿtazilī value to the Shafʿīs: the Muʿtazilī inheritance of a sacred law that promotes human benefit "served to justify both the overall rationality of the and the practice of analogical reasoning" (El-Shamsy, 20). While El-Shamsy notes the utility this moral theory played in justifying analogy, he argues that consideration of benefit did not, in practice, play an important role "in the actual process of legal reasoning," not until, at least, the work of later Ashʿarī Shafʿīs, such as Al-Ghazali. Ashʿarism had, under Muʿtazilī intellectual pressures, conceded to the idea that although God was beyond the realities of law and ethics and thus was not held to any rules of morality or reason, He had nevertheless made it a habit of the universe that harm and benefit correlated with the prescribed and the proscribed. For more on this, see Aaron Zysow, *Economy of Certainty*, chapter 4 (Oxford University Press, 2013). El-Shamsy traces this in the work of Al-Ghazālī who offered, not a rationalist Muʿtazilī, but a "quasi-empiricist" argument whose "basis in Ashʿarī voluntarism necessarily precluded the assumption of a priori structure or aims within the law, but it left open the possibility of discovering such a structure through observation of the law itself" (El-Shamsy, 32). El-Shamsy sees in this development the Ashʿarī the final severance of law and theology, which allowed benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) to be understood not as a matter of theology, but a legal concept that only required probabilistic induction to be epistemically acceptable, whereas knowledge in the

[divine] law) where "rules of Islamic jurisprudence are laid down to attract benefits and to eliminate hardship, in order to protect the five necessities of life recognized by Islam: religion (*dīn*), life (*nafs),* offspring/lineage (*nasl*), wealth/property (*māl*) and intellect ('aql)."[91] Al-Ghazālī complements the five objectives with three-part scale of priorities, again inferred from the legal corpus: divine law ensures that people's welfare is met by providing for i) *ḍarūriyyāt* or those things considered necessary for their survival, b) *ḥājāt* or those things that underlie the functions of, or bring about the necessities, and c) *taḥsīniyyāt* or those aspects that beautify life and add to comfort and ease. Another emergent sub-genre in legal thought systematized what came to be known as legal maxims, which function as "the frame of reference for substantive legal cases."[92] Zakariyah draws on theological and jurisprudential articulations to define legal maxims as "legal rules, the majority of which are universal, expressed in concise phraseology, depicting the nature and objectives of Islamic Law and encompassing general rules in cases that fall under their subject matter."[93] Legal maxims, while an inductive legal construct, are useful in that they can bring back the jurist's mind to the first principles of law, amidst the continuous expansion in size and complexity of the legal corpus.[94] A particularly relevant legal maxim is *al-ḍarar yuzāl* (injury/harm should be removed).[95] What generates wide recognition for this maxim and its applicability in Islamic jurisprudence is that "it has its roots firmly in Qur'anic injunctions and in the traditions of the Prophet," [96] such as the famous *ḥadīth* "*lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār"* (no harm should be inflicted or reciprocated).[97] While it may seem like a straightforward maxim, a number

realm of theology required certainty (El-Shamsy, 34). Moving forward, *maṣlaḥa* became a tool of legal reasoning and the derivation of new (analogical) laws responding to new developments. For an intellectual history of *maṣlaḥa*, see Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

91 Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 158.

92 Samy Ayoub, "'Neither Desiring It, nor Transgressing Its Limits:' Ethical Hierarchy in Islamic Law," in *Islamic Law and Ethics,* ed. David R. Vishanoff (Washington, DC: IIIT, 2020), 34–51 at 35.

93 Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 40. Jurists and theologians have slightly different conceptions pursuant to their disciplinary conventions and their way of deriving knowledge. Thus, a legal maxim is "either 'a general theorem which applies to all of its related particulars' or 'a general rule which applies to its particulars in order to deduce rules from it;'" Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 36.

94 Zakariyah, 56.

95 Zakariyah, 162.

96 Zakariyah, 159.

97 Ḥadīth no. 2340 in Muhammed ibn Yazīd al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, ed. Muhammed Fu'ād 'Abdulbāqī (Dār Iḥiyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, n.d.), 784.

of subsidiary injunctions are also taken into consideration when deriving or discerning a legal ruling pertaining to the question of harm. Some of these include the injunctions that the harm is not to be removed by another harm; that, if necessary, a larger harm may be removed by a lesser harm; that a personal harm can be incurred if it prevents a public harm; and if an action will bring about both harm and benefit, that the prevention of harm be prioritized.[98] To further complicate the picture, there are at least two other legal maxims that seem to temper and balance out this injunction to remove harm. One is "hardship begets facility,"[99] the other that "custom is authoritative."[100] The first expresses the idea that rules should be alleviated or adjusted so as to bring ease in exceptional cases of hardship; the second recognizes that a community's customs, defined as "practices that have *penetrated* deep among people by recurrence and are *acceptable* to people of *sound* nature" are a recognized source of legal authority.[101]

What this means for our purposes is that the juristic process of deriving new laws to respond to changing circumstances and new realities is not as simple as identifying harm and eliminating it. The legal and political minds that govern a community must be attuned to the nature of the emerging harmful practices, their extent, what objectives of the law they are hindering, and what legal maxims are relevant to addressing them, all in an act of balancing and prioritizing benefits and harm. However, this process will not achieve the kind of reckoning and reconfiguration if we rely on superficial vision. If we as communities continue to think in terms of scarcity, of what is "approved by reason"—bearing in mind that reason is instrumental in the Anthropocene—or what the majority of humankind today finds "acceptable,"[102] then many of the forms of harm we have examined in the

98 In his Chapter 6 of *Legal Maxims in Islamic Criminal Law*, Zakariyah identifies these submaxims in his study: a) harm should be prevented as much as possible (*aḍ-ḍarar yudfa' bi-qadr al-imkān*), b) greater harm should be prevented by committing a lesser injury (*aḍ-ḍarar al-ashadd yuzāl bi-ḍ-ḍarar al-akhaff*, c) personal injury should be incurred to prevent general injury (*yutaḥammal aḍ-ḍarar al-khāṣṣ li-daf' ḍarar* 'āmm), and d) preventing evil is better than attracting benefits (*dar' al-mafāsid aw-lā min jalb al-maṣāliḥ*).

99 Muḥammad Ibn Bahā' al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Manṯūr fī l-Qawā'id*, 2nd edition, Taysir F.A. Maḥmūd, ed. (Kuwait: Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs, 1405), 3:169.

100 Luqman Zakariyah, "Custom and Society in Islamic Criminal Law: A Critical Appraisal of the Maxim 'al-'Ādah Muḥakkamah' (Custom is Authoritative) and its Sisters in Islamic Legal Procedures," *Arab Law Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2012), 76.

101 Zakariyah, "Custom and Society in Islamic Criminal Law," 77.

102 Zakariyah, 79.

earlier section can be justified away as necessary or collateral harm that cannot otherwise be changed lest it interrupt the higher order necessities of life as we have come to know it. For the juristic endeavor to rise to the occasion, and, to my mind at least, remain committed to the spirit of the law, those involved in the process must themselves cultivate strangerhood. They must exercise a critical distance from customary practices and must recognize the ways in which domination structures and configures harm in a way that requires a strong departure from the micro-level (context specific and individual) approach to cases of harm that characterizes the Muslim *qāḍī* (judge) and his *fatwā* (legal opinion). In communities governed by Islamic law, this endeavor must engage and encourage questions of the true needs of the community's members, of the "forms of life" that need to be sustained and protected within it, and of the potential for experimenting in different scales and speeds of sourcing public goods, and various registers of social organization and alternative forms of life that brings us closer to fulfilling our trust.

We can establish from this foray that the identification, measurement, and assessment of what is harmful are all processes involved in the production of jurisprudence, a practice that is central not only to the regulation of Muslim communities and public order, but also the individual believer's life. Therefore, knowledge of the present forms of socio-economic harms, the practices that enable them, and how and why these practices come about, strike me as necessary components for determining legal rulings as a form of resisting structural evil. This intricate connection between the legal and the ethical, the result of the intricate and interconnected development of Islamic moral theory, theology, and law, is one way that the ethical work of strangerhood can be elevated from the typical individual locus of ethics to becoming a collective praxis and a communal ethic.

Returning

In an article on the pursuit of happiness, Muslim legal scholar Khaled Abou El-Fadl states that Muslim theologians have always conceived of a process where a Muslim's reflection and deliberation would lead to the "realization of the importance of goodness, [so that] the seeking of knowledge… would lead to a comprehension of the moral good."[103] I have argued that to be a stranger is more than an eschatological identity or a designation of

103 Khaled Abou El-Fadl, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Islamic Ethics for the Modern World," *ABC Religion and Ethics* (Sept. 4, 2018), www.abc.net.

otherness. To be a stranger is to embody a particular prophetic praxis with clear characteristics and behaviors. It is to approach our very livelihood with slow, deliberate, and reflective distance, and to take seriously our duty by genuinely and constantly learning about what practices inflict harm and what we can do to eliminate it. This duty, in its essence, is the same as when it was first revealed. However, just as the *jāhiliyyah* (ignorant injustice) of each age manifests differently, so must our duty to transform ourselves and society meet the complexity and magnitude of this injustice. While I have illustrated the use of this framework with the example of socio-economic practices, I imagine it to be necessary and applicable to all our relations and practices, private and public.

It is reasonable to ask, however, whether doing this work will truly lift forms of harm or will merely allow us to refrain from inflicting harm. My response to this question is tentative. No community can erase all forms of harm. We also cannot know how much communities can do to successfully influence national and transnational policies, or if most of the harm we have so far incurred is fully reversible. Islamic eschatological discourse points towards increased corruption and the proliferation of sins and harm leading to the Day of Judgment. My understanding, however, is that the potential failure of our actions to attain the desired outcomes in this world does not negate the responsibility to perform them. In this light, I understand God's reassurance that people are only held accountable to their capabilities.[104] I see their ethical obligation to address harm to be according to what subjective privileges they have at their disposal—be they of class, knowledge, access to finance and policy resources, political freedom, and so on. The impossibility of total repair and redress of harm is irrelevant to our ethical obligations, because the *grammar* of Islamic eschatology, and Islamic practice in general, is that of intentions and principles, not outcomes.

Cultivating the way of the stranger is to commit oneself to a life-long endeavor of balancing hope with a generous—as opposed to self-flagellating—investigation of one's complicity. But we learn from strangers how to sit with uncertainty. Strangers bide their time, they know their place in the world is constantly changing, as are their circumstances and their fortunes. Being a stranger may therefore also help us ground our actions in an acceptance of the fluctuation of power and capabilities. Within this discursive logic, the Prophet is reported to have said:

104 *lā yukallif Allāh nafsan illā wus'ahā* (Qur'an 2:286), that is, "God does not demand of anyone that which they are not capable [of doing]."

إِنْ قَامَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَفِي يَدِ أَحَدِكُمْ فَسِيلَةٌ، فَإِنِ اسْتَطَاعَ أَنْ لَا تَقُومَ حَتَّى يَغْرِسَهَا فَلْيَغْرِسْهَا

In qāmat al-sāʿah wa fī yadi aḥadikum fasīlah fa-in istaṭāʿa an-lā taqūma ḥattā yaghrisahā fa-l-yaghrisahā.

If the Final Hour comes while you have a shoot of a plant in your hands and it is possible to plant it before the Hour comes, you should plant it.[105]

And it is within this *grammar* that we may understand the following orientation towards intentional action in the world:

وَإِذْ قَالَتْ أُمَّةٌ مِنْهُمْ: لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوْمًا اللَّهُ مُهْلِكُهُمْ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا قَالُوا مَعْذِرَةً إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ. فَلَمَّا نَسُوا مَا ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ أَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ السُّوءِ وَأَخَذْنَا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا بِعَذَابٍ بَئِيسٍ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ.

Wa-idhā qālat ummatun minhum: lima taʿẓūna qawman allāhu muhlikuhum aw muʿadhibuhum ʿadhāban shadīda qālū maʿdhiratan ilā rabbikum wa laʿallahum yattaqūn. Fa-lammā nasū mā dhukkirū bihi anjaynā alladhīna yanhawna ʿan *alsū' wa akhdhnā alladhīna zalamū bi-ʿadhābin ba'īs bimā kānū yafsuqūn.*

And whenever some people among them asked [those who tried to restrain the Sabbath-breakers], "Why do you preach to people whom God is about to destroy or [at least] to chastise with suffering severe?"—the pious ones would answer, "In order to be free from blame before your Sustainer, and that these [transgressors, too,] might become conscious of Him. And thereupon, when those [sinners] had forgotten all that they had been told to take to heart, We saved those who had tried to prevent the doing of evil, and overwhelmed those who had been bent on evildoing with dreadful suffering for all their iniquity" (Q 7:164–65, Asad translation).[106]

105 Hadith No. 9 in Muhammad Nasir Al-Din Al-Albani, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥah*, volume 1 (Riyadh: Maktabat al-mʿārif), 38.

106 In my reading, the response of the group designated as the subject in these verses places the emphasis on both intentionality and deontological obligation, as well as uncertain yet enduring hope in the sinner's potential good, rather than on purely or exclusively consequential outcomes.

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