Tablet and Sword: Religion and Violence in Recent Popular Scholarship on the Muslim World, by Adam Edward Hollowell

Abstract

A growing body of popular scholarship attempts to reframe Western conceptions of the Muslim world by offering, as Reza Aslan says, "a new, more constructive set of ideas and metaphors." This essay reflects on the complexities and promises of three recent efforts composed outside traditional academic settings: Eliza Griswold's *The Tenth Parallel*, Graham E. Fuller's *A World Without Islam*, and Aslan's edited volume *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*. Despite their respective challenges, these books diversify and nourish literary images of the Muslim world, and they reshape our perceptions of the relationship between religion and violence in global politics.

Born out of longstanding discontent with Samuel Huntington's now infamous "clash of civilizations" hypothesis, a growing body of popular scholarship attempts to reframe public conceptions of religious conflict across the Muslim world.[1] The most notable of these attempts from 2010 was Eliza Griswold's *The Tenth Parallel*, an extensive journalistic project exploring violence and political tension across countries along the line of latitude seven hundred miles north of the equator.[2] Two radically different approaches are Graham E. Fuller's *A World Without Islam* and Reza Aslan's edited volume *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*. Fuller's project is an ambitious counterfactual enterprise; he argues that geopolitical and ethnic tensions between the West and the Middle East would be largely similar even "if there had never been an Islam."[3] Aslan's project is more indirect. *Tablet and Pen* offers translations of poetic and literary voices to provide "a new paradigm for viewing the mosaic that is the modern Middle East."[4]

This essay reflects on the complexities and promises of these recent popular attempts to reframe public perceptions of the Muslim world. Many will agree, with Fuller, that, "in many senses there is no 'Muslim world' at all, but rather many Muslim worlds, or many Muslim countries and different kinds of Muslims."[5] Even as we admit this complexity, how can we speak truthfully about religion and politics, especially in places plagued by violent conflict? Do these authors create new spaces for clarity and insight, or do they subtly repeat the inadequacies of their predecessors? Perhaps most importantly, are the new interpretive frameworks they suggest helpful for charting a new course of popular understanding of contemporary Islam?

I begin by examining Fuller's hypothesis that a world without Islam would possess remarkably similar geopolitical tensions. Here William Cavanaugh's concept of the "myth of religious violence" provides a helpful device for assessing Fuller's argument. Turning to Eliza Griswold's work, I argue that she helpfully articulates the complexities of the Muslim World along the tenth parallel, but leaves us more exhausted than hopeful as we look toward future Muslim-Christian relations. Lastly, I will argue that the literary force of *Tablet and Pen* boldly introduces a variety of unique voices to the Western imagination, while largely relinquishing the

task of explicitly reconfiguring our impressions of religion and violence. I conclude by suggesting that, despite their respective limitations, these works collectively diversify and nourish Western access to the Muslim world and may have the effect of creating new spaces for dialogue and relationship.

Imagining a World without Islam

Though written for a popular audience, *A World Without Islam* is more closely imbedded in the academic world than *The Tenth Parallel* or *Tablet and Pen*. Fuller is former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, the author of several books, and an adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University. He begins by juxtaposing his argument with Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory, asking, "What if Islam never existed? To some, it's a comforting thought … no holy wars, no terrorists. But what if that weren't the case at all?"[6] Fuller argues that a world without Islam would look much the same as it does today, including challenging tensions between the West and the Middle East. This is because Islam "has primarily served as flag or banner for other, deeper kinds of rivalries and confrontations."[7] These more determinative factors include "economic interests, geopolitical interests, power struggles between regional empires, ethnic struggles, nationalisms, even severe clashes within Christianity itself."[8]

Given the sweeping nature of the argument, Fuller moves quickly through a list of historical conflicts where, he argues, Islam was not the most fundamental issue at stake. Most importantly, he catalogs a broad basis of conflict between the Eastern Byzantine Empire and the Western Roman Empire – "religious, cultural, geopolitical, historical, artistic, and psychological."[9] He argues that "anti-Western feelings" in the Eastern Orthodox Church "strongly resemble certain Muslim attitudes toward the West…suggesting a common geopolitical source of shared views, suspicions, and grievances toward Western influence, intentions, and interventions."[10] In other words, "Islam" has wrongly been identified as the driving factor behind East-West tensions.

Here William Cavanaugh's concept of "the myth of religious violence" helps analyze Fuller's frustration with "facile assumptions that Islam is what the Middle East is all about – the source of the problem and the solution."[11] According to Cavanaugh, the myth of religious violence "is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from 'secular' features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence."[12] The myth rests on a fundamental belief that "religion must be at least analytically separable from politics, economics, etc.…we must be able at least on paper to identify which motives are religious, which are political, and which are social."[13] Fuller clearly rejects the myth; he argues explicitly against the idea that something called "Islam" is inherently violent. He builds his project, however, on the fundamental idea that religion is analytically separable from other historical, social, geopolitical, and economic factors. That belief is at the heart of Fuller's claim; thus, he says, "take away Islam and the trends still remain."[14]

In short, while Fuller rightly rejects the isolation of Islam as a sole determining factor in global political conflict, he swings the pendulum too far in the other direction. His aim is noble, and to say that we need to consider complex geopolitical, economic, and ethnic tensions alongside religion is certainly appropriate. But it undermines his criticism of a simplistic narrative about Islam to retort that conflict "has really very little to do with religion and everything to do with political and cultural frictions, interests, rivalries, and clashes."[15] To isolate religion as the most relevant or most irrelevant factor in global conflict is to oversimplify an inherently complex situation for interpretive clarity. Fuller says, "Take Islam out of the equation, and there's a very good chance you'd still find the Middle East at loggerheads with the West."[16] That may be true, but we cannot take Islam out of the equation—as Fuller well knows– and so we cannot isolate it to be overlooked in our analysis of the Middle East, just as we cannot isolate it to overlook other factors.

Encounters with Conflict along the Tenth Parallel

If Fuller is right when he argues that "Islam, in the end, is what Muslims say it is, and how they act upon it," then Eliza Griswold's *The Tenth Parallel* is an attempt to make a record of what Muslims in many parts of the world are saying and doing in the name of Islam.[17] The book presents observations and reflections from nearly a decade of journalistic endeavors along the tenth parallel in Africa and Southeast Asia, including in Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, the Horn of Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Griswold, like Fuller, is attempting to facilitate a shift in popular Western understanding of Islam away from a "clash of civilizations" thesis. Yet, where Fuller hypothesizes about grand stretches of history, Griswold reflects more intimately on direct experiences of those who live in regions of conflict and violence. She demonstrates an astute ability to observe religion without isolating or overlooking its entanglements with other complicated realities. As she notes in the introduction, "Over the past decade, there has been much theorizing about religion and politics…I wanted to see how Christianity and Islam are actually lived every day by huge numbers of vulnerable, marginal believers."[18]

With acute sensitivity, Griswold confronts the challenges of weak political power and industrial globalization alongside those of ethnic and religious tensions. In Somalia, Ahmed Abdi Salem, a businessman frustrated with conflict between warlords, observes, "This is a secular community, but the more they see themselves as marginalized, the more they turn to religion…Religion comes in because it's education for free and we all have it."[19] In the Philippines, Father Geremia argues that the conflict between ethnic Moro militia groups and the government is "between power and powerlessness, not Christianity and Islam."[20] Griswold's reporting often highlights the prominent social and political role of religion in the absence of other resources.

At other times, however, leaders from fractured communities explicitly point to religious causes of violence. While describing violent chaos in the aftermath of local elections that overwhelmed Yelma, a small town north of Wase, Nigeria, Muslim lawyer and community leader

Abdullahi Abdullahi observes, "That was the day ethnicity disappeared entirely and the conflict became just about religion."[21] Christian pastor Sunday Wuyep notes, similarly, "This is about religious intolerance."[22] Griswold, hesitant to isolate religion as a solitary interpretive lens, editorializes the event by noting, "Economics lay at the heart of the enmity between the two groups: as merchants and herders, the Muslims were much wealthier than the minority Christians."[23] Later, she pushes on for a deeper explanation, asking several local young people "if they thought this was really about religion."[24]

After ten years of travel, Griswold is so accustomed to a world of violence and brutality that she remains calm, even stoic, amid narrow escapes from bombings and tense moments with ruthless leaders. In fact, what stands out most are those moments when she encounters something that doesn't quite fit her interpretive categories, and she seems genuinely surprised. On one occasion, she approaches two Nigerian religious leaders, Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa and Pastor James Movey Wuye, with great skepticism. These men promote "deprogramming efforts" with former militant believers, which includes the reading of scripture together, and Griswold says, "At first, I did not believe that such a simple practice could actually work. As an outsider, I doubted that words on the page, no matter the color, could make a substantive difference as to how people viewed one another."[25] Later, she reflects on her surprise that these efforts have helped the situation, saying, "time and again people's professions of their beliefs, like James and Ashafa's work with former militants, baffled me. They were ultimately mysterious, and could not be explained away by self-interest, or anything else of this world."[26]

Another surprise comes while traveling with Ibnu Ahmad, a former Islamic militant trained in Afghanistan and one of the leaders of the Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia. She writes, "Ibnu Ahmad confessed one thing he hated about Afghanistan: the arrogance of the Arab fighters, who believed, by virtue of their Arab ethnicity, they were better Muslims than locals and Southeast Asian foreigners."[27] As Ahmad spoke, Hunter, a traveling companion, "howled his approval. He, too, hated the attitude of those in Europe and the Middle East, be they Caucasian or Arab: it was the classic arrogance of those in the temperate zone couched in religious superiority."[28] Griswold is caught off guard by Ahmad's hatred for other Muslims and his strange pairing of Europeans and Arabs under the common attitude of superiority. She seems surprised because the hatred is primarily ethnic, or geographical, rather than religious. What she hears as sacrilegious the fighters laugh off as scriptural. The story points to one of the largely unexplored themes of the book–tensions between these ethnic communities along the tenth parallel and the Arab communities of the Middle East. But it also points to the elusiveness of her subject.

If *The Tenth Parallel* suggests anything, it is that life in the midst of conflict is murky, ambiguous, and fraught with tension and confusion about how to go forward. By the end of her travels, Griswold is weary and broken by the intractability of political, economic, and geographic messes. At the peak of her disillusionment, she articulates her growing sense that religion is malleable to the point of being vacuous. She notes that in the Philippines, or anywhere on the tenth parallel, "Islam…could mean whatever one wanted it to; it could hold a link to the past of

forge a vision for the future. It could reinforce a family's feudal power or promise liberation from colonial oppression. This is today's splintered Islamic rebellion."[29] Griswold's definition of "religion" seems to have changed from the start of her travels, widening, but not necessarily for the better.

Literary Landscapes from the Middle East

Exhibiting many of the same corrective impulses in *A World Without Islam* and *The Tenth Parallel*, Reza Aslan's *Tablet and Pen* aims "to provide a different, more authentic perception" of the modern Middle East.[30] To do this, Aslan gathers together pieces from poems, fiction, memoirs, and essays translated from Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish. What unites the contributions is not a collective Muslim identity, but "a preoccupation with these themes– the overwhelming sense of being cast as 'foreign,' as 'other.'"[31] Thus, he aims to highlight the richness and diversity of the Middle East with an image that is "not fashioned by the descriptions of invaders, but rather one that arises from diverse literatures of its most acclaimed poets and writers."[32]

Aslan is clear that one central purpose of the collection is to unsettle long-standing Western perceptions of the Middle East "as a mysterious and exotic, savage and erotic place."[33] Yet while the voices in this volume are no less critical of simplistic accounts of the "clash of civilizations" mindset, religion and violence are less directly under the analytical microscope. Many of the representations of religion in general, and Islam in particular, are subtle and unremarkable, neither the focus of the scene nor the defining trait of the characters. It lurks behind parental disapproval of young lovers. It takes shape as a headscarf in the sun, incense burning during incantations, or prayers tacked to a wall. It is "a God/Who has hidden Himself/Behind the face of the moon./For the fear of His people."[34]

The two most explicit reflections on Islam and violence richly explore emotions of grief, piety, and tension. In "The Girl Sleeping on Top of Oil," Pegah Ahmadi juxtaposes sharply violent imagery with the exhaustion and submission of heartfelt prayer.

Hear me well, prayer rug!
With my dust from Iraq and memories from the wet underbelly of Khorramshahr!
And you, camphor prayer!
As rain from my child reaches the heart of the bow
then it would be time to wash off the moon!
I will explode you
I am no windowpane, but I will bring about your death,
explosion!

Hear me well, prayer rug!
I can work magic
with my explosive prayer of submission

I can pull out a dove
live, breathing heavily
from the passageway in my throat
and with all my heart, all the explosion in my heart
and my blood and body
let it loose over waters.
Croon on, rain, croon on!

And then, bent over my skirt
I sank my head into my downy pillow
And two blue bowls
Exploded into my palms.[35]

Ahmadi confronts the reader with imagery of explosions, but she directs and subverts it into the bursts of tears accompanying prayers of submission. Constructing an alternative to public acts of terror, she privatizes and internalizes the explosive tension by replacing corporal violence with the physical manifestations of grief, loss, and frustration.

Such introspection is also present in "Jamilah and Us," a poem by the Iraqi poet and literary critic Nazik Al-Mala'ika. In it she reflects on the public response to the imprisonment and torture of Algerian nationalist revolutionary Jamilah Bouhired (b. 1935).

Jamilah! Beyond the horizon, far beyond the borders of nations, you weep.
Your hair loose, your tears soak the pillow.
Are you really crying? Does Jamilah cry?
Don't they give you music and song
Didn't they make offerings, of words and more words to you?
So why the tears, Jamilah?

The details of your torture were on every tongue,
And that hurt us, it was hard for our sensitive ears to bear.
You were the one imprisoned and shackled
And when you were dying for a sip of water
We marshaled all our songs
And said, "We'll sing to you, Jamilah, through the long nights."
All of us said: They gave you blood and fire to drink.
All of us said: They put you on the cross.
But what did we do? We sang, we praised your heroism, your glory.

We said: "We'll save her (Yes, we will)!"
We made promises, false promises, drunken promises
And we shouted "Long live Jamilah! Long live Jamilah!"

We fell in love with Jamilah's smile.
We adored her round cheeks.
The beauty that prison had gnawed revived our love.
We were infatuated with her dimples, with the braids of her hair.
Did we not use her suffering to give meaning to our poetry?
Was that a time for songs? Songs, be ashamed.
Be silent before this noble suffering.

Their intent was evil. They cut her with sharp blades.
We gave her smiles, good intentions.
They hurt her with knives.
We, with the best of intentions, hurt her with ignorant, uncouth words.
The teeth of France tore her flesh.
She was one of us, our kin.
And the wounds we inflicted are more painful to bear,
Shame on us for all the suffering of Jamilah![36]

Al-Mala'ika expresses deeply ambiguous sentiments about the subtle abuses of political celebration and representative martyrdom. She not only names the difficulty of knowing when suffering calls for silence, for songs, or for calls to arms, but she also offers a strong warning against justifying violence by placing it easily into a larger narrative of revolution. She verges on an uncomfortable collapse of the divide between the Western torturers and the Middle Eastern protesters when she cries, "Shame on us for all the suffering of Jamilah!"

These sober and beautiful sensitivities to overly simplistic accounts of violence, redemption, and mourning go a long way toward creating what Aslan calls "a new, more constructive set of ideas and metaphors."[37] The work of both Ahmadi and Al-Mala'ika reflects the common experience of imperialism and colonial domination at the heart of this collection: "the disrupted histories and ravaged lands, the depletion of resources and inequities in wealth and status, the long struggles for sovereignty, and the vacuums of power and identity that so often followed independence from foreign rule."[38] At the same time, each author poetically subverts and reconfigures traditional understandings of the relationship between religion and violence in the Middle East.

The benefits of Aslan's collection are readily apparent; it deftly introduces unique voices from the Middle East to Western popular imagination. Yet, as he presents these new images and metaphors, he largely leaves to the reader the task of reconfiguring Western impressions of the relationship between religion and violence. That is to say, he is content to present these "literary landscapes" without providing even a rudimentary roadmap for the reader to navigate the new terrain. Given that Aslan has elsewhere proven himself to be an insightful commenter on similar themes, we're left wondering what additional benefits might have accrued with a more robust introduction.

Conclusion

A World Without Islam, *The Tenth Parallel*, and *Tablet and Pen* each attend, in their own way, to issues of religion, violence, and political conflict. Griswold's travels place her most directly in the line of fire, and her surprise in rare moments of reconciliation contrasts more frequent encounters with brutality and suffering. She diversifies and personalizes our images of religious violence but fails to offer many glimmers of hope. Fuller and Aslan confront "ubiquitous images of terrorists and fanatics" more indirectly by shifting our ideological and imaginative paradigms, respectively.[39] Here the literary force of *Tablet and Pen* is particularly effective. The richness and diversity of these native voices offer a multitude of constructive impressions and metaphors to replace standard Western associations of Middle Eastern violence.

More importantly, at the center of each book is an attempt to redefine "religion," particularly "Islam." For Fuller, this lies primarily in rejecting the use of the term as an "instant and uncomplicated analytical touchstone for most affairs in the Middle East."[40] As I've tried to show, however, his project is more concerned with training our eyes to focus on "deeper" issues than it is about getting a clear picture of the various ways Islam takes shape in the region. On this matter Aslan is distinctly helpful to the extent that he allows native voices of the Middle East to speak on their own terms. He shifts the encounter with Islam away from an all-or-nothing mentality toward more subtle, organic moments, while allowing that "the questions posed by the role of Islam in society are ever-present themes."[41]

Griswold grows frustrated with the elusiveness of a definition. She speaks of reaching, finally, "a limit of interpretation," and—as noted earlier—her departing notes reveal an overwhelming sense of exhaustion.[42] Yet her efforts succeed where both Fuller and Aslan fail, because she turns our attention directly to Islam's role in the conflicts of the Global South along the tenth parallel. Here we encounter some unique, even unexpected tensions between Islam in the Middle East and other parts of the world. *The Tenth Parallel* makes it clear that political conflicts "take place not simply between rival religions, but inside them."[43] Thus, while all three authors are well aware that, as Aslan says, "there is no such thing as a monolithic 'Muslim world,'" Griswold alone challenges the Western tendency to conflate the Middle East with the Muslim world.[44] She takes us to the heart of Islam in Nigeria, Sudan, and Indonesia, challenging Western captivity to distinctly Arab images of the religion.

Despite their respective challenges, each of these works diversifies and nourishes Western access to the Muslim world. Examined collectively, they represent a constructive trend in popular scholarship aimed at reshaping Western perceptions of the relationship between religion and violence in global politics. I have tried to point to some of the limitations of each approach. Yet, along with their authors, I share the hope that contributions to the public forum such as these will have the effect of creating new spaces for dialogue and engagement with the Muslim world.

Adam Hollowell is Director of Student Ministry at Duke University Chapel and Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Religion and Sanford School of Public Policy. Hollowell holds an A.B. from Duke

University, a well as a Masters of Theology and a Ph.D. in Theological Ethics from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His teaching and research examine political ethics across religious traditions, with particular attention to violence, poverty, and just-war theory. His work has been published in the *International Journal of Public Theology*, the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, and *Studies in Christian Ethics*, and he is a regular contributor to *State of Formation*, an online forum for emerging religious and ethical leaders sponsored by the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*.

Notes
[1] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
[2] Eliza Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girouz, 2010).
[3] Graham E. Fuller, *A World Without Islam* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010), 4.
[4] Reza Aslan, ed., *Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), xxiii.
[5] Fuller, *World*, 8.
[6] Ibid., book jacket.
[7] Ibid., 5.
[8] Ibid., 4.
[9] Ibid., 61.
[10] Ibid., 62. The argument relies on his belief that "there's no doubt what religion would dominate the Middle East today–Eastern Orthodox Christianity" (61).
[11] Ibid., 10-11.
[12] William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
[13] Ibid., 156.
[14] Fuller, *World*, 30. Thus, we must "attend to other deeper and systemic types of problems" because "religion is *not* the central issue at work in present tensions." (11).
[15] Ibid., 16.
[16] Ibid., 44.
[17] Ibid., 139, emphasis removed from original.
[18] Griswold, *Tenth*, 12.
[19] Ibid., 131.
[20] Ibid., 257.
[21] Ibid., 46.
[22] Ibid., 47.
[23] Ibid., 46-47.
[24] Ibid., 49.
[25] Ibid., 71.
[26] Ibid., 71-72.
[27] Ibid., 168.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 267.
[30] Aslan, *Tablet*, xx. Although Aslan compiles literature from 1910-2010, I will largely limit my comments to those selections in Part Three covering 1980-2010.

[31] Ibid., xxiii. In fact, Aslan is quick to note that many of the authors do not self-identify as Muslims and “there is no such thing as a monolithic ‘Muslim World,’ save perhaps in the imaginations of some in the West.” (xxii).
[32] Ibid., xx.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Hamid Reza Rahimi, “A Quarter to Destruction,” in *Tablet,* 604.
[35] Pegah Ahmadi, “The Girl Sleeping on Top of Oil,” in *Tablet,* 564-565.
[36] Nazik Al-Mala’ika,“Jamilah and Us,” in *Tablet,* 584-585. My initial reflections on this poem appeared in a blog post titled "Violence and Celebration in Revolutionary Times" for *State of Formation* (http://www.stateofformation.org/2011/02/violence-and-celebration-in-revolutionary-times/).
[37] Aslan, *Tablet*, xxiii.
[38] Ibid., xxi.
[39] Ibid., xxiii.
[40] Fuller, *World*, 3.
[41] Aslan, *Tablet*, xxii.
[42] Griswold, *Tenth*, 281.
[43] Ibid., 13.
[44] Aslan, *Tablet*, xxii.