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Article

Decolonising Islam: Indigenous Peoples, Muslim Communities, and the Canadian Context

Shadaab Rahemtulla

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH1 2LX, UK; s.rahemtulla@ed.ac.uk

Abstract: The problem of empire has been a key theme in Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT). However insightful, ILT's engagement with empire has presumed a particular colonial configuration, in which Muslims are on the receiving "end" of power, being occupied by an external, non-Muslim force. But what about the presence of Islam within settler colonies, in which voluntary Muslim migrants are structurally complicit in the ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples? Focusing on the Canadian context, I ask: How can we decolonise Islam in the settler colony? That is, how can Muslims address their own complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with native peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that praxis? I argue that decolonising Islam entails three hermeneutical moves: (I) gaining a critical understanding of the socio-historical context, namely, the history of empire on the land; (II) deconstructing the boundaries between "migrant" and "settler", which actually serves to vindicate the former group, releasing them of accountability and responsibility; and (III) engaging in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition. This final theological step, I maintain, is a two-fold dynamic: expounding Islam as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation.

Keywords: Islam; empire; decolonisation; settler colonialism; Indigenous people; Canada

1. Introduction

This article places Islamic liberation theology (ILT) in conversation with settler colonialism and Indigenous rights. As in contemporary Islamic thought in general, the problem of empire has been a key theme in ILT. Examples in the literature include (but are not limited to) US imperialism and resistance to it in Muslim contexts (Dabashi 2008); racial apartheid, as the structural legacy of Afrikaner settler colonialism in South Africa (Esack 1997); and the study of select Islamist movements as grassroots forms of liberation theology, such as Hizbullah in southern Lebanon (Marusek 2018) and Hamas in Occupied Palestine.[1] However insightful, ILT's engagement with the category of empire has generally presumed a particular colonial configuration in which Muslims are located on the receiving "end" of power, being colonised by an external, non-Muslim force. But what about the presence of Islam, I ask, *within* settler colonies in the Americas? Today there are large, established Muslim communities in Canada (~1 million) and the United States (~3.5 million). Migrant Muslim communities in North America are entering their third and even fourth generations, and, in the case of the US, there is a rich Black Muslim legacy that goes back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In this paper, I focus on my own home context of Canada as a concrete case study to grapple with, and provide insights into, the complex relationship between (Muslim) migrants, settler colonialism, and Indigenous dispossession.[2] Centrally, I argue that the case of Canada (and parallels can easily be drawn with the US or Australia) challenges the field of ILT to revisit the category of settler colonialism in a more nuanced, layered manner. For in these settler colonial settings, voluntary Muslim migrants are structurally complicit, *as* settlers, in the ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples.[3] Indeed, despite the established presence of Canadian and American Muslims, there is little critical awareness of the lived realities of native suffering, past and present.

At worst, Muslims may buy into dominant discourses that "blame the victim"—a phrase first used by the psychologist William Ryan in terms of anti-Black racism in the US (Ryan 1971)—representing Indigenous peoples as lazy, irresponsible, and prone to alcoholism and violence. This was the representation conveyed to me as a Muslim growing up in a devout community in Vancouver/Unceded Coast Salish Territories. At best, Muslims may see the fate of native peoples as a grave historical injustice, but one that is ultimately unconnected to "our" problems and concerns: accountability, so the line of thinking goes, lies solely on the shoulders of European settlers from times past.

Putting ILT in reflective dialogue with Indigenous struggles in the Americas, I raise the following questions: How can we decolonise Islam in a settler colonial setting, in which Muslims are not the occupied but themselves implicated in the continued settlement of the land?[4] That is, how can Muslims address their complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that liberating praxis? These are, admittedly, big questions that require long-term, collective, and multi-disciplinary scholarly work; my aim here is simply to spur, to kick-start a larger conversation.

In this article, I argue that decolonising Islam in Canada (or the US or Australia) entails three hermeneutical steps, of which "theological" work is actually the last. Firstly, we must gain a detailed understanding of the socio-historical context, that is, the long history of empire on the land and resistance to it, and how that history has shaped the present. Liberation theology, after all, is never abstracted but always begins with praxis (Bennett 2007, p. 39). Learning that social reality and history, therefore, is not simply "background information"; it cannot be alluded to in a quick, lazy manner merely to "set the stage" for discussion. Rather, it is the very first hermeneutical step in decolonising Islam, and must be teased out with a careful eye to the particularities of, in this case, the Canadian context. Secondly, in order to critically (re)position the Muslim community *within* that socio-historical context, we need to deconstruct the (colonially constructed) boundaries between "migrant" and "settler", which actually serves to vindicate the former group, releasing them of complicity and responsibility. Indeed, it is the presence of this problematic ontological divide between migrant and settler that allows Muslims to evade—if not outright deny—an innate responsibility that we, as settlers living on stolen land, have towards Indigenous peoples. Thirdly, in the light of the first two steps, we need to engage in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition and its complex history. This final theological step of decolonising Islam, I argue, is a two-fold dynamic: expounding Islam as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation. I conclude the article with a concrete example of what decolonising Islam can look like. Focusing on the Qur'an and commentarial tradition (*tafsir*), I re-read the Conquest of Canaan through a decolonial framework in solidarity with Indigenous rights. In sum, this article builds on, and contributes to, a longstanding, anti-colonial tradition within ILT of challenging empire. At the same time, it departs from the existing literature by engaging a very different context and subject positionality, in which Muslim communities are not on the "receiving end" of settler colonialism but enmeshed, in complex but nevertheless complicit ways, within settler colonial structures.

Before embarking on the first hermeneutical step—unpacking the socio-historical context—let me first define some key terms. In this paper, I use the US terminology "Native American" and the Canadian terminology "First Nations" interchangeably. The US and Canada, after all, are socially constructed national entities with artificial, and often arbitrary, borders that cut across Indigenous lands and communities. These terminologies—"Native" and "First"—carry both a chronological and ethical dimension which recognises that the peoples in question were present, living, and thriving on the land long before the arrival of European settlers (Muckle 1998, p. 2). Moreover, the latter part of the Canadian term— "Nations"—acknowledges the great diversity (cultural, linguistic, and ethnic) of native communities, who tend to be reduced in the Western (and Muslim) imaginary into a singular, monolithic bloc. Settler colonialism is the next term which requires clarification.

Settler colonialism denotes a particular mode of colonialism in which an external force not only occupies another people's territory, but, over the course of time, injects their own population (settlers) into that territory. Land, understood in a fluid, holistic sense as "land/water/air/subterranean earth," thus takes on added significance in settler colonial contexts as the most prized, and contested, form of capital (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 5). And this settler relationship to the land, as the postcolonial scholar Patrick Wolfe has observed, is simultaneously "negative" (destructive) and "positive" (productive), entailing, as an ongoing structural process, the decimation of native societies and the erection of a new society (Wolfe 2006, p. 388).

2. Socio-Historical Context

Today, Indigenous peoples are arguably the most marginalised social group in Canada. The poverty levels within First Nations communities are alarming: 25% live under the poverty line, and this number increases to 40% when it comes to child poverty (Canadian Poverty Institute 2023). Similar to African Americans in the US, Indigenous peoples in Canada are disproportionately represented in the prison system. Despite comprising only 3% of the broader national population, they make up 19% of the prison population (Gorelick 2023). Perhaps the most disturbing manifestation of anti-Indigenous racism is the mass disappearances of Indigenous women. Over the past three decades, roughly 4000 women have either been killed or gone missing in Canada (Cecco 2022), and the actual, unreported numbers are likely higher. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has shown that Indigenous females in Canada are 16 times more likely to be murdered or to go missing than Caucasian females (Reclaiming Power and Place 2019, p. 55). Such racist misogyny, moreover, not only manifests in homicide and abduction, but also in routine acts of violence in everyday life. Native women and girls face considerably higher rates of physical assault, sexual abuse, and robbery. For example, the National Inquiry notes that they are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than non-Indigenous women and girls (Ibid.).

Native peoples have never passively accepted such marginalisation, and have consistently resisted and exercised agency in various ways. Idle No More is a compelling example of First Nations' mobilisation. Founded by four women (three Indigenous and one White ally) in 2012 in the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, the movement advocates for Indigenous rights and sovereignty, focusing on the Canadian government's systematic dismantling of various environment protection laws, which have jeopardised the safety and wellbeing of native communities living on the land (Idle No More 2023). The six-week hunger strike of Chief Theresa Spence—the elected leader of the Attawapiskat Nation in northern Ontario—in December 2012 to January 2013 became a unifying symbol for the Idle No More movement. Staging her hunger strike near the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, Spence was protesting the deplorable living conditions in the Attawapiskat reservation, including "a long-standing housing shortage on the reserve, a boil water advisory, pollution from nearby mining activity, and extreme economic depression" (Barker 2015, p. 48). Similar to Black Lives Matter in the US, Idle No More quickly became a national phenomenon, with demonstrations and protests spreading across Canada.

The naming Idle No More is admittedly problematic, and the movement itself acknowledges that First Nations people have never been "idle" in the face of Canadian colonialism, explicitly positioning itself as part of a wider legacy of native resistance. To quote the Idle No More activist and Anishinaaabe scholar Leanne Simpson: "Idle No More is the latest—visible to the mainstream—resistance and it is part of an ongoing historical and contemporary push to protect our lands, our cultures, our nationhoods, and our languages." (Ibid., p. 49) The so-called "Oka Crisis" (1990) in Quebec, as it was dubbed in the mainstream media, is perhaps the most well-known example of Indigenous resistance in modern Canadian memory. The Mohawk Nation had been protesting the seizure of their ancestral lands—The Pines—for decades, when the Municipality of Oka confiscated land in the late 1950s to build a nine-hole golf course. In 1989, the municipality announced it

would seize more of The Pines to expand the golf-course (by a further nine holes) and to build a new condominium complex (Gabriel 2010, p. 345). Mohawk protestors challenged the municipality and, deploying direct action, set up a barricade to block access to their ancestral lands. This led to a heated, 78-day standoff between the protestors and the Quebec police force. The Canadian Army intervened and lay siege on the Mohawk blockade for 26 days, eventually bringing it down. To this day, the army and the police force (Sûrete du Québec) have refused to apologise for various human rights violations perpetrated against the Mohawk protestors, including the denial of food and medicine, physical beating, and torture (Ibid., p. 346).

The dire state of First Nations peoples cannot be understood in isolation of the legacy of empire; this present reality is a direct outcome of a longer, structurally embedded process of settler colonialism and native dispossession. The rest of this section unpacks that historical context. While the first recorded Indigenous encounters with Europeans took place with the arrival of the Norse or "the Vikings" in what is now Newfoundland in the eleventh century (Dickason 2002, p. 67), these were scattered and isolated encounters. Systemic, mass-scale European colonisation began in the late sixteenth century. The French and the British, as the two principal imperial players, were in fierce competition to carve out their own economic spheres of influence, based on the lucrative fur trade, but with the Treaty of Paris (1763) the French formally ceded their colonial territories in North America to the British, which included the heart of "New France": the modern-day province of Quebec (Walker 2008, p. 15). The establishment of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, as politically independent from, but also loyal to, the British Crown, was a cumulative process of colonial expansion. When Canada was formally created, it comprised of only four provinces (Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, or "New Scotland"). In the coming years, these borders would expand considerably to include, in the far north, Rupert's Land—bought from the Hudson's Bay Company—and the Northwest Territories, both in 1870; Manitoba and British Columbia (BC) in the west in 1870 and 1871, respectively; and Prince Edward Island in the east in 1873 (Dickason 2002, pp. 237–38). BC itself was an amalgamation, in 1866, of two administratively separate colonies: the Mainland Colony of British Columbia and the Colony of Vancouver Island (Duff 1997, p. 84).

The land was, of course, anything but "empty," waiting to be colonised and populated; on the contrary, it was teeming with peoples and cultures. The Native American scholar George "Tink" Tinker notes that when Europeans first arrived in the Americas, there were approximately 100 million people living on the land (Tinker 2008, p. 6). Moreover, while native peoples are frequently portrayed in the national imaginary as a monolith— *the* aboriginal people of X country—it is important to underline just how culturally and ethnically diverse these communities were, and continue to be. In BC alone there are over 30 ethnicities and 200 First Nations groups, including the Haida, Nootka, Coast Salish (in whose territory the City of Vancouver was established), Athapaskan, Interior Salish, and Bella Coola (Muckle 1998, pp. 6–7). Like colonial formations across the non-European world, the Canadian and US nation-states showed little respect for the historic, territorial boundaries of Indigenous communities, who had stewarded specific swathes of land for centuries. The western end of the Canada-US border, for instance, cuts right across Coast Salish Territory—the cities of Vancouver and Seattle are both located within them—and, on the east coast, the border permanently split the Blackfeet Nation. The US side would remain the Blackfeet while the Canadian side would become the Blood, and today the two identify as distinct peoples (Ellerman and O'Heran 2021, p. 25).

The arrival of European colonialists, across the Americas, led to the destruction of Indigenous populations and a sharp decline in their numbers. The Spanish colonisation of Latin America is the most notorious example of mass genocide. The Conquistadors almost exterminated the entire population of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), numbering about seven million, and killed twenty million people in the immediate decades following the conquest of Mexico (Tinker 2008, p. 11). The transmission of foreign diseases, to which native peoples had no prior exposure and thus immunity

to, also played a key role in the rising death toll. In the context of BC, diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza, measles, scarlet fever, and especially smallpox, described as the "most devastating of all diseases," wreaked havoc: between the early 1800s and 1920s, the native population of BC dropped by a shocking 75% (Muckle 1998, p. 60). Unlike the Spanish model of mass extermination, the Canadian settler state approached its relations with native peoples through the treaty system, seeking to "extinguish the Indian [*sic*] rights to the soil by treaty" (Duff 1997, p. 98). Building on British colonial practices in North America, a treaty entailed government ownership rights to the land in exchange for other (less desirable) parcels of land as part of reservation plots, as well as gifts, annual payments, services, and other forms of compensation (Ibid., p. 91). Native leaders were often unaware of what they were signing up to or even what ownership, as a Western concept, entailed. Indeed, the very idea of ownership was non-existent in Indigenous languages and cultures. Rather, there was "a firm sense of group filial attachment to the particular places that comes with a responsibility to relate to the land in these places with responsibility" (Tinker 2008, p. 9).[5] Consider the Canadian government's relations with the Cree Nations of the Plains (the modern-day Prairies). The Plains are often seen, in Canadian history, as a shining example of how the government dealt fairly with First Nations peoples through the signing of treaties. Yet, in its dealings with the Cree Nations, the government's unequivocal goal was to "establish control over them, and Canadian authorities were willing to and did wage war upon the Cree in order to achieve this" (Tobias 1983, pp. 519–20). Well aware of the government's interests, Big Bear—the legendary Cree chief and resistance fighter—became a fierce opponent of the existing treaties, calling for a significant revision in order to secure greater autonomy and independence for his people (Ibid., p. 524). It is important to note that, unlike the rest of Canada, no treaties were negotiated in BC. In the nineteenth century there were fourteen land purchases signed in what is now BC, amounting to less than 3% of the land mass of Vancouver Island (Harris 2002, p. 21). Although the treaty system adopted in the rest of Canada is hardly unproblematic, BC offers the rawest example of European empire, wherein Anglophone settlers simply walked in and unilaterally claimed the land for themselves. This is why First Nations activists and their allies routinely refer to the lands of BC as "unceded" territory. Due to the lack of negotiated treaties, for many years the BC provincial government denied any obligations to recognise and settle land claims brought forward by Indigenous peoples—a position the government held until 1990 (Dickason 2002, p. 418).

Canada often juxtaposes itself to the US and South American experience, posturing as a more enlightened, humane expression of state-building and settler–Indigenous relations. In addition to various examples of native resistance and Canadian state suppression, such as the famous 1885 Northwest Rebellion headed by the Metis leader Louis Riel and the Plains resistance led by the Cree chief Big Bear, it is important to note that the two longest intermittent wars with Indigenous tribes took place on what would become Canadian state territory: namely, the Mi'kmaq War (1613–1761) with the British and the Iroquois War (1609–1701) with the French (Ibid., p. 127). Furthermore, just because the Canadian state did not pursue a Conquistador model of mass extermination, this does not mean the underlying objective of state policy was not to eradicate Indigenous people. Rather, it was eradication by different means. Wolfe has argued that although settler colonialism subscribes to a "logic of elimination," that logic does not necessarily manifest as outright genocide (Wolfe 2006, p. 387). The logic of elimination can surface in a variety of modes, such as

> officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools. . .all of these strategies, including frontier homicide, are characteristic of settler colonialism. (Ibid., p. 388)

The Canadian nation-state, from its inception, pursued assimilation as its principal logic of elimination. European settlers had little respect for Indigenous cultures and spiritual

traditions, which they saw as essentially inferior to Christianity and the West. They thus presumed it was only a matter of time before native peoples assimilated into superior European ways, and state policy was premised on this core assumption of native inferiority. To quote the first Prime Minister of Canada, John A. Macdonald, in 1887:

> The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change. (Macdonald, as cited in Dickason 2002, p. 237)

The government waged a war on native culture, especially on collective, community-based traditions. The festival of the potlach, for example, was a pillar of native life in Westcoast Canada, and in the 1880s laws were introduced criminalising the potlach, with threat of imprisonment, and it was not until 1951 that the potlach was decriminalised (Muckle 1998, p. 72). Similar state legislation, in both the US and Canada, outlawed the Sun Dance (*Ookan*)—the central ceremony of the Plains' Nations, such as the Blackfoot (Tovías 2011, pp. 40–42)—and this prohibition remained until 1959. Yet colonial legislation did not necessarily translate into practice on the ground; Indigenous peoples did not simply accept these laws but continued to celebrate these ceremonies, often underground. One historian of the Blackfoot has argued, with reference to legislative attacks against the Sun Dance, that the very passing of such laws should be "viewed against the many Blackfoot acts of resistance and myriad reports of the continuation of the practice" (Ibid., p. 189). Hence, just as with sovereign colonial power and organised Indigenous resistance to it, cultural colonial power—in particular assimilationist legislation—was also contested by First Nations' peoples.

The boarding school, more commonly known as "the reservation school," was one of the most important institutions of assimilation for the Canadian government. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which was active 2008–2015, has unearthed the sheer scale of violence, pain, and (continuing) trauma that the reservation schooling system has inflicted on over 150,000 Indigenous children over a period of roughly a century (Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 1 2015, p. viii). The schooling system was established in the 1870s and 1880s as a partnership between the federal government and Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, who ran the day-to-day operations of the schools. In the 1880s there were three large residential schools, and by 1930 the system had grown to 80 residential schools across the country (Ibid., p. 4). By the 1980s most schools had been shuttered, although "the last federally supported residential schools remained in operation until the 1990s" (Ibid.). In these schools, Indigenous languages were banned and spiritual traditions demonised. Generations of children were separated from their parents, communities, and cultures, and forcibly enrolled into a system of national indoctrination. Recall Wolfe's discussion of the logic of elimination, which includes "child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions and boarding schools." (Wolfe 2006, p. 388). All three apply to the predatory actions of the Canadian state. Indeed, in its final report the TRC refers to the reservation schooling system as "a key component of a Canadian government policy of cultural genocide" (Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 1 2015, p. vii).

This institution of cultural genocide, moreover, was not just violent discursively or existentially, that is, in its attempted erasure of Indigenous identity and heritage. It was also violent in the most literal sense of the term. Physical and sexual abuse were widespread in the reservation schools, and alarming numbers of Indigenous children died. The TRC has found that 3200 children died in the residential schools, which is far higher, proportionately, than the death rate of White school children in Canada in the same period (Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 4 2015, p. 1). For example, in the early 1940s the death rate in residential schools was a staggering 4.9 times higher than the average death rate of school-attending children, lowering in the 1960s to (only!) twice as high as the average school death rate (Ibid., p. 18). About a third of child deaths were never recorded by name; parents were rarely informed, either of sickness or death; and most of the children

were buried in unmarked, mass graves near the schools (Ibid., p. 134). What explains this disproportionately high death rate in the reservation schools? It seems that disease was a principal cause, with tuberculosis being cited 48.7% of the time, at least for reported deaths (Ibid., p. 138). This shows that the living conditions in these underfunded schools were deplorable and that most children were, to quote the TRC, "malnourished, quartered in crowded and unsanitary facilities, poorly clothed, and overworked" (Ibid.). Alongside disease, children died due to accidents, especially fires (which were a frequent occurrence, given the poor living conditions); suicide was not uncommon; and many children tried to escape and run away, only to go missing (Ibid., p. 3). In sum, the residential schools did not just attempt to discursively kill Indigenous identity, language, and culture; they also inflicted brute, physical violence on the bodies of Indigenous children, in many cases killing them. Even in terms of assimilation, then, settler colonialism's logic of elimination must be understood both figuratively and literally.

3. On Migrants and Settlers

Having sketched out the colonial history of the land, and, in so doing, *recognising* the injustices meted out against native peoples, the next hermeneutical step is to critically (re)position, to contextualise Canadian Muslims within that painful history. Like other communities of colour in Canada, Muslims—I am speaking emically here as a member of this national community—often see themselves as migrants, or as the grand/children of migrants, but rarely as what we are, collectively and across generations, within the broader frame of Canada's colonial past: settlers. There is a divide, an enduring gulf, which is too often presumed to separate *us,* as migrants, from *them:* European settlers, that is, Anglophone and Francophone "pioneers" from centuries prior. But settler colonialism, as Wolfe presciently notes, is not a historical "event"—a thing of the past—and therefore something that is over, but rather an ongoing "structure" which reflects a "continuity through time" (Wolfe 2006, p. 390). The passage of time, after all, does not erase crime. This is a key principle in international law. Canada, or the US, or Australia are no less settler colonies today than they were yesterday. And yet, the manifest settler-hood of these states continues to be rendered invisible. Consider the discipline of migration studies. While migration scholars have been admirably attuned to questions of racism and xenophobia against migrants and refugees, they have

> remained largely silent on the constitutive role of settler colonialism in the social, economic and political development of these states. While migrant scholars may acknowledge settler colonialism as an event in the distant past, few regard it as relevant to the study of contemporary immigration and citizenship. (Ellerman and O'Heran 2021, pp. 21–22)

On the contrary, comparative migration research tends to celebrate countries such as Canada and the US for their relatively open naturalisation and citizenship schemes, such as acquisition-by-birth and acceptance of dual, even multiple, nationalities (Ibid., p. 27). In doing so, migration studies has failed to properly situate these immigration policies within the history of empire and its vested, structural interests in settler population growth and legal enfranchisement. Immigration, let us not forget, was (and continues to be) a major tool in the colonisation process (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 1). What is needed, therefore, is to deconstruct the ontological borders between the (modern) migrant and (historic) settler, thereby recasting settler coloniality more accurately as, recalling Wolfe's phrasing, a "continuity through time." This deconstruction is essential in order for migrant communities to recognise that supporting Indigenous rights and land struggles is not an act of charity—a progressive struggle, amongst others, to be a good ally with—but rather a solemn responsibility (*amana*, to use an Islamic term) that addresses our own existential complicity, as migrant settlers, within the Canadian settlement project.

Acknowledging this complicity is particularly acute in the Canadian context. I think the case of African Americans in the US, as the descendants of slaves who were forcibly shipped to the Americas, is still different as there was no element of volition or choice

in the movement across the Atlantic. But the Muslim community in Canada is largely a migrant, and thus voluntary settler, community. Indeed, the very first registered Muslims in Canada, dating back to 1863, were Scottish settlers who had converted to Islam: namely, the Love family (Waugh 2018, p. 1). As the historian Baha Abu-Laban has documented, although the vast majority of Muslims arrived in Canada after World War II, the first wave of migrants arrived between the 1880s and World War II, hailing mainly from the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, in particular modern-day Lebanon (Abu-Laban 1980, p. 2). While including Muslims, these first-wave migrants were predominantly Christian (Ibid.). Alongside Arab Muslims, there was also a burgeoning community of Turkish Ottoman migrants (Abu-Laban 1983, p. 76). Socioeconomically, these first-wave migrants came with little capital, labouring as peddlers and unskilled workers (Ibid.). My aim here is not to provide a history of Islam in Canada; rather, I gesture to that history to underline the broader settler context in which the community lived and grew. Consider the country's first purpose-built mosque: the famous al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, Alberta, built in 1938. The construction of this mosque was made possible through the fundraising efforts of Lebanese women involved in the Arabian Muslim Association, especially Hilwie Hamdon (Kurd 2018, p. 181). That they went door-to-door and were able to successfully raise the required funds—no less than CAD $5000 (Waugh 2018, p. 31)—in the context of the Great Depression is remarkable, and speaks to the seminal role women played in establishing Islamic institutions in Canada. But that history is also deeply imbricated with the legacy of settler colonialism. Fort Edmonton, which would later become the City of Edmonton, was "one of the most important outposts for the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly on the fur trade" (Kurd 2018, p. 182). Hilwie's husband—Ali Hamdon—had moved in 1900 from Lebanon to Canada, first settling in Manitoba, then Saskatchewan, and ultimately relocating to Alberta. Hamdon began as a peddler, but was able to rise through the ranks to become a prominent businessman and eventually setup his own fur trading post (in partnership with his brother) at Fort Chipewyan in northeast Alberta, commuting back and forth between "Fort Chip" and Edmonton, where Hilwie and the children were based (Waugh 2018, p. 30). The Hamdon family and their involvement in the fur trade, therefore, are a compelling example of just how entangled (ensnared?) the histories of Muslims and settler migration are in the Canadian landscape.[6]

First Nations peoples themselves have called on migrants to become more cognisant and aware of their own privileged positionality as settlers. This should not be misconstrued as a reactionary or "anti-immigration" position. Indigenous peoples in Canada, as a socially marginalised community with historic ties to the land, have been consistently supportive of, and in solidarity with, other marginalised communities, such as refugees and asylum seekers. To give just one example: in 2010 when 492 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees arrived at the coast of BC on a cargo ship and were immediately detained by the Canadian government, First Nations activists and elders staged weekly demonstrations in support of the refugees (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 8). But Indigenous people have emphasized that migrant communities must acknowledge their own positionality on stolen lands and the structural privileges, and concomitant responsibilities, that come with that positionality. "Decolonising Antiracism" (2005)—co-authored by the First Nations (Mi'kmaw) scholar Bonita Lawrence and South Asian Canadian scholar Enakshi Dua—was arguably the first article to point out and reflect upon the settler positionality of immigrant communities in Canada (Lawrence and Dua 2005),[7] and, as we will see below, its implications within anti-racist circles. The Cree scholar Harold Johnson writes that settlers, including new settlers (that is, immigrants), need to learn about and honour the numerous treaties that were signed by Indigenous leaders "in line with indigenous understanding and interpretation" of those treaties, recognising that "prior Indigenous sovereignties were never extinguished by the treaties" (Johnson, as cited in Ellerman and O'Heran 2021, p. 30). It therefore behoves all migrants to seek out and educate themselves about the *history* of the land. Learning (from) that history must be a requirement for all newcomers—a point also underlined by Kwakwaka'wakw chief Bill Wilson (Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 9). Indeed, this is one of the

reasons why socio-historical context plays such a prominent role in this article, constituting the first hermeneutical move in decolonising Islam in the Canadian context. Solidarity with native communities, moreover, cannot be restricted to discourse and language, to verbal pronouncements such as land acknowledgments, as important as these are. In their now classic article—"Decolonization is not a Metaphor" (2012)—Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang stress that the decolonial project cannot be reduced to decolonising "the mind", that is, decolonisation as an essentially discursive and cultural exercise—"metaphor," as they put it—including awareness-raising and curriculum reform; rather, the heart of decolonisation is thoroughly "material," entailing concrete land struggles to support Indigenous rights, life, and sovereignty (Tuck and Yang 2012, pp. 19, 28).

A point of clarification is in order. Recognising the settler status of racialised migrants in no way takes away from the injustices of racism and social exclusion that they (we) have faced. Today Canada is a diverse and multi-racial society, and becoming more so each year. In the 2016 census, people of colour accounted for 22% of the wider population (Block et al. 2019, p. 4), and this number is significantly higher in major cities like Toronto and Vancouver. However, the visual tapestry (if I can put it thus) of the Canadian landscape masks enduring, structural inequalities between racialised and non-racialised people. Consider unemployment. In 2016, the unemployment rate amongst people of colour was 9.2%, while it was 7.3% for White Canadians (Ibid.). Labour discrimination, like all forms of discrimination, is acutely intersectional, cutting across race and gender lines. In 2015, it was found that women of colour earned 59 cents for every dollar that White men earned, as compared to men of colour, who earned 78 cents (Ibid., pp. 4–5). These structural inequalities are also present within the Muslim community, which is overwhelmingly coloured. In 2011, the Canadian Muslim population passed one million, comprising just over 3% of the national population (Hamdani 2015, p. 24). Going back to the question of employment: despite the fact that Canadian Muslims are proportionately more educated than Canadians in general—44% of working-age adult Muslims have a university degree, as compared to 26% of the general population—the unemployment rate amongst Muslims is significantly higher than the national average: 13.9% versus 7.8%, respectively (Ibid., pp. 26–27). There is also considerable income disparity between Canadian Muslims and the wider population, with Muslims making, in 2010, "three-fourths of the median income of all Canadians." (Ibid., p. 27).[8]

The visual tapestry of contemporary Canada can also produce historical amnesia; it becomes all too easy to forget how White, and how proudly White, Canada was before the 1960s. Like the US and its passing of the Hart–Cellar Act in 1965, which "expunged racist immigration quotas" from earlier legislation (Curtis 2009, p. 72), Canada's immigration policy moved to a colour-blind, qualification-based approach in 1960. Before this point, English Canada was basically a "monocultural, monolingual, single-nation state" (Day 2000, p. 178) and crudely unapologetic that "desirable" immigration presumed a European point of origin. To quote Prime Minister William Mackenzie King in 1947:

> Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. . .It is not a "fundamental human right" of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege. (Ibid., p. 178)

Racism against non-Indigenous coloured peoples has a long history in Canada. For example, much is made of the Underground Railroad and Canada as being an enlightened safe haven for Black people trying to escape the horrors of US slavery. During the mid-nineteenth century, approximately 40,000 Black fugitives arrived in Canada vis-à-vis the Underground Railroad (McLaren 2008, p. 69). Yet what is often glossed over, if not ignored altogether, is the fact that once the fugitives arrived they faced deep-seated racism. Most White parents in Canada West (modern-day Ontario) were opposed to Black children attending schools, as were the school trustees themselves. By and large, Black children were barred from enrolling in publicly funded elementary schools, and in the few cases where they could enrol, they were made to sit on separate benches (Ibid., p. 72). In other words, Black fugitives managed to escape US slavery not for equal and dignified treatment in Canada,

but racial segregation and exclusion. Coloured groups in other parts of the country faced similar discrimination, such as Chinese labourers who came to work in BC's mines and railways in the nineteenth century (Anderson 2008, pp. 90–92).

But despite such experiences of dehumanisation, racism cannot be used as a justification mechanism to deflect from the reality and responsibilities of being a settler—whether White or Brown—on stolen land. Drawing on Janet Mawhinney's notion of "moves to innocence," which refers to the discursive ways in which White people obfuscate and escape their own racial privilege and complicity, Tuck and Yang have coined the phrase "settler moves to innocence" (Tuck and Yang 2012, pp. 9–10). By this, they refer to

> those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. (Ibid., p. 10)

When discussing Indigenous issues with fellow North American Muslims, and with North Americans of colour in general, I have routinely encountered settler moves to innocence—"Oh, how can we be settlers? We experience racism all the time." But subject positions are complex, nuanced: it is entirely possible to be structurally excluded and, simultaneously, to benefit from exclusionary structures. As Lawrence and Dua eloquently put it: "Individuals are often involved in a "race to innocence," in which they emphasize only their subordination and disregard how they may simultaneously be complicit in other systems of domination" (Lawrence and Dua 2005, p. 139). Characteristic of settler moves to innocence is flattening out the specificities, the contextual particularities, of what are actually distinct social justice struggles. This is a critique that Tuck and Yang wage against progressive coalition politics in coloured circles, wherein various struggles (queer, anti-racist, class-based, Indigenous) are all lumped together under a totalising rubric of solidarity: as simply "decolonizing" (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 17). Due to such flattening, not only is decolonisation abstracted from the concrete, material contexts of colonised native communities—decolonisation thus devolves into "metaphor"—but experiences of racism amongst people of colour, however violent and traumatic, obfuscate their own status as settlers and the structural advantages they accrue within that colonial system, even if as second-class (Brown) beneficiaries. Intersectionality in resistance work is necessary, of course, but the problem, as Lawrence and Dua note, is when native decolonial struggles are scripted into a liberalised "pluralistic framework"—a plurality of resistive options—where decolonisation becomes one option amongst others (Lawrence and Dua 2005, p. 131). But if *all* these sites of oppression and resistance are situated on stolen land in the first place, then decolonisation must, they argue, become "foundational" in how antiracism, and resistance work in general, are approached (Ibid., p. 127). The underlying point here is that being a settler is not a choice but rather an honest recognition of one's own existential subject position on ethnically cleansed land. As the Canadian sociologist Sunera Thobani succinctly puts it: "migrants become implicated whether wittingly or otherwise, in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples." (Thobani, as cited in Bauder and Breen 2022, p. 6). So rather than debating whether migrants are settlers or not, the more pressing question is: do we, as coloured migrants, look into the mirror of power with transparency and accountability, or continue to live in denial of the settler colonial structure that we inhabit, benefit from, and indeed contribute to?

4. Decolonising Islam

Now that we have unpacked the broader socio-historical context of Canadian settler colonialism (step 1) and properly situated diasporic Muslims within that settler context (step 2), we can address the question of religion more explicitly. How can religion, that is, the religion of the migrant settler, be decolonised? And in the more specific case of Muslim migrant settlers, how can Islam be decolonised? The first point to be made is that Islam occupies a very different history in the Americas than Christianity. The latter played a pivotal role in legitimating European conquest of the land and the exploitation of Indigenous labour and seizure of natural resources (Tinker 2008, p. 11). Much is often

made in contemporary Christian circles—liberal and liberationist—of the protest of the priest Bartolome De Las Casas (d. 1566), who documented and challenged the Spanish genocide of the Indigenous peoples of South America. Yet, as Tinker notes, Las Casas, while opposing outright genocide, was still committed to Spanish empire, calling instead for "a gentle conquest" through missionary conversion of the native populations (Ibid., pp. 11–12). A similar pattern of Christianisation was pursued in colonial North America, becoming a government-sponsored policy in the nineteenth century. In 1819, the US government passed the Civilization Act. This law

> provided $10,000 to support the work of "benevolent institutions" which would teach Indians [*sic*] to read, write, farm, and generally live like their white neighbours. The benevolent institutions were primarily missionary organisations whose objective was to convert Indians to Christianity... (Treat 1996, pp. 7–8)

In the case of Canada, the TRC explicitly acknowledges the historic role that Christianity and Christian missions played within the residential schooling system. As noted earlier, from the formative years of this system in the early nineteenth century, missionary churches were actively involved, and the partnership between the churches and the government lasted until 1969 (Final Report of the TRC, Vol. 4 2015, pp. 4, 126). Whereas the government provided funding for the residential schools and passed key legislation such as mandatory attendance, different church denominations—from Roman Catholic and Presbyterian to Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist—ran the daily operations of the schools (Muckle 1998, p. 68).

This history has resulted in a complicated, indeed turbulent, relationship between Christianity and Indigenous peoples, even for those who identify as believing Christians. Many Native Americans are at least nominally Christian, maintaining some connection with historically missionary churches (Tinker 2008, p. 14). Later in this article we will see that the Native American scholar Robert Warrior (paralleling the Palestinian scholar Edward Said) critiques the Exodus paradigm of liberation,[9] which is a staple paradigm in liberation theology. Warrior, however, points to the other side of the narrative, namely, the Israelite genocide of the Canaanites (Warrior 1989, p. 262). In offering this critique of the Exodus, Warrior is not calling for a hermeneutical rereading of Christianity, but challenging Christianity itself as an inappropriate and problematic theological framework for native liberation (Ibid., p. 261). He explicitly identifies his position as "post-Christian" (Warrior 1996, p. 102); Christianity is thus a tradition that he, as an Indigenous person, has parted ways with, opting instead "to go home to the drum, the stomp dance, and the sweatlodge" (Ibid., p. 103), that is, Native American spiritual traditions. But even Indigenous people who remain devout Christians and are committed to operating within a Christological framework have found great difficulty in navigating the history of missionary colonialism and the complicity of Christian leaders in the dispossession of Native Americans (Treat 1996, pp. 9–10). The Cherokee scholar William Baldridge is a case in point. A professor of pastoral ministry and an ordained Baptist minister at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas, Baldridge has wrestled with the colonial legacy of Christianity. In a fascinating exchange with Warrior, Baldridge concedes that Warrior's critique of the Exodus sparked "an intellectual and spiritual crisis" within himself (Baldridge 1996, pp. 100–1), but one that he was ultimately able to resolve by re-reading the Old Testament story in the light of (his reading of) the Gospel narratives, focussing on Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28 (Ibid., p. 101). Osage scholar George "Tink" Tinker, who is Professor Emeritus at the Iliff School of Theology in Colorado and an ordained member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, is also sharply critical of the history of Christianity. Tinker argues that any serious Native American liberation theology must recognise, unapologetically, Christianity's historic role in the land as "the religion of the colonizer" (Tinker 2008, p. 130).

And this brings us to the complex place of Islam. I must first clarify that decolonising Islam is not simply about extrapolating basic ethical "teachings" from the Qur'an or hadith literature or the works of classical Muslim thinkers, systematically putting together, for

example, a "theology of justice." While social justice is certainly a major theme in the Qur'an (Q. 90:12–18; 107:1–7), and belief in God's justice and compassion (Q. 49:9, 45:22) is central to ILT, speaking about justice alone is too sweeping and abstracted. The theme of justice (*'adala*), after all, could be invoked for a diverse array of causes, from women's rights to class struggle to religious pluralism. Recall, moreover, Tuck and Yang's cautionary note about equating decolonisation with social justice work in general, and the erasure involved in that flattening process. Instead, the project of decolonising Islam has to be explicitly attuned to questions of empire, and must also involve critical, unapologetic rereadings of the Islamic tradition in the light of anti-colonial politics, rather than simply "finding" or "discovering" the answers in the tradition. In this section, I argue that the project of decolonising Islam is a two-fold dynamic, as Islam acts as both a radical *subject* that decolonises and a problematic *object* requiring decolonisation. Let me explain.

When it comes to the legacy of Western Empire, there is so much in common that Muslims and First Nations peoples share. Over the past two centuries, Muslim-majority lands have been brutally occupied by European powers, most notably the French (in mainly North Africa and West Africa, as well as select parts of the Middle East) and the British (mainly in the Middle East and South Asia)—the two very powers that carved out Turtle Island between themselves. And the legacy of Western Empire in Muslim-majority lands is not just a historical phenomenon but, of course, acutely contemporary, such as the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the ongoing, US-backed Israeli Occupation of Palestine. And in these various historic contexts, from Algeria and Egypt to India and (Dutch-controlled) Indonesia, Muslims mounted massive scales of anti-colonial resistance. Indeed, Western empire and resistance to it has been a defining theme—if not *the* defining theme—in Islamic intellectual thought over the past two centuries. Anti-colonialism, therefore, does not sit on the margins of contemporary Islam; it is central, indeed constitutive, of it. Furthermore, there are important contextual synergies between (settler) empire at home and empire abroad. US foreign policy is, in many ways, the intuitive, structural extension of its own violent settler colonial formation, during which time it created an "efficient agency of statecraft for the ingestion and privatization of the country's vast and pluralistic Indian Country [*sic*]" (Hall 2003, p. xxix). While not focusing on the Muslim world *per se,* Tinker has been a leading Native American voice calling for stronger ties of transregional solidarity and exchange between Native American activists and liberation theologians in the Global South, such as in Latin America, arguing that isolationism between the two is, itself, a lingering legacy of empire and strategies of divide-and-conquer (Tinker 2008, pp. 33–34).

To be sure, while there are certainly shared colonial histories (and presents) between Muslims and First Nations peoples, there are also critical differences that should not be elided and glossed over. Colonialism and settler colonialism are not the same thing, and the term "Fourth World" has sought to highlight the distinctive settler colonial circumstances and challenges that Indigenous peoples face. The Fourth World was first used by the Indigenous activist George Manuel. Hailing from the Shuswap Nation in the interior of BC, Manuel was a towering figure in First Nations mobilising in the 1970s, leading the National Indian Brotherhood—the most powerful native organisation in Canada at the time (Hall 2003, p. 238). Manuel also played a pioneering role in forging international solidarity networks between Indigenous groups at home and comrades in the Global South. It was actually during a trip to Tanzania where he first heard the phrase "Fourth World" from a Tanzanian diplomat, who casually remarked to Manuel: "When the Indian peoples come into their own, that will be the Fourth World" (Manuel and Posluns 1974, p. 5). A fluid and somewhat ambiguous term, the Fourth World basically seeks to shift native politics and self-expression beyond the constraints of Eurocentric nation-state frameworks— frameworks that were pursued, often to great detriment, by postcolonial states in the Global South—drawing instead on more organic modes of self-determination in line with native cultures and traditions (Hall 2003, p. 238). In envisaging Fourth World alternatives, Tinker stresses the importance of spirituality and enchanted worldviews, as it was these very spiritual worlds that settler colonialists disparaged, attacked, and sought to eradicate

(Tinker 1996, p. 116). Recall that the erasure of Indigenous culture and identity was the driving, assimilationist objective of the Canadian residential schooling system. A devout Fourth Worldist, Tinker has criticised Latin American liberation theologians for playing into Eurocentric, post-Enlightenment discourse and assumptions. He writes:

> Indian people want affirmation not as "persons" (the language of Gustavo Gutierrez) or as individuals but rather as national communities with discrete cultures, discrete languages, discrete value systems, and our own governments and territories. To put it in straightforward language, Indian people do not aspire to be recognised in terms of class structure or as workers, the proletariat, peasants, or even as ethnic minorities, but rather as peoples. We should add that "production", the Marxist category, is of little interest to Indians for whom the land is primary. (Tinker 2008, pp. 136–37)

Here Tinker is questioning the neutrality, the presumed ahistoricity of the grammar of liberationist discourse—from "class" and "workers" to "peasants" and the individual ("persons" over "people")—and trying to introduce a new, Fourth World language that is spatially embedded in settler colonial contexts, committed to political sovereignty, and firmly rooted in Indigenous traditions and social identities.

But while contemporary Islamic thought has been shaped by resistance *to* empire, the classical Islamic tradition ("the canon") emerged in the context *of* empire, and this, I argue, is the critical moment of Islamic history that we need to decolonise. The history of Islam is replete with wealthy, transregional, and multi-ethnic empires, including the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), and the Safavid Empire (1501–1722). Though Muslims are generally aware, and often proud, of the existence of these empires, we have not fully appreciated the lasting impact of (Muslim) empire on the Islamic intellectual tradition.[10] This point is particularly salient in the classical period—that is, the Umayyad Empire (661–750) and Abbasid Empire (750–1258)—as the Islamic tradition came into being in this timeframe, such as the creation of the canonical schools of law. Consider the imperial effects on the doctrine of *jihad* during the Umayyad period. In the Qur'an, *jihad* simply means "struggle" or "striving." This refers to social struggle, including both non-violent and violent forms (*qital*, or armed combat), as well as internal, spiritual struggle and moral development. From the European imperial era up to the present time, *jihad* (like contemporary Islam in general) has taken on an acutely anti-colonial expression, with resistance movements routinely framing their political cause as a *jihad* (Peters 1979, p. 6). But *jihad* played a very different hermeneutical function in the pre-modern period. During the Umayyad era, the Muslim state went from being a relatively modest regional entity to a massive global empire. To quote the Umayyad historian Khalid Blankinship:

> Starting from small beginnings in Western Arabia, the Muslim state grew enormous, uniting a territory stretching from Spain to China and from Yaman [*sic*] to the Caucasus under the rule of the Muslim caliph within a single century. As a result of this expansion, the Muslim caliphate surpassed the Roman and Chinese empires in land area, perhaps being exceeded only by that of the Mongols in pre-modern times. (Blankinship 1994, p. 1)

In comparison, the succeeding Abbasid period saw little further expansion. The height of Muslim empire, at least geographically speaking, was attained during the Umayyad regime. And during this phase of radical expansion, the theological language of Islam was re-serviced in the interests of empire. Over the course of the Umayyad conquests, *jihad* was divorced from its original Qur'anic usage and recast as an ideological imperative for "the establishment of God's rule in the earth," thus theologically justifying Muslim conquest and expansionism (Ibid.). This recasting of *jihad* was so central to Umayyad state-building and foreign policy that Blankinship, in the very title of his monograph, refers to the Umayyad Empire as "the Jihad State".

I would like to conclude this article by offering a concrete, in-depth example of what decolonising the Islamic intellectual tradition might look like in the specific context of

Indigenous rights and settler violence. As noted earlier, the Exodus—the liberation of the ancient Israelites from Pharaonic bondage—is a recurring paradigm in Christian liberation theologies, including Latin American liberation theology, Black theology, and Minjung theology in South Korea (Gutiérrez [1971] 1973, pp. 159–60; Boff and Boff [1986] 1999, pp. 34–35, 99; Cone [1970] 2010, pp. 48–49; Wielenga 2007, pp. 63–64). The Exodus, however, has been challenged by Indigenous scholars, namely, the Palestinian Edward Said and Native American Robert Warrior (Said 1986, p. 91; Warrior 1989, p. 262), who point to the *other* side of the narrative: the Israelite entry into the land of Canaan and the subsequent massacre of its Indigenous population. Said and Warrior naturally dis-identify with the invading Israelites and, instead, read the narrative with "Canaanite eyes" (Ibid.). Through their critical intervention, the preferential theology of the Exodus paradigm is problematised, as the God of the oppressed in Egypt effectively transforms into the God of the oppressor in Canaan. The Old Testament narrative has a number of texts in which God explicitly orders the destruction of the local Canaanites (Deut. 7:1 and 20:16), and the Book of Joshua relates various atrocities perpetrated against the Indigenous population, such as the destruction of the city of Jericho and its people (Josh. 6:21–24).

But is this simply a Christian theological discussion? Do the "Canaanite" criticisms of Warrior and Said only apply to Latin American liberation theology or Minjung theology, and not to Islamic liberation theology as well? My previous work—"The Qur'an, the Bible, and the Indigenous Peoples of Canaan: An Anti-Colonial Muslim Reading" (Rahemtulla 2020)— has put Warrior's and Said's interventions into conversation with the Islamic tradition. The Exodus, after all, also plays a prominent role in ILT, such as in Farid Esack's *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Esack 1997), which focuses on the South African apartheid context. The African American Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson even prefaces his two books on Black theology—*Islam and the Black American: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Jackson 2005) and *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Jackson 2009)—with Q. 28:5, which refers to the Exodus and God's preferential option for the oppressed. Hence, given the importance of this paradigm for Muslim liberationists, I ask if the same colonial problematic also applies to the Islamic account of the Exodus: "Does the Qur'anic account mirror the biblical one? Did a mass genocide take place and, if so, was this a result of divine sanction?" (Ibid., p. 215).

Through close textual analysis, I show that while Warrior's and Said's critiques can indeed be levelled against the millennium-old Qur'anic commentarial tradition (*tafsir*), the Qur'anic account itself does not have genocidal content and can be cogently reconciled with decolonial politics and a commitment to Indigenous rights. Drawing on eight major *tafsir* works spread across the pre-modern and modern tradition—including those of Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923), Isma'il ibn Kathir (d. 1373), Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli (d. 1459), Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), and Abul 'Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979)—I demonstrate that the commentarial tradition not only mirrors the biblical account, but openly draws on it. For example, al-Tabari, arguably the most influential figure in the commentarial tradition, portrays the Israelite encounter with the Canaanites in a violent, genocidal manner, and one that is divinely sanctioned. For "the command of God" (*amr Allah*), to quote al-Tabari, was "to fight the mighty people" (*qital al-jabbarrin*) and "to attack them in their land" (*wa hujumihim 'alayhim fi ardihim*) (al-Tabari, as cited in Rahemtulla 2020, p. 224). Al-Tabari, by his own self-admission, draws on the scriptures of "the People of the Torah", that is, the Old Testament, to inform his understanding of the Qur'anic account (Al-Tabari, as cited in Ibid., p. 228). Furthermore, other influential commentators, such as Ibn Kathir, al-Mahalli, and al-Suyuti, also reproduce violent, pro-war readings and, in the contemporary period, Mawdudi even goes so far as to include extensive, direct quotations from the Book of Numbers (Ibid., p. 225).

In contrast to the *tafsir* tradition, the Qur'anic account does not license violence against the people of the land. Rather than offering a detailed narrative, the Qur'anic account is comprised of two "snapshots": (a) the initial Israelite encounter—post-Exodus but before the Wilderness years—with the borders of Canaan (Q. 5:20–26) and (b) the second Israelite

encounter with the land, which takes place after the Wilderness years (Q. 2:58–59 and 7:161–62). Significantly, the divine command to the Israelites in both snapshots (Q. 5:20–26 and 2:58–9) is simply "enter" (the imperative *udkhul*), with the word "entrance" (*dukhul*) being used in a variety of grammatical forms in the text. Moreover, the possibility of fighting (*qital*) is actually introduced by the Israelites, not by God or Moses. That is, the Israelites assume that entrance (*dukhul*) into the land must necessarily entail combat (*qital*), but the Qur'anic text itself does not make any such assumption (Ibid., p. 223). Nor does the Qur'an presume a binary "either/or" territorial logic: that only one people (a conquering, victorious people) can live on the land, at the expense of a vanquished Other (Ibid.). Within the Qur'anic account, it is entirely plausible for both peoples—the Canaanites as the respected Indigenous inhabitants, the Israelites as refugees fleeing Pharaonic Egypt—to co-inhabit the land. In terms of Q. 7:161–62, which is part of the second snapshot, the verb "to live" or "to dwell" (*sakana*) is used, and neither "entrance" nor "dwelling" carry explicit connotations of violence. They can, of course, be *interpreted* violently, and indeed have been so by Muslim exegetes for over a millennium, but there is a crucial difference between reading violence into a text and the language of the text itself explicitly using violent terms, as in the case of the Old Testament narrative.

I think my findings are significant not because they *prove* that the Qur'an is morally superior to the Bible (as a liberation theologian committed to religious pluralism, I have little interest in such polemics) but because they vividly demonstrate the lasting, discursive effects of Muslim empire on the *tafsir* tradition and, by extension, on the Islamic intellectual tradition as a whole. Is it mere coincidence, after all, that the Qur'an has a non-colonial account of Canaan and is itself a pre-colonial text? Recall that the Qur'anic revelations ended with the Prophet's death in 632, well before the Arab conquests took off. Empire, therefore, was not the immediate, historical backdrop of the Qur'an. In contrast, this was precisely the socio-political milieu in which the Islamic intellectual tradition emerged, took shape, solidified. The *tafsir* tradition certainly drew on biblical literature (*isra'iliyat*) in general, but the question, I ask, is why in this particular case—that is, why did the conquest story in the Old Testament *appeal* to Qur'anic commentators in the way that it did? What was it about the Conquest of Canaan, as a gripping narrative of warfare, invasion, imperial victory, and land acquisition that Muslim exegetes, especially pre-modern exegetes, could relate to? The wider historical backdrop of Muslim empire and the enduring legacy of Umayyad empire in particular, I believe, is key to understanding the hermeneutical appeal of this narrative. This is what it means to decolonise the Islamic tradition.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to chart out new decolonial futures for Islamic liberation theology by placing it in conversation with Indigenous rights and land struggles, focusing on the Canadian context. While ILT, like contemporary Islamic thought in general, has been shaped by (resistance to) Western empire, scant attention has been paid to systems of colonial power in which Muslims are not the occupied but are themselves, as settler migrants, complicit in the continued dispossession of native lands and peoples. Indeed, despite the extensive scholarly attention that Islam in North America has received, surprisingly little has recognised and addressed the ethical implications of being a migrant settler community living on (off) stolen land and calling it "home". The question, then, is how can we decolonise Islam in the settler colony, in which Muslims themselves are implicated in the continued settlement of the land? That is, how can Muslims address their complicity with the settler colonial project, standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and revisiting their own faith tradition in the light of that liberating praxis? In this paper, I have argued that decolonising Islam entails three hermeneutical steps, of which "theological" work is actually the last: (I) gaining a critical understanding of the socio-historical context, namely, the long history of empire on the land and its lasting impact on Indigenous peoples; (II) (re)positioning Muslims within that colonial history by dismantling the ontological divide between "migrant" and "settler", as such a distinction

serves to release Muslims, and migrants in general, of responsibility and accountability; and (III), in light of the first two steps, engaging in bold theological reflection on the Islamic tradition and its complex history. This final theological step, I have argued, is a two-fold dynamic, for Islam has a complex historical relationship to empire, operating as both a radical subject that decolonises (the modern history of Islam *under* empire) and a problematic object requiring decolonisation (the pre-modern and early modern history of Islam *as* empire).

At the beginning of this article, I acknowledged that the project of decolonising Islam is a considerable one, entailing a collective, multi-disciplinary undertaking. My objective in this article has simply been to start a conversation in Islamic studies which, I believe, should have begun a very long time ago. And in this spirit, I concluded by giving a concrete example of what decolonisation might look like in the field of Qur'anic studies, revisiting the Conquest of Canaan narrative with an eye to Indigenous rights and liberation. What might similar decolonising efforts look like in the discipline of Islamic law—how, for instance, were the juristic categories of "property" and "private ownership" developed over the course of the Islamic conquests?—or in hadith and sira (prophetic reports and biography), or even in the mystical tradition? After all, while Sufi tariqas (orders) have certainly received patronage from the state, and while Sufism is often touted in the public sphere as a "neutral" and "good" Islam,[11] tariqas also played a pioneering historical role in mobilising anti-colonial resistance to European armies. This is a radical history that needs to be unearthed and accented. In sum, this article is a provocation—an invitation addressed specifically (though not exclusively) to Muslims living in settler colonies to theologically confront the problem of empire, to wrestle with their own positionality within it, and to do so across the full, disciplinary spectrum of the millennium-old Islamic tradition.

Notes

1. While not identifying as a study of liberation theology per se, there has been extensive scholarship on political Islam in Palestine, seeking to contextualise Hamas as a popular resistance movement against the Israeli occupation, as opposed to being a "terrorist organization". See, among others: Gunning (2007), Hroub (2000, [2006] 2010), Roy (2011) and Ababneh (2014). There is also significant work on Christian liberation theology in Palestine, such as Ateek (1989), Raheb (2012, 2014), and Kuruvilla (2013).

2. I draw on John Gerring's instrumentalist understanding of the case study approach, which he defines as "an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalize across a larger set of units" (Gerring 2004, p. 341). In terms of this paper, the broader set of units would refer to settler colonies in general that have significant Muslim migrant populations.

3. The case of African Americans, as the descendants of slaves forcibly shipped to the Americas, as well as the category of refugees and asylum seekers, are more complex.

4. I define decolonisation comprehensively, as both a material struggle against colonial systems and structures (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 28) and, just as importantly, a wider discursive project that resists the universal hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, pp. 1–2), charting out new ways of thinking and being.

5. It is for this reason that the word "stewardship" is often used to describe Indigenous *relations to* the land, which is treated as a living, breathing entity, as a fellow partner in life, rather than a capitalist-inflected discourse of *ownership over* the land, and thus something inanimate—dead—that can be commodified, bought, exchanged.

6. I am grateful to Siavash Saffari for pointing out the Hamdon family's commercial ventures.

7   The postcolonial scholars Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright wrote a response—"Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States"—which challenged Lawrence's and Dua's arguments (Sharma and Wright 2008–2009). This exchange set off a heated debate within postcolonial circles. The contours of that complex debate, however, lie outside the scope of this article.

8   The reasons for this disparity, indeed contradiction, between educational credentials and employment status are complex. One reason is the fact that the educational qualifications of first-generation migrants are routinely ignored and dismissed within the Canadian labour market. This leads to now ubiquitous scenarios in which taxi drivers and Walmart employees were, back in their countries of origin, highly trained engineers and physicians.

9   While Said's and Warrior's critiques emerged quite close to each other (1986 and 1989, respectively), it is important to note that they are addressing very different audiences. Said (1986) is criticizing the American political theorist Michael Walzer and his book *Exodus and Revolution* (1985), which selectively represents the Exodus as a "paradigm of revolutionary politics" (Walzer 1985, p. 7). Far from being revolutionary himself, Walzer is a major status-quo figure and a supporter of the State of Israel and its occupation of Palestine. For an analysis of the Said-Walzer exchange, see (Veracini 2023). Warrior, on the other hand, is addressing Christian liberation theologians, particularly Latin American and Black theologians, and thus kindred spirits—comrades—in progressive politics.

10   Someone who was sharply mindful of the legacy of empire was the Iranian revolutionary Ali Shar'iati (d. 1977), although his argument engaged a much earlier timeframe, from pre-empire (that is, the Prophet's time) to the Muslim imperial period. Shari'ati famously distinguished between "Red Shi'ism" and "Black Shi'ism," the former being the protest-oriented religion of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*), the latter reflecting the institutionalisation of Shi'ism, under the Safavid Empire, as a religion of "the Palace" (Shari'ati n.d., p. 10). Interestingly, Shari'ati made a similar, and lesser-known, distinction between an insurrectionary "Muhammadi Sunnism" (that is, Sunni Islam during the Prophet's life) and a reactionary "Umayyad Sunnism" (Rahnema 2000, p. 301). I thank Saffari for pointing out these hermeneutical parallels in Shari'ati's thought.

11   Sufism (the Anglicised form of the Arabic *tasawwuf*) refers to the Islamic mystical tradition.

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