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## Editorial

This December 2020 issue of *IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies* extends our commitment to engage with a wide range of topics related to civilisational studies. This time, all four articles included in this issue explore the most essential topics of contemporary intellectual discourse, which are human value and human rights in Islam, and the importance of religion in providing wellbeing, peace and balance as principal catalysts in civilisational and societal development.

The first article, “Human Value in Islamic Thought,” authored by Müfit Selim Saruhan engages in a critical analysis of the value of a human being from an Islamic viewpoint. A human being is characterised in Islam as an intelligent being or creature. The author argues that, at present, there is a deep need for an understanding of peace based on justice, as mentioned in the Qur’an. Human beings have constantly been stumbling in an atmosphere of marginalisation, polarisation, and discrimination that leads to depression, anxiety, and fear. Human beings need to live together to continue their lives and prepare for the hereafter, and this social structure should be formed in a way that will enable them to help and protect each other. According to the Qur’an, justice, peace, and love should be the primary values in human life as they not only bring comfort but also value to human life. According to Islam, the value of a human being increases when his behaviour is shaped based on peace and love. As the paper argues, the principles that make humans valuable are also the basic duties of human beings living together on earth. The principles mentioned in the Qur’an allow Man to choose between freely believing and not believing while respecting the beliefs of others. He must listen to the opinions of others, and let others define and explain themselves. Consequently, religion introduces principles that regulate the visible world of Man with the promise of happiness, and also binds the invisible world and the condition of peace after death in order for him to obey these principles.

The second article titled, “The Life and Political Role of Kurdish Women in the Ottoman Empire,” authored by Bzhar Othman Ahmed and AbdulWahed Jalal Nori is a good example of women empowerment in Islamic history. Based on primary sources such as *Seyahatname* (Travelbook) of Evliya Çelebi, this article presents an authentic elaboration of Kurdish women’s lives in their communities, particularly their highly influential roles in dynastic politics and their symbiotic careerism with their husbands and sons. As the article further elaborates, Kurdish women played a crucial role in the political sphere of Kurdistan, especially in ruling the principalities and fighting against their enemies, often supporting their husbands and sons as the power behind the throne, as well as exercising power themselves, notably during the Ayyubid dynasty and the Ottoman era. Also, the authors uphold the view that Kurdish women were notably freer than their counterparts in other nations in the Middle East, and Kurdish husbands had a great deal of trust in their wives.

The following article, named “Muslim Dynamics in America: Challenges and Opportunities,” is authored by Dinar Dewi Kania, Ariesa Ulfa, Sari Tri Stianawati, Erpy Reinita, Rere Jessika Purnomo and Agus Saefurohman. This paper describes the challenges and opportunities for Muslims in America and the role of American Muslim intellectual organisations in both domestic and global spheres. The authors suggest that influence of Islamophobia in US governmental and foreign policies are visible, particularly in counterterrorism policies, and this creates various challenges for Muslims living in America. However, at the same time, opportunities for Muslims to gain higher education and careers in various fields remain wide open in America. Besides, the paper highlights that the contribution of Muslim intellectual organisations to the American society and global society has always been present and cannot be neglected. Concerning the future, the paper envisages that Muslim intellectuals in the US who currently tend to unite and work together seem to be intensifying their research and education programmes as well as consolidating various Muslim communities in the US.

The final article written by Ismail Kadala Murutha and Saud Bin Mohammad, entitled “A Study of Dosteo Bisaka’s Contribution to the ‘Faith of Unity’ Religious Movement in Western Uganda,” discusses

the emergence and principles of a new religious movement in Uganda called Faith of Unity (FoU), which became a dominant religion in Uganda within the last three decades. The authors suggest that, in post-independence Uganda, the negative effects of colonialism, civil wars and recent struggles for power led to the inadequate and sometimes total absence of proper social, economic and political structures, leaving the country in a state of turmoil and uncertainty. Societies lost hope and became vulnerable and ready to accept any message that appeared to offer answers and solutions to their life problems. In such a midst, many new religious movements appeared on the Ugandan religious scene, and FoU is the most successful among them. As the authors argue, the main purpose of the founder of FoU, Dosteo Bisaka, was to bring back unity among the people, revitalise African spirituality and strengthen the African way of life that had been dispirited by foreign religions while, at the same time, be cognizant of the needs and requirements of the modern society by rehabilitating some of the indigenous African practices in new forms that are relevant to modern society. Despite the fact that FoU was founded around three decades ago, still, it has not attracted much scholarly research. Thus, this article is a valuable contribution in the field as it presents an original study of FoU from a neutral and non-judgemental perspective.

We are also pleased to carry a review of “Key Islamic Political Thinkers” edited by John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin (published in 2018 by Oxford University Press) contributed by Makmor bin Tumin. The reviewer considers that this edited book shows little nuances to provide a better understanding on contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse as it does not include thinkers from other regions such as the Southeast Asia. Also, the reviewer believes that this edited book has not seriously dealt with the richness of the thinkers’ ideas, but rather is more focused on their activities and ideology, leaving the readers unsure as to what the political take away was from the political thought that the contemporary intellectual thinkers left us with.

Finally, on behalf of the Editorial Board, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my heart-felt appreciation to all our contributors and reviewers. Their valuable and enlightened contributions will, I am convinced, be of interest to scholars worldwide. Finally, my thanks and appreciation go to all members of the Editorial Board, our

Editor Dr. Alwi Alatas, Book Review Editor Dr. Kaoutar Guediri and Assistant Editor Sr. Norliza Saleh. This issue became reality due to your dedication, efforts and sincerity. May Allah bless you all.

**Elmira Akhmetova**  
**Editor-in-Chief**  
**December 2020**



# Human Value in Islamic Thought

Müfit Selim Saruhan<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the value of a human being from an Islamic viewpoint. From the perspective of Islamic thought, a human being is characterised as an intelligent being or creature. As a natural result of this characterisation, a human being has the capability of transforming the subject of his knowledge into action. In this respect, the will to know and the tendency to do is the most basic need and, therefore, the right of all human beings. The worldly life is a field of values through which Man will win his afterlife. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human freedom and a moral existence. The world is also an area of gains in a way. This article attempts to determine the criteria of human worth and value in Islamic thought. Accordingly, it explains the awareness of differences that lead to the realisation of God's existence.

**Keywords:** Islam and morality, Responsibility, Value, Islamic Thought, Human Being, *Taqwa*, Diversity, Peace, Social Justice.

## Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to approach and analyse human value from the perspective of Islamic understanding and thought. The Qur'an prioritises and emphasises on what makes human beings valuable, and there are powerful theological and philosophical interpretations of this issue in the Islamic world. Today, the world needs peace more than ever. Human beings and the value attributed to them should always be

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prioritised in any field of life. We, as modern people, have been in the middle of violence and gender discrimination besides many ongoing religious, economic, and political problems. Although this world should be the ultimate source of comfort and peace. Human beings have constantly been stumbling in an atmosphere of marginalisation, polarisation, and discrimination that leads to depression, anxiety, and fear. At this point, we witness that there is a deep need for an understanding of peace based on justice, as mentioned in Qur'an. In this article, we will touch on the guiding function of Qur'anic verses and the principles of human value. According to the Qur'an, justice, peace, and love should be the primary values in human life as they not only bring comfort but also value to human life.

Human beings are characterised as intelligent creatures that can understand and seek meaning in life. Human beings inherently have the will to "know". As a natural result of this, Man has the capability of transforming his knowledge and putting it into action. In this respect, the will to know and the tendency to do are the most basic needs and, therefore, they are the rights of all human beings. Life in this world is based on values through which Man will reach heaven in the hereafter. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human life and moral existence.

Accordingly, I will try to explain the following matters in this article. The principles, which I intend to discuss, are based on the sense of "awareness", specifically awareness of the fact that each living being is unique and significant, and is aware that this uniqueness is an order of Allah, the Criterion who makes human life valuable and is the balance of good deeds in this world and the hereafter. According to the Qur'an, those who meet and socialise are valuable; socialisation is significant as it makes human life meaningful. The measure of superiority in the sight of Allah is *taqwa*. The concept of *taqwa* is one of the principles of Islamic thought that ensures the real value of a human being in this world and the hereafter. Seeing the mistakes of our ancestors and having the courage to be authentic are two significant elements that should be embraced to protect the value of human beings. In this article, I will try to explain the essentials and priorities of the value of Man in the Qur'an, which states that being aware of differences among human beings and showing respect ensures the realisation of Allah's existence.

### **Man's Natural Desire for Knowledge and Good Deeds**

In Islamic Philosophy, the soul, as a single genus, may be divided into three species. Firstly, there is the vegetable, which is the first entelechy (perfection or actuality) of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it reproduces and grows, and is nourished. Secondly, there is the animal, which is the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it perceives individual things and moves by volition. Thirdly, there is the human being, which is the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it commits acts of rational choice, deduction through opinion, and perception of universal matters (Afnan, 1958, p. 136; Kabadayı, 2006, p. 22).

Nutrition, growth, shelter, and understanding are the basic endeavours that all human beings share. While we share partnerships with other living things in our efforts to feed, reproduce, and seek shelter, the effort to understand is unique to humans. A life in which there is no effort to understand is wasted at the vegetative and animal level. The road to understanding is through knowledge, and the road to action and behaviour is through contemplation. Searching for the meaning of humanity is similar to having inner peace because it is a way of finding freedom (Ibn Miskawayh, 1398, p. 118; Ibn Sina, 1328, p. 5; Deniz, 2018, p.45).

The first area where an individual's personality appears is "the integrity of the body". The "life" and "continuity of health" of the individual is the law constituting the basic elements of the individual. The integrity of the body also calls upon the phenomenon known as "right to life" in case of an inseparable necessity, and puts it at the head of the constitutional arrangement. Life is central as the most fundamental right and the most fundamental freedom in an individual. It also cannot be dissolved from the human attribute. Therefore, the right to life cannot be restricted by any means (al-Attas, 1984, p. 45; Deniz, 2017, p. 15).

The Qur'an teaches us the essence of being human and describes four aspects of Man - physical creation, spirit, natural disposition (*fitrah*), and light - all of which have an unmediated origin in Allah. These features are combined to make Man a distinctive and special creation. Additionally, the Qur'an sets a frame about Man, including his aspects as a physical creature, a spiritual creature, a creature that is

naturally disposed to worship, and an enlightened creature. Our body, our spirit, our predisposition to worship Allah, and our light are gifts sent directly from Him to serve as a critical means of attaining human perfection. The perfection described in the Qur'an lies in cultivating these aspects of the spirit in order to transcend the animating qualities, actualise our disposition to worship, and refine our light (Shakir, 2018, p. 3).

When we examine the expressions about "life" in the Qur'an, we see that life in this world is a step that leads us to another existence. This worldly life consists of certain features that are temporary and deceptive. Permanent life will begin after this worldly life.

The two verses below lead us to think, contemplate, and research. Neither religion nor philosophy could exist in a world where there is no death. The Qur'an refers to the temporariness of this world, but the main purpose is not to give Man the idea that there is nothing to do here. Instead, the Qur'an emphasises that Man should prioritise the basic, most significant, and permanent values such as justice, peace, and love.

O my people, this worldly life is only [temporary] enjoyment, and indeed, the Hereafter - that is the home of [permanent] settlement (al-Ghafir: 39).

And the worldly life is not but amusement and diversion, but the home of the Hereafter is best for those who fear Allah, so will you not reason? (al-An'am: 32).

The Arabic word for world, *dunya* (d/n/y), is derived from its root word which means low. *Dunyā* means the temporary world - including its earthly concerns and possessions - as opposed to the eternal spiritual realm, or the hereafter. *Dunyā* also means closer or lower. In the Qur'an, here and hereafter represent oppositions in the temporal, spatial, and moral dimensions, similar to now and later, below and above, and evil and good respectively (Isfahani, 1986, p. 375; Draz, 2009, p. 45).

Allah created life (al-Mulk: 2), which makes it divine. Observing the worldly life and looking at its subtleties bring people together with the existence of Allah. He has entrusted this world to Man as His caliph, the reasons for which we cannot completely comprehend. There

are statements made by angels, who were concerned that Man, as the caliph on earth, will “shed blood” and “cause corruption”. However, the Almighty Allah emphasises, “Indeed, I know that which you do not know” (al-Baqarah: 30).

This emphasis seems to indicate that the real duty of Man is not to defeat and shed blood, but to improve and sustain life. What makes this world meaningful is the actions of human beings. The Qur’an reminds us of the temporariness of this world and emphasises that the joy of living is based on the competition among human beings in terms of goodness (al-Zumera: 10; an-Nisa: 97).

There is an ethical value of the worldly life in Islam; it is a field of values through which Man will win his afterlife. In this field of values, we encounter the freedom of choice, which is one of the basic requirements of human freedom and morality. The world, in a sense, is also an area of achievement. In the Qur’an, Allah mentions night as the time to rest and day as the time to work (an-Naba: 10-11). In Surah al-Jumu’ah, the Almighty Allah invites believers to worship with enthusiasm and, at the end of the Jum’ah prayer, invites them to earn and share the endless gifts that He has given: “And when the prayer has been concluded, disperse within the land and seek from the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah often that you may succeed” (al-Jumu’ah: 9).

In this respect, the Qur’an emphasises that life in this world is a game and distraction (al-Hadid: 21) and the possibilities offered by this world are temporary. The statement, “I love not those that set,” (al-An’am: 76) in the Qur’an is presented through Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH). This significant statement means that we will not have knowledge about what is right, what is wrong, and how much we will be valued in this worldly life without going through a divine (*Rabbani*) education process. The verse “...so let not the worldly life delude you and be not deceived about Allah by the Deceiver” (Fatir: 5) clearly shows that a human being is susceptible to deceit unless he looks at life as a means of reaching wisdom.

In terms of the Qur’an, the Almighty Allah provides answers to those who wish it: “Whoever desires the life of this world and its adornments – We fully repay them for their deeds therein, and they therein will not be deprived” (Hud: 15, 26). Accordingly, every human

being has the fundamental right to acquire, produce, and share property. Islam often draws attention to the inherent sense of possession and advises that this feeling should not erode one's moral qualities (Deniz, 2018, p. 25).

The Divine Will sets human beings a goal in this world: to win both this world and the hereafter. The believer shall not forget his worldly share.

But seek, through that which Allah has given you, the home of the Hereafter; and [yet], do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done well to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters (Al-Qasas: 77).

We are meant to be in the service of humanity, in return for the gifts and good deeds Allah has endlessly served us.

### **Human Nature: Man as a Living Being Who Understands and Acts**

Man is the most distinguished creature on earth. In terms of the history of philosophy, Man has always tried to know and define the whole universe in the best way. However, the search for knowledge about the very nature of humanity has long been ignored. The individual who sets out to research all the subjects of science and philosophy to the finest of details may neglect himself the most in this process. The question of whether Man and his nature has been understood brings extensive explanations and interpretations with it.

According to the philosophy of Islamic thought, human beings are intelligent creatures that understand and then act accordingly. This intelligence has two basic components, namely the will to know and the tendency to act; these are also the two most basic human needs. In this respect, it can be said that these two components are the most basic rights of human beings.

Man attains peace and freedom when he discovers the inner workings of nature. The mind performs its activities within the limits of life and time. Receiving knowledge and acting accordingly occurs in a flow of life and time. What creates human values is a type of information regardless of its source; value does not occur without

knowledge since the latter is its basis. Human beings create values and apply them as long as they know. The knowing individual is aware of what is good, right, and virtuous, and follows them in everyday life. The purpose of a knowing individual's existence is to be virtuous and righteous in every step of life.

Based on the abovementioned information, it can be said that the actions of human beings have been subjected to various basic classifications. The general actions of human beings can be defined as:

1. Activities that are carried out by an individual towards a goal, such as the realisation of technical projects and decisions.
2. Activities that are related to the actions of daily life; in short, our natural needs such as nutrition, shelter, and struggle for survival.
3. Systematic and mechanised movements, such as a job in a factory or the act of using a technical tool.

Reflecting upon our values in real life by combining them with knowledge leads us to happiness. Additionally, such wise actions give us inner and external peace. Every single thing around us becomes meaningful when we start to really "understand"; perceiving the first reason and final goal of everything is necessary for a consistent and steady life. Knowledge ultimately exists to shed light on the way of Man.

The Qur'an says, "...and We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference..." (al-Isra, 70). As human beings, Man possesses the power to know and act at the same time. In this respect, he has the right to be valuable and honourable.

Upon closely studying the Qur'an, we can conclude the following essential teachings:

1. It describes the origin and creation of human beings, and provides information about human life after death.
2. It draws attention to the positive and negative psychological characteristics of human nature.

3. It describes the duties and responsibilities of human beings. These tasks essentially include the duties of Man to himself, his environment, and his lord; his other duties include sociological, moral, and religious acts.

An individual who expresses and defines himself, who understands and desires good, and applies it in his every action will be happy. Similarly, an individual who contemplates the universe and is aware of the natural forces and functioning of the universe will know his strengths and limitations. One of the most common and accepted definitions of religion in Islamic thought underlines this fact. Accordingly, religion is the name given for the whole of the rules that ensure the happiness of human beings in this world and the hereafter.

The main goal of Islam is to liberate Man. The principles in the Qur'an allow him to choose between freely believing and not believing while respecting the beliefs of others. He must listen to the opinions of others, and let others define and explain themselves. Religion introduces principles that regulate the visible world of Man with the promise of happiness, and also binds the invisible world and the condition of peace after death in order for him to obey these principles. If we look at the teachings of the Qur'an, religion is a concept that expresses the relationship of Man with God, with other human beings, and finally with the whole living and non-living universe. In this respect, the prophets struggled to draw human beings to an honourable line, to keep them free from external ties that surround and limit them, and to give them their fundamental rights. The history of the prophets should be read as the history of human rights struggle (Nasr, 2000, p. 46; Garaudy, 2015, p. 18; Rahman, 2009, p. 36).

According to al-Ghazali and many other scholars, the condition of creating a society that human beings need to live in is to ensure that there is mutual solidarity based on a specific, fair, and collective basis for survival; the significant elements are called nation and Shariah (Mahmud, 1968, p. 134; Goodman, 2003, p. 46).

For example, al-Shahrastānī in his *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal* states that human beings need to live together to continue their lives and prepare for the hereafter, and this social structure should be formed in a way that will enable them to help and protect each other. This formation of togetherness is called the nation (1947, p. 38).



### **Awareness of Differences Leads to Perceiving Allah's Wisdom**

Allah states the following reason behind our diversity:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (al-Hujurat: 13)

This verse expresses that the awareness of our being in different colours, races and languages in this world is a kind of process that leads us to the existence of Allah. When Man examines the formation and differences of races and languages in terms of physiological, psychological, and sociological aspects, he realises the power behind these differences. Diversity obliges us to accept a systematic design made of different elements. The verse also emphasises that those who will determine the wisdom of these differences are human beings with knowledge.

### **Differences as a Form of Awareness: The Value of Socialisation**

When approaching this issue from the Qur'anic perspective, our starting point is that our differences are natural and the result of the Divine Will.

To each of you, We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all-together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ. (al-Maidah: 48)

In the frame of this verse, we can state that the ethnic, cultural, and geographical differences of human beings are a result of the Divine Will. Allah, the Supreme Creator, has intended for Man to attain unity in the diversity of differences. The fact that this is a divine law means that it is also natural law. Finding unity within the multiple is one of the most important conditions for the existence of societies in sociological terms. The nature and continuity of things are based on the existence of differences.

Societies would not be able to meet their needs without differences. We find the best examples of this in the statements of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. According to al-Farabi, every human being needs many things in order to live and achieve superior perfection, but cannot provide all of them alone. Since each individual can only do his part to meet these needs, human beings need to come together, unite in their duties, help each other and complete different tasks to be able to survive. Al-Farabi emphasises that a world created with the help of all human beings will be a happy world. He also believes that the resource of socialisation based on happiness is a necessity. In other words, human beings need each other and societies can be successful as long as this chain of need is carefully constructed. In al-Farabi's philosophy, justice and love are the root of civilisation. His view of love is composed of three sources that determine the structuring of social organisations: love (arising from necessity), benefit, and pleasure. When viewed from the perspective of politics and state philosophy throughout history, it is perceived that these three sources have determined and shaped humanity.

According to al-Farabi, pleasure occurs when virtue and interest are combined. In this respect, the maintenance of the state, which is established by love, is based on the virtue of justice. The bonds that bring entities in the universe together are like the love that binds people together. Parts of a city and the different elements in it are connected and linked by a bond of love and, as such, they should be fairly protected. For this reason, justice is the foundation and principle of a virtuous city. While al-Farabi classifies virtuous societies as large, medium, and small. He emphasises on the coexistence of all nations in all habitable (*ma'mur*) regions of the globe with the large society; the coming together of the middle society and a single nation; with a small community it means the gathering of the people of a single city in a region where any nation is settled. The highest form of good and perfection is achieved firstly in the city. Happiness cannot be achieved in a community smaller than the city. Bad deeds occur, just as good deeds occur by choice and will. Therefore, happiness is not obtained in every city. A city that provides real happiness to its people and aims to help them on the way to happiness is a virtuous and perfect city. A society in which its people help each other to achieve happiness is a virtuous and perfect society. Cities that help each other will become a virtuous and perfect nation. Likewise, the virtuous and perfect

universal state only emerges when all the nations within it help each other to attain happiness (Al-Farabi, 1985 pp. 79, 117-118).

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) further develops the theory of need; for him, human beings cannot live alone. Social life is essential for the survival and continuation of human beings. When they start to live in a society, they enter into relations with each other. Law and fair administration are needed in order to regulate relations and ensure that they work fairly. They require a lawmaker and a fair administrator for their share. For the continuation of the human species and the full realisation of human existence, there should be a person who will oblige fair management and people who will comply with the laws of this management. The existence of Divine Grace is obvious, so it is inconceivable that it does not assign some people to fulfil this need. These people are prophets, and just governance and laws are the revelations they brought from God. Prophecy is mandatory for justice and law (Ibn Sina, 2004, p. 50).

According to the statements presented above, differences are natural and they ensure richness in human life. There are differences in human ability and level of understanding. For this reason, the Divine Will points out that the epistemic differences among human beings in terms of perceiving the truth and their inclinations may differ due to these differences. Competing in good deeds and following righteous deeds should be the fundamental aim of humanity.

The verses presented below have inspired theologians and philosophers in the Islamic world. These verses call upon humanity to work in consciousness of unity by being aware of differences and not breaking away from the movement towards good.

Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds - indeed, we will not allow being lost the reward of any who did well in deeds. (al-Kahf: 30)

And that there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives. (al-Najm: 39)

According to the Qur'an, the prerequisite that makes Man valuable in terms of his work in this world is his actions. A human being is valued based on his work and production, not skin colour or environment. No one has the chance to choose the environment in which he is born

or the exact conditions in which he lives. The communities formed by men and women have different characteristics, which generates the discovery of individualities within sociality. *Taaruf*, which means “to get acquainted”, is a concept expressing mutual acquaintance and cognition. It is another divine emphasis of differences as a means of unity and beauty (Izutsu, 2002, pp. 45-65).

### **The Measure of Value in the Sight of Allah: *Al-Taqwa***

“Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.” (al-Hujurat: 13)

Verse 13 of the Surah al-Hujurat above emphasises on the significance of knowing, meeting, and sharing. However, there is another significant criterion of *al-taqwa* after these elements. The following are some questions that should be asked, understood, and contemplated upon in the light of this verse:

- What is *taqwa*?
- What is Superiority (*Akram*) (أكرم)?
- What is the wisdom and reason behind using the word *Akram* in the verse, while emphasising superiority in the word *Afdal* (افضل)?
- What is the semantic difference between *Akram* and *Afdal*?
- Do we perceive the existence of a human being with our eyes or our heart? We can perceive the superiority of property and authority with our five senses. Therefore, the perception of *taqwa* is not a sensory awareness, but a mental comprehension.
- Is there any difference between superiority in the sight of Allah and human beings? The emphasis in the abovementioned verse is about being “in the presence of Allah” (*Indallah*) (عندالله). When we categorise nations in the world, we are doing it with the same criteria: developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries. Here, the Almighty Allah leads us from the pride of intermediary values to the acceptance of noble and enduring values. While this world has standards of superiority, in Allah’s sight, the criterion of superiority is *taqwa*.

Man is a creature that knows and acts. All human behaviours have various factors and reasons. A human being spends his life describing and evaluating what he sees. He feels the peace of existence as long as he gives meaning to what he sees and feels. He understands as he knows, and as he understands, he finds the opportunity and strength to move freely.

The value system that Islam bestows upon Man comprises high and noble values. Moral and religious values give Man an understanding of the harmonious integrity of the universe. A human being who is indifferent to moral and religious values will experience personality fragmentation, no matter how mature his personality is. Moral and religious values are elements that strengthen personality by combining joy and harmony with the environment and the meaningfulness of life (Dar, 1963, p. 175; Donaldson, 1953, p. 75).

## Conclusion

According to Islam and the Qur'an, the value of a human being increases when his behaviour is shaped based on peace and love. The principles that make us valuable are also the basic duties of human beings living together on earth.

The Qur'an prioritises discovering and understanding this world and the differences in it, rather than rejecting or criticising different perspectives. However, when one's religious perceptions are not properly settled, he moves away from following good deeds and becomes lost in life. The system of the modern world causes new generations to become less happy because the centre of their life is no longer about "peace and unity". The religion sent by Allah gives us the duty to, firstly, have a solid personal construction and, secondly, to protect, resurrect, and sustain what is different. Improving life on earth is the duty of all intellectual human beings.

*Al-Taqwa*, which is the highest consciousness of duty and responsibility, is above all these principles. The level of justice is the closest to *al-taqwa* because it requires a deep sense of responsibility for the duties of Allah. Human beings who are not fooled by the deception of time will adhere to permanent values instead of pursuing temporary values. The first principle of salvation is to be the owner, not the

prisoner, of time. Man will have knowledge and faith reflected in his actions, and then recommend the right deeds and patience. Socialisation is possible only with a consciousness of worship. The abovementioned verse about *al-taqwa* emphasises clearly on the qualities of those who attain salvation in plural mode, as well as on the development of the law of friendship and goodwill. Man should fulfil Allah's orders with love and show compassion to all creatures. The fundamentals of faith cleanse the human soul and turns Man into a being who constantly feels God right beside him.

The Qur'an states that one of the most fundamental problems of human beings is not being able to see the mistakes of the previous generations and ancestors. Defending the wrongs of our ancestors, with whom we have the same lineage and blood relation, and not being able to display an original stance distracts us from the line of justice stipulated by conscience and the Qur'an, and imprisons us in the darkness of cruelty.

In sum, Islam's emphasis on the protection of generation can be understood from two perspectives. First of all, Islam seeks to ensure that generations of all living creatures should be preserved in terms of environmental and biological considerations. Secondly, Islam intends not only to guarantee the biological continuation of the human species, but also to offer guarantees to the moral, religious, and legal character of their future generations. It is one of our major responsibilities to afford full protection to human beings.

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# The Life and Political Role of Kurdish Women in the Ottoman Empire

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**Abstract:** Kurdish women have always played a major role in communal and political activities, notably during the Ayyubid dynasty. In the Ottoman era, many Kurdish women played a great role in politics and even ruled in some places. However, populist feminist narratives have been ignorant of the strident role played by Kurdish women during the Golden age of Islam in Kurdistan, including believing Orientalist stereotypes that they had no rights and could not go outside freely. This article shows the dynamic role of Kurdish women in the Ottoman era, particularly their contributions in politics, using qualitative historical and textual analysis, with an exploratory qualitative research design, depending on both the primary and secondary sources. This article also presents a more authentic understanding of Kurdish women's lives in their communities, particularly their highly influential role in dynastic politics and their symbiotic careerism with their husbands and sons.

**Keywords:** Kurdish women, Kurds, Kurdistan, political role, Ottoman era.

## Introduction

Many Kurdish women have played a major role in Kurdish life and culture as well as in Islamic civilisation throughout history. Under the Ayyubid dynasty, they were great patrons and scholars of *hadith* as well as strong political figures. Kurdish women played a crucial role in the

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political sphere of Kurdistan, especially in ruling the principalities and fighting against their enemies, often supporting their husbands and sons as the power behind the throne, as well as exercising power themselves (Joseph, 2005). In the early history of Islam in Kurdistan, the Kurds were engaged in political affairs in Kurdish principalities, for example, in the Dustaki State (983-1093), with its capital in Mayyafariqin, which was located in the current Kurdistan of Turkey, around the land of Jazira. Some sources state that Jazira was named after Jazirat Ibn 'Umar. Meer Badh ibn Dustak, the son of Dustak (983-990), established the kingdom after protracted wars. The Marwani family was descended from Marwan ibn Kak, who ruled after Meer Badh was killed (Mohammed, 2018). In this state, many Kurdish women were enrolled in the political field, including Fāṭima bint Aḥmad al-Kurdi (also known as Fāṭima Khatun), a great politician in the Abbasid caliphate who secured the rule of her son, Abū Taghlib. She arrested Nāṣir al-Dawla in the Dustaki State in the 4<sup>th</sup> century H (Zeki Beg, 2000). In addition, al-Amira al-Daylamiya, Amir Badh bin Dustak's wife, ruled from the Hisn Kayfa fortress after her husband was killed in Mosul in 990 CE. Al-Amir Abi Ali Hassan bin Marwan came to his aunt's castle with his army and informed her that his uncle was dead. He then proposed a matrimonial alliance with al-Amira al-Daylamiya whereby he would be rendered every castle and city and she would be consulted in the ruling and administration of his state. She accepted this offer and became a major figure in the Marwani State without any conflict. Sitt 'Azīza bint Zanki bin Awan held Diyarbakir after losing her husband, Amir Sa'īd bin Nāṣir al-Dawla, in 464 H/1072 CE. She then agreed to marry Amir Niẓām al-Dīn and gave him the city. Similarly, Sitt al-Malik bint Nāṣir al-Dawla built the Marwan dome in the suburb of Farqin, which included her father's grave, while Sitt al-Nas bint Amir Sa'īd (Raḥīma) created a tomb for her husband, Nāṣir al-Dawla Maṣṣūr, and also bought and converted a church into a mosque. In the negotiation with Seljuks, Sitt al-Malik bint Nāṣir al-Dawla met Niẓām al-Mulk al-Ṭūsī, who was a vizier of Sultan Alp Arsalan in the Seljuk State, and gave Farqin to them in 463 H/1071 CE (Yusuf, 2001). The Rawaddi State (954-1071) was one of the most important Kurdish dynasties during the Abbasid era, ruling in Tabriz, Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Urmia, Maragha and Miyana. The name of this territory goes back to the Kurdish Rawaddi tribe. Ibn Khallikan al-Irbili mentions that the Rawaddis were a great Kurdish tribe whose founder, Muhammad ibn Husain Rawaddi, drew on the great loyalty of his tribal

followers. Princess Hwadad Khatun was the last ruler of the Rawaddi State. Ruling in the city of Maragha, she was the granddaughter of 'Alā' al-Dīn Beg, who passed away in 604 H. After she married Jalāl al-Dīn Khwarizmshah, the Rawaddi lands were absorbed into the Khwarizm State (al-Swirky, 2000).

The political role of women in the Ayyubid dynasty was expanded. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī's grandfather belonged to a Kurdish tribe, whose forefathers had settled in northern Armenia. Along with most Kurdish tribes, they became progressively integrated with the Turkic world during the course of long service in the Abbasid Caliphate and later Turkic Sultanates. Ayyūb, the father of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, was born in Dwin, which is near Karkh in eastern Azerbaijan. His father, Shādhī, served a Shaddadi family of Kurdish descent, whom the Seljuk Sultan Alp Arsalan had made the governor of that territory. After a while, he left Dwin for Iraq as circumstances became unfavorable for him there. In Iraq, he was welcomed by his friend, Bahruz, the military governor of Iraq under the Seljuk Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn Mas'ūd. Bahruz appointed Shādhī as his governor of the town of Tikrit, situated on the bank of Tigris, which was granted to him as a fief. After the death of Shādhī, his elder son, Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, became the governor of Tikrit. His younger brother, Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh, also assisted him in the administration of the town. They managed the affairs of the city with such dedication, love and wisdom that they soon became highly popular among the local people. In the meantime, 'Imād al-Dīn Zankī, the ruler of Mosul, was defeated by the army of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustarshid in battle, in which Bahruz also fought on the side of the Caliphate. Caught between the enemy behind and the river ahead, Zankī almost despaired for his life. His only option was to escape to Mosul via Tikrit. Hence, he took shelter with Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb and sought his assistance in this task. Ayyūb provided him with some boats, by which he and his army crossed the Tigris and safely reached Mosul. Ayyūb was put to task by the authorities of Baghdad for having assisted the enemy. Simultaneously, another serious incident involved Shīrkūh killing a close confidant of Bahruz with regard to the charge of sexually assaulting a helpless woman. The matter was reported to the court of Baghdad in an exaggerated manner, the consequences of which were warrants issued to arrest both Ayyūb and Shīrkūh. However, before they could be arrested, both of them left Tikrit for Mosul in 1138. Ṣalāḥ al-

Dīn was born on the same night they fled, along with their families. After that, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn lived in Mosul and then moved with his uncle, Asad al-Dīn Shīrkūh, and their army. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn later established the Ayyubid State after destroying the Fatimid Caliphate in 1171 (Anjum, 2002; Mohammed, 2018; Ibn Khallikan, 1961; Ibn Shaddād, 1934). After the death of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 1193, many of his relatives ruled in the Ayyubid State, with a prominent role for the women of the family, one of them being Ḍayfa Khatun (also known as Safiya Khatun). She was the daughter of al-Malik al-ʿĀdil Sayf al-Dīn Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ayyūb, who was the brother of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. Al-Malik al-ʿĀdil was born in 1143 and once ruled Aleppo before passing away in 1218 (al-Zaʿbi, 2003). Ḍayfa Khatun was the following: the wife of her cousin, al-Malik al-Zāhir Ghāzī ibn Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, who was the ruler of Aleppo; the mother of al-ʿAzīz, who became the ruler of Aleppo; and the grandmother of the ruler of Damascus, al-Nāṣir. She was born in the Citadel of Aleppo in 1185 and was raised there (al-Zarkaly, 2002). She was renowned for her knowledge, faith and strong power. She established Al-Firdaus Madrasah in Aleppo in 1235, lavishly endowing it and paying the teachers' salaries (Ali, 2005). Her husband passed away and his rule ended in 1236, after which it passed to her son, al-Malik al-ʿAzīz. Since he was young, Ḍayfa Khatun, then aged 52, ruled as regent for six years (Othman, 2010; al-Zarkaly, 2002) and assisted by Shams al-Dīn Lu'Lu'. She passed away in 1242 at the age of 58, after which her grandson assumed control at the age of 13 (Yusuf, 1992).

Another important woman is Ghāziya Khatun, who was the daughter in law of al-Malik al-Kāmil and the widow of al-Malik al-Muzaffar. Prior to her passing in 655 H/1257, she ruled the city of Hama on behalf of her son, al-Malik al-Manṣūr Muḥammad, until he grew up. He became the ruler of Hama in 1242 until he passed away in 1284 (al-Zaʿbi, 2003). During the siege of Damascus in 1229, al-Kāmil decided to dispatch a force against the fortress of al-Karak, where Ghāziya Khatun was then residing. When al-Kāmil's force appeared beneath the walls, commanded by two former Amirs of al-Mu'azzam, she ordered a sortie against them by the people of Karak castle. Al-Kāmil's forces, perhaps surprised by this show of resistance, were driven off in confusion, while the two commanders were captured. She threw them into a dungeon in the fortress, where they remained until they died (Humphreys, 1977).

It can be seen from this brief overview that women played a pervasive role in the political and dynastic affairs in pre-Ottoman Kurdish history.

### **Kurds and the Ottomans**

As mentioned previously, the Kurds lived alongside Turkic peoples from the early Abbasid era and had formal relations with the Ottomans since the Battle of Chaldiran, which happened in 1514 between the Ottomans and Safavids (Kalman, 1994). Others trace relations much earlier to the Kurdish tutor of Sultan Muḥammad II the Conqueror (al-Fātiḥ), Molla-i Gorrani, whose full name was Aḥmad bin Ismā'īl. Born in 1410 in Shahrizor, he visited and lived in Damascus, Egypt, Cairo, Hijaz, Bursa and Istanbul. He became Ibn al-Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī’s student, then travelled to Bursa in 1441, where he was appointed as a lecturer. He subsequently became a special teacher to Sultan Muhammad II in 1442 (Othman & Rostam, 2013).

He taught Sultan Muhammad II and encouraged him to conquer Constantinople in 1453 (Othman & Rostam, 2013). Other sources believe that the first relationship between the Kurds and Ottomans goes back to Sultan Orhan’s time, during which a Kurdish Imam named Mawlana Tāj al-Dīn al-Kurdi, known as Khayr al-Dīn Pasha, became the Grand Vizier of Sultan Orhan (Galip, 2015). Undoubtedly, the Ottomans and Kurds certainly had familiarity with each other prior to the onset of formal relations from 1514 onwards. Evliya Çelebi (1611-1684) traced their interactions to Yildirim Khan in the Malatya Citadel in Kurdistan:

When the Diyarbakir’s leader and Mar’ash’s leader were struggling to divide their realms, the Kurds of Malatya revolted against them and asked the Ottomans to help them. The revolutionaries asked Yildirim Khan in Bursa to come to Kurdistan and help them against their rulers, and the Ottoman’s army also got Amasya and Sivas. After a while, the population of Malatya revolted against Yildirim Khan, therefore Yildirim with a hundred thousand soldiers attacked this Citadel in 800 and opened it. (Çelebi, 2000, p. 12)

Çelebi also alluded to the revered Ottoman progenitor, Sulaymān Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman

Bey, and his son named Ertuğrul staying in Malatya when they first came from the Steppes, after which they went to the Roman frontiers. In other section, Çelebi mentions about Kaya Alp Bay, the grandfather of Ertuğrul, living in the Citadels of Ahlad and Urfa (Çelebi, 2000). These two towns were mostly Kurdish inhabited areas. For these reasons, Çelebi is credited with mentioning the earliest ties between the Kurds and Ottomans.

### **Women's Lives and Status in Kurdistan in the Ottoman Era**

Kurdish women naturally comprised numerous socio-economic and geographical groups during the Ottoman era, and the only commonality universal to all of them was the general observance of a Kurdish Islamic lifestyle (Homar, 2016). More extensive documentation is available concerning elite women - such as the mothers, daughters and sisters of powerful men - including their roles in settling conflicts and social problems, not least in auspicious marriages. Individual women continued to play a major role as stewards governing their husbands' lands while the latter were travelling or on campaign, and even ruling directly as regents (Joseph, 2005). *The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Culture* shows some information about Kurdish life under the Ottoman rule with regard to Çelebi's travelogue:

In the Bitlis principality the female members of the prince's family, together with maids and slave girls, were confined to the harem. Apparently in exaggeration, he noted that women were not allowed into the marketplace, and would be killed if they went there. (Çelebi, 2000, p. 358)

As the *Encyclopedia* acknowledges that this is a hyperbole signifying the jealousy of a particular ruling house in Bitlis, in other entries, Çelebi alluded to the freedom of Kurdish women and the great love their husbands held for them. The Kurds were noted for their love of bathing; hence, expensive household baths were installed for women to bathe and thus avoid the negative impacts of cold weather. Most houses in Imadiyye had their own bathrooms (Alpaslan, 2014):

The building of cleaner baths, this city has... baths, but they are not developed and repaired like other baths in Kurdistan. They were created in the past, and are great buildings. In

addition, the people of this city created household baths for their women, because they do not like their women go outside to bathe and come back and the cold weather could make them ill. (Çelebi, 2000, p. 307)

Kurdish women wore modest Islamic dress, typically a *sirwāl* (trousers) and a tunic blouse, with a coloured headscarf, as noted of the women of Van (Çelebi, 2000). Çelebi discussed women's clothes in Diyarbakir, where "all of the women wear a white headscarf and cloth to cover their face, and put a small gold on their heads, and boots for their feet; they are faithful to their husbands and look very beautiful" (Çelebi, 2000, p. 50).

Women in Bitlis were famous for their dedication to preserving their modesty and chastity as well as avoiding markets or public bathrooms. They had clothes sewn from silk fabrics, and silver or gold embroidered caps on their heads. When they went out, they wore a thin white veil on their heads, thereby covering their faces (Çelebi, 2000). Çelebi stayed in Kurdistan for a long time, which is why his descriptions are particularly important as he regularly saw Kurdish women from various regions in the streets. All of his descriptions of Kurdish women's clothes are in accordance with those recorded by İzzat (2009).

Women had a significant role in their family and social activities with their husbands, and were noted for their frugality and conscientiousness (al-Damluji, 1999). Due to the difficult terrain of Kurdistan, they were skilled horsewomen and helped their husbands in the fields (Nabaz, 2003). Some Western travellers who visited Kurdistan noted the strength of Kurdish women. One of such traveller was a German voyager named Lerkh Petr who noted that, in the villages, women carried their children and toiled the fields, wove carpets, fabrics and sheets and also sewed clothes (Lerkh, 2008). Molla Mahmood Bayazidi, who was born in 1797, wrote '*Adat wa A'araf al-Tawa' al-Kurdiya* (Habits and Customs of Kurdish Tribes) in which he discussed about Kurdish culture at that time, with much information on women (Nabaz, 2003). He lived in the Soran Emirate and noted that "Kurdish women are respected by their husbands and they are freer than women from other nations, even during the battle, they fight beside her husband against their enemies" (Nabaz, 2003, p. 123).

In general, Kurdish women were notably freer than their counterparts in other nations in the Middle East, and Kurdish husbands had a great deal of trust in their wives (Lerkh, 2008). If the husbands were not in the house, the wives would still welcome guests and serve them (Son, 2007). Claudius James Rich believed that “the Kurdish women’s positions are greater than Turk, Arab, and Persian women” (Son, 2007, p. 35). Major Frederick Millingen also believed that “the Kurdish women are very free and intelligent, they are loyalty do not do any treason against their husbands, they are grateful in order to do anything” (Millingen, 1870, p. 250). Moreover, as described by James Bryce (1910), who was born in 1838 and passed away in 1922, “Kurdish women wear headscarf but do not put any fabric on their face, and they are not afraid of us and people of the Caucasus” (Bryce, 2010, pp. 254-255). Pietro Della Valle notes that “Kurdish women do not wear hijab, and they are talking with their men and us freely” (Della Valle, 2006, p. 94). Clearly, these conflicting accounts represent different times and geographically diverse communities and, in general, refer to peasants that travellers were more likely to encounter (Homar, 2016).

### **The Role of Kurdish Women in Kurdistan under the Ottomans**

The situation of Kurdish women under the Ottomans was generally a continuation from the preceding eras. In the Luristan Emirate, there was a female ruler named Dawla Khatun, who assumed governance after the death of her husband, ‘Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 716H). However, she was unable to maintain power amidst intrigues among the emirate family and consequently ceded control to her brother, ‘Izz al-Dīn Husayn (Al-Swirky, 2000; Zeki Beg, 2000).

The Bitlis Emirate, which was a *vilayet* (province) in the Ottoman Empire, was ruled by Shah Khatun after the death of her husband, Amir Shams al-Din. She ruled ably until her son, Amir Ibrāhīm, ascended to rule in 835 H (al-Swirky, 2000; Zeki Beg, 2000). This emirate was called Rozhakiyans and encompassed a wide area with a huge army. Çelebi narrated about Shah Khatun’s grandson named Abdal Khan:

The head of this government named Abdal Khan and his people were the Kurds. During the war, the Bitlis government had 5,000 soldiers. The government’s administration was



created by the tribes, and they did not become Melek Ahmed Pasha's guests just for ten days. (Çelebi, 2000, p. 128)

However, Çelebi narrates about the Bey (Governor) of Bitlis' help to Sultan Murad IV during the Baghdad campaign. The Bey of Bitlis welcomed the Sultan and serviced him when he returned from the Baghdad campaign. Sultan Murad IV stayed in Bitlis for a while and appointed the Bey to collect Mush City's incomes for himself. The Bey of Bitlis spent these incomes on the guards of the Citadel and repaired the bazaar at Bitlis. However, the key of the Bitlis Citadel was with the Bey of Bitlis because it was an independent government (Çelebi, 2000).

The Soran Emirate was ruled by Khanzad (1555-1615 CE), the daughter of Amir Hassan, after her spouse, Meer Suleiman bin Shakaly, was arrested by the Ottomans in Baghdad. She served the emirate very well and spent much time listening to the problems of her community and building many mosques. In addition, she moved the capital of the emirate from Dwin Qala to Harir and built the Kalasw fortress to protect her capital from enemies. She even prepared a large army and attacked many surrounding cities (Zeki Beg, 2000; Nabaz, 2003). Çelebi was amazed at a situation during the reign of Sultan Murad IV, when a Kurdish woman named Khanzad-i Meer-i Soran commanded Harir and Soran in Shahrizor Province. Despite the Soran Emirate not being a *vilayet* per se, she had a huge army of between 40,000 and 50,000 soldiers, including 12,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry archers. This example was unique, and she fascinated Çelebi as a Kurdish warrior queen who successfully attacked the Safavid strongholds of Hamadan and Dergazin (Çelebi, 2000). Her name remains legendary and is commemorated in many Kurdish songs and poems, especially in the Laskiri poem (al-Swirky, 2000).

Qarafatim (Black Fatim) was a female warrior born in 1854. During the Crimean War, she fought for the Ottomans against the Russians in Qaris and Erzurum in 1887, leading a battalion of 500 men. Her fierce leadership captured the imagination of the West (Zeki Beg, 2000). In 1887, the *New York Times* featured a profile on her, describing her as "the redoubtable female warrior of Kurdistan." *Al-Waqy' Newspaper*, No.730, which was published on November 4, 1877, described her as follows:

We have already talked about the Kurdish princess, who led the military by herself, and now it is learned from the news of Astana (Istanbul) that this princess was called Qara Fatima. When the Ottomans attacked the village of Qawzim Tepe (Qawzim Hill), she was a leader of the group of soldiers, and she is one of the people of Bruce, who is a young and wealthy beauty with vigor, patriotic jealousy, and Islamic diet, with which she formed a group of 500 volunteers from her countrymen. (Zeki Beg, 2000, p. 247)

Given the nurturing, placid feminine archetype of the West during the Crimean War that was embodied in Florence Nightingale, it is truly remarkable that there were women leading crack units in the Ottoman ranks. At the end of the Ottoman rule in Kurdistan, 'Adila Khan (1859-1924) lived in the city of Sine, in the Kurdistan region of Iran. She married Osman Pasha ibn Muhammad Pasha, the head of the Jaf tribe, in 1895 (Zeki Beg, 2000). She moved from Sine to Halabja in the same year and after the death of her husband in 1909, she came to rule Halabja and became famous for her governing capabilities. She built a bazaar and garden in the Persian style as well as the institution of the Court of Justice, over which she presided (al-Swirky, 2000). A British writer and diplomat named Major E. B. Soane travelled to the Kurdish borderlands in the early 1900s and wrote the first English-language manual of Kurdish grammar. He met her in Halabja and described her as a woman unique in Islam, both in the power she possessed and the efficacy with which she used the weapons in her hands. In addition, during the First World War, she helped save the lives of several British soldiers stationed in Halabja, which earned her the title of *Khan Bahadur* (Princess of the Brave) from the British (al-Swirky, 2000).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were many Kurdish women who led their tribes. One such woman was Qadem Kher, who revolted against Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran after her brother, Shah Murad, was killed by the Shah in 1925. She arose and gathered her tribe's warriors and fought a five-year rebellion against the Persians. She even inspired the Kurdish leader, Sheikh Maḥmūd, to combine their forces and fight for the independence of the whole of Kurdistan. This was because Sheikh Maḥmūd came from a great family that was a part of the Qādiriyya Sufi order in Kurdistan of the well-known Barzinji tribe. His full name was Muḥammad al-Hafid, son of Sheikh Sa'īd, son

of Muḥammad, son of Hajj Aḥmad. He was born in 1881 in a small place called Kani Askan. He studied Islamic sciences and was fluent in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and Persian. He led the Kurdish national struggle for decades to the point where he could establish a country in Sulaymaniyya and the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, though, it was destroyed by British colonial warfare. He died in 1956 (al-Bayati, 2005). Eventually, Reza Shah mediated an agreement and controlled some Kurdish leaders around Qadem Kher. Moreover, he sent a golden Holy Quran with his signature to her to show his honest intentions. Eventually, Qadem Kher surrendered, but Reza Shah treacherously imprisoned her until she died (Jabbary, 1969).

Women in the Kurdish tribes also resisted Ottoman attempts to combine Kurdish tribes and govern them more directly. These women included Mama Pwra Halima in Pishdar, Mam Pwra Nergiz of the Shwan tribe (Izedi, 2002), Mam Prshang of the Milan tribe and other women, namely Pery Khan, Shemse Khatun, Meryem Khanum and Fasla Khatun. In addition, Major E. B. Soane mentioned many brave horsewomen from Hamawand tribe who fought against the Ottomans (Son, 2007).

At the end of the Ottoman era, in 1919, a Kurdish women's organisation named Kürt Kadınları Te'alî Cem'iyeti was established in Kadıköy, Istanbul. This group sought to show Kurdish women's abilities in political and other social activities, and to find employment and provide education for Kurdish women and children, for which they opened many schools in Kurdistan. Many women from the Badirkhan family were involved in this organisation, such as Adwiye Khatun, Nazli Khatun, Zarife Khatun, Nazira Khatun, Saedet Khatun and Princess Layla Khan. Princess Amine Khan was the head of the organisation (Altan & Akbaş, 2019).

It can be seen that Kurdish women were prepared to fight against great powers to protect their tribes and homeland, including the Persian and Ottoman Empires, as well as to strive to improve conditions for women, children and society in general in Kurdistan.

## Conclusion

This article concludes that Kurdish women played a great role in the political sphere in Kurdistan under the Ottomans. According to European travellers who came to the Near East to visit Kurdistan, Kurdish women were freer than those from other nations and were fiercely loyal to their husbands. In addition, ordinary women helped their husbands by working both in the fields and in their homes, just as noble women helped their menfolk in the political sphere. Many Kurdish women became rulers in their own right in Kurdish principalities before the Ottoman era and often served as regents after the death of their husbands or until their sons attained their maturity. They were not mere figureheads, but rather actively engaged in all aspects of the political sphere, even in leading armies on the battlefield. Indeed, even during the late Ottoman era, Kurdish women led battalions during the Crimean War between the Ottomans and Russians, including at the battles of Qaris and Erzurum in 1887, and many newspapers at the time wrote about their bravery.

Kurdish women fought against Iran, as evidenced during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Qadem Kher revolted against Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran after her brother, Shah Murad, was killed by the latter in 1925; she even tried to coordinate an alliance among the Kurds. Most modern Kurdish women are still engaged in civil society activities, such as women's organisations and education, in preparing women to become leaders. Indeed, the first of such an organisation, Kürt Kadınları Te'alî Cem'iyeti, was established in 1919. However, they retain the passion and bravery of their foremothers, which was evident most recently when Kurdish women were at the forefront of the war against Daesh after the Iraqi army fled Mosul in 2014.

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# Muslim Dynamics in America: Challenges and Opportunities

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**Abstract:** American Muslims are faced with immense challenges, yet there are also opportunities within these challenges that have resulted in the emergence of various Muslim intellectual organisations in the United States of America. This paper aims to describe and analyse the challenges and opportunities for Muslims in America and the role of American Muslim intellectual organisations in both domestic and global issues. The result shows that Muslims in the United States (US) still need to bear the issue of Islamophobia with its related physical and psychological threats. American Muslims will also need to face the ideological and intellectual challenges to revitalise Islamic teachings so that Islam can be properly understood by the American society. The influence of Islamophobia in US government policy and foreign policy are enormous, especially since it relates to counterterrorism policy. However, opportunities for American Muslims to gain higher education and careers in various fields remain wide open. The contribution of Muslim intellectual organisations to the American society and global society has always been present and cannot be neglected. Concerning the future, intellectual Muslims in the US who currently tend to unite and work together seem to be intensifying their research and education programmes as well as consolidating various Muslim communities in the US.

**Keywords:** Muslims of America, Islamophobia, Religious Discriminations, Intellectual challenges, Islam.

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## Introduction

The United States of America (USA) is a large country with people of various ethnicities, races, and religions living side by side. Initially, the United States (US) was formed from the 13 former colonies of Great Britain, which became independent on July 4, 1776. America then carried out a massive expansion of its territory by buying areas such as Louisiana, which was purchased from France, and Alaska from Russia. To this day, the United States is known as a superpower country. For a long time, we recognised Columbus as the discoverer of the American continent. However, today, this detail has been refuted by various parties based on scientific evidence. A prominent Muslim historian al-Mas'ūdī (871-957CE), for example, has written in his *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'ādin al-Jawhar*, a historical note regarding the discovery of what seems to be the land of America, by a young Muslim man named Khashkhāsh bin Sa'īd bin Aswad from Cordoba, Andalusia, during the time of the caliphate of 'Abd Allāh bin Muḥammad (888-912 CE). It was written that departing from the coast of Delba (Palos) in 889, Khashkhāsh bin Sa'īd had taken a voyage and reached an unknown land where he met local residents and returned from this trip with an assortment of unique and rare items. Al-Mas'ūdī outlined the map of the land in his book, where the mainland is identified to be the modern time land of America (Husin, 2018).

The arrival of Islam in America was due to the arrival of slaves who were brought and employed by European aristocrats. Among the many slaves brought to America were Muslims. A source further strengthens this notion that the first Muslim immigrants to have arrived early to what now is the United States, particularly in 1875 and 1912, departed from Syria. John L. Esposito strengthens this argument by stating that the origin of the arrival of Muslim migrants to the United States occurred when European aristocrats came with slaves from Africa. However, after the African slaves arrived in the United States, some of them could not maintain their faith and eventually converted to Christianity (Khalik, 2015).

Muslims and Islam in the United States are an inseparable part of US history and studies in US pragmatic foreign policy. Freedom is a fundamental component in US politics; it is not bounded by any particular traditional principles, but rather has a utility purpose. The

main goal of the US foreign policy is to maintain the continuity and ideals of the international community and to expand the US economy abroad. For this reason, on matters of religion, there is no specific racial or ethnic group that make up the majority of Muslim adults in the US. Religious freedom is one of the fundamental freedoms applied in the US, therefore, despite Christianity being the major religion in the US, it has to be open to people of all religions, including Muslims.

However, on September 11, 2001 (9/11), the bombing of the World Trade Center in the United States (US) became an incident in history that gained international attention. It not only aroused US anger due to the many fatalities it caused, but also posed a new threat to US domestic interests. This prompted a new US foreign policy that became more aggressive by way of focusing on finding terrorists, punishing those who support them, as well as developing strategies to eradicate those terrorists using methods that include hunting down international terrorist organisations in Muslim countries and the Middle East (The Official Government Featured Commission Publication, 2004).

For this reason, following the 9/11 incident, an anti-Islamic discourse developed and the United States accused al-Qaeda, a Muslim militant group, as being responsible for the incident. Since then, the term “Islamophobia” continues to develop and seems to be a new identity in US politics, a trend that has especially attracted the attention of Muslim-majority countries. Islamophobia itself comes from the words “Islam” and “phobia”, which means a fear of Islam or hatred of Muslims. The events following 9/11 also became the base that describes the condition of Muslims in the United States today. Dislike towards Islam is growing and US politicians often use anti-Islamic sentiments, as was initially started through the statement of the then-President, George W. Bush, who announced to the world that the US has been attacked by the terrorist, Osama bin Laden. According to the US government, the war on terrorism is the battle of civilisation. The Bush administration also asked other nations to join forces with the United States to face this battle (The Official Government Featured Commission Publication, 2004).

The United States of America has become a home country to the most diverse Muslim population in the world. This includes people of all ethnicities, countries, and schools of thought. Demographically, the

exact number of Muslims scattered across the United States is difficult to determine because the percentage continues to increase. Among the famous Muslim figures in the United States are the late Muhammad Ali, the late Malcolm X, Mos Def, Fareed Zakaria, Shaquille O'Neal, Lupe Fiasco, Dr. Mehmet Oz, and Rima Fakhri. Important Muslim business figures include Farooq Kathwari, who is the CEO of Ethan Allen furniture store with 300 branches throughout the country, Malik M. Hasan, who is a pioneer in the HMO sector with his private health insurance organisation, and Safi Qureshey, who is the leader of a Personal Computer component manufacturing company in the country ("What is the Truth about American Muslims?," n.d.).

The aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy had certainly left a significant negative impact on Islam, especially among the Muslims in America. Various discriminatory policies were created both in the domestic and foreign policies of the United States due to the increasing strong issue of Islamophobia. American Muslims are faced with various challenges, yet there are also opportunities within these challenges that have resulted in the emergence of various Muslim intellectual organisations in America that contribute to its domestic and global issues. This paper aims to describe and analyse: 1) Discriminative policies against American Muslims; 2) challenges and opportunities for American Muslims, and; 3) the role of American Muslim intellectual organisations in both domestic and global issues.

## **Discriminative Policies against Muslims in the US**

### *Immigration Policy: Muslim Ban Policy*

On March 6, 2017, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, issued an immigration regulation, which is similar to a previous policy during Bush and Obama era, that drew controversy around the world. Under this rule, Trump administration imposed a temporary freeze of the issuance of visas for six Muslim-majority countries. The following are some controversial issues of Trump administration regarding the immigration of Muslims: 1) Suspending the US Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days; 2) The prohibition was not limited to Syrian refugees; 3) A 90-day suspension to everyone from seven Muslim-majority countries, namely Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan,

and Yemen. Several visa categories, such as diplomatic and UN visas, are not covered by this suspension; 4) Priority was given to religious minorities who faced torture (in an interview, Trump mentioned about Christians in Syria); 5) Approximately 50,000 refugees were admitted to the US in 2017, which was a drastic reduction from the quota set by former President Barack Obama (Syahrin, 2019).

This regulation was claimed to be important and based on the false assumption that the presence of Muslims in the United States has threatened national security and peace of the citizens. According to Syahrin (2019), some of the immigrant groups were suspected of being members of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and intended to infiltrate the United States. This was followed by the rejection of some family members of American Muslims from the Middle East by American society. However, the Muslim ban policy raised pros and cons in United States politics. Most citizens of the United States, especially students, opposed President Trump's policy because it could create tension and domestic problems.

### *Counter-Terrorism Policy*

Terrorism has become a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of the world, especially the United States. This is because it is considered as a crime against humanity. It has also become increasingly recognised in the international arena since the 9/11 incident. The following are some forms of American policy against terrorism:

#### 1. The PATRIOT Act and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Following the 9/11 attack, many new policies were made in the United States, one of which was the establishment of a new institution named the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The existence of the DHS is a clear response to the problems of security and stability that arose in the country, specifically that of terrorism. Programmes carried out by the DHS are an effort to increase community resilience by providing the following: (1) Education and increased public awareness of terrorism; (2) Public participation in reporting suspicious activity; (3) Public participation in preparedness to face urgent situations; and (4) Increased and more focused communication between the government

and the public on issues related to terrorism. These were the United States government's efforts in fighting terrorism, though it required the involvement of non-state actors, namely the society and community (Timur & Syakirin, 2018).

The events of 9/11 also triggered the re-emergence of the Orientalist analogy of Islam and Muslims, where both are considered as "inassimilable, subversive, violent" (Beydoun, 2016: 115), as well as other characters that describe the inherent nature of tendency towards terrorism. This stigma is deeply embedded in the memory of the US government's institutions and agencies, particularly the DHS and the anti-terror team of the law enforcement, with policies that suppress civil liberties and attach the "presumption of guilt" onto Muslims through supervision, prosecution, and entry denial. Two government policies that can be classified as structurally "Islamophobic" are the PATRIOT Act, including all of its immigration regulations, and the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Policing as efforts to counter radicalisation (Beydoun, 2016).

Although the surveillance of American Muslims existed long before the events of 9/11, special monitoring by electronic surveillance has become a strategic foundation for countering terror in the US since the establishment of the DHS in 2002. The PATRIOT Act, which has become the basis and legal instrument that suppresses the civil liberties of Muslim groups, confirmed evidence of structured Islamophobia in US institutions. The lowering of standards that must be met to monitor, search, and confiscate individuals and their possessions is considered to be an overly damaging effect of PATRIOT Act on civil liberties, especially in regards to Arab and Muslim groups. In addition to the broadening of powers given to the authorities through the PATRIOT Act, a programme named the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) was formed in 2002, which specifically contained immigration rules that severely restricted Muslim immigrants, non-immigrants, and permanent residence groups. The NSEERS' "special provision" required the identification of fingerprints and of male adolescents from 25 countries that, apart from North Korea, are all Muslim-majority or Arab countries. The sanction, if a rejection to comply with the data collection occurred, was the deportation of the individual to his/her country of origin. Although the NSEERS has since been annulled, both the PATRIOT Act and the NSEERS are

clear examples of the existence of structural Islamophobia within US institutions (Beydoun, 2016).

Recently, the fear of radicalisation in Muslim groups has become an issue and a major part constituting Islamophobia. The development of a counter-radicalisation or de-radicalisation programme has also emerged and become a major part of structural Islamophobia in the US government. As was in previous regulations, CVE policing is also a programme that targets American Muslims, and involves collaboration between DHS, local law enforcers, and informants from communities. The practice of CVE policing itself is considered to be the “most nefarious” part of US structural Islamophobia because it strongly suppresses the freedom of American Muslims from their rights to exercise freedom of religion and speech as well as rights of privacy. By stigmatising Islam as an inherently extremist religion, any Muslim who appears to practice their religion became a highly suspected individual and is monitored as a “presumptive radical.” As with various other regulations in the US government agencies and bodies, CVE policing is also built on the assumption that the Muslim identity and its expression are a sign of radicalisation, and is built on the growing structural assumption fallacy that the Muslim identity is closely related to terrorism (Beydoun, 2016).

## 2. Developing the International Norm of “War on Terror”

In maintaining its security and stability both nationally and internationally, following the 9/11 attacks, the US tried to develop an international norm and perspective regarding the War on Terror by inviting all countries to collaborate with the US in the fight against terrorism. This was certainly laden with the national interests of the US itself since it needed another “enemy” after the Cold War. The “us” versus “them” mentality became a kind of ideology for policymakers in the US. So far, the US has found no rival in many ways, though some view China as a threat. However, China does not meet the criteria that the US wants. To create a global society, a global threat was needed, and Islam, with all its effects, geographic reach, and differences, among others, was deemed to fit the criteria required by the US. Finally, US policymakers made Islam a new actor at the security level, especially after the Cold War (Shipoli, 2018).

There is a general consensus among foreign policy analysts that promoting democracy is the goal of US involvement in world affairs, but there is also consensus that US foreign policy changed after 9/11. The influence of Islamophobia in US government policy and foreign policy is enormous. During the election campaign, the candidates did not try to hide their views on Muslims and even questioned Muslims' loyalty to America, as well as their ability to work normally. When they (the candidates) were elected, even though some did not share these suspicions openly, others dared to do so. This reflects not only in how they deal with Muslims in America, but also with Muslim-majority countries and the extent to which US foreign policymakers can trust Muslims (Shipoli, 2018).

In the perspective of realism, when a country such as the United States strives hard to popularise the idea of a War on Terror as a moral movement in order to protect the safety (human rights) of civilians, in fact, this notion can be understood as an effort to achieve national interests in a security context. The perspective of realism puts the idea of an "international War on Terror movement" as an instrument to achieve the interests of international relations actors. Meanwhile, in the constructivism framework, the development of the War on Terror's norm, with human rights and freedom issue, have been utilised as a basis for the international movement against terrorism. Common ideas related to human values become a strong issue so that a common identity for countries to fight terrorism can be built (Kusuma & Muhammad, 2019).

The direction of United States policy shows somewhat striking changes that resulted from the 9/11 attacks. The Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR) issued by the US Department of Defense at the end of September 2001 showed a major change in the orientation of defense policy objectives. There are four policies (defense policy goals) recorded in the report: 1) Assuring allies and friends; 2) Dissuading future military competition; 3) Deterring threats and coercion against United States interests; and 4) If the deterrence fails, decisively defeating any adversary. In the QDR 2001 report, the US also reiterated that the purpose of the armed forces is to protect and enhance national interests, and if the deterrence strategy fails, it must be able to fight against threats to these interests (Department of Defense USA, 2001).

The military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were initiated after 9/11 as the realisation of the war against terrorism, are not only seen as efforts to safeguard US national interests but also as a form of power display to show that the US is still the influential superpower of the world that can maintain international security and order. This behaviour can be related to the end of the Cold War period, where the collapse of the Soviet Union later gave rise to the US as a superpower in the international world. For this reason, the momentum of military operations after 9/11 was strategically used by the US to show its military strength to the international community as well as an effort to reaffirm the view that the US is a superpower that was yet to be matched. In fact, the US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq showed a change in the country's method to hegemonise the world, which was initially soft and political to a "hard" approach (Kusuma & Muhammad, 2019).

### **Islamophobia: Challenges of the American Muslims**

The history of Islamophobic thought began in the era of European colonialism. The form of dislike, hatred, and fear by Western people towards Islam peaked after the 9/11, the attack of the millennia that tore down the World Trade Centre, which was an icon of the United States economy, and killed nearly 3000 people. Bahravesh in Zulian (2019) states that parties that have a direct interest in campaigning the narrative of Islam as a cruel and inhuman religion spread it all over the world. Surrounded by this narrative, European and American citizens in particular slowly started to believe in this narrative and became campaigners themselves in the attempt to spread Islamophobia (Zulian, 2019). Living as a Muslim in America is certainly not easy because the negative view of Islam by Western people has been ingrained and rooted for a long time, and reached its climax after the 9/11.

Islamophobia that was not an extension of the 9/11 terrorist attacks emerged more intensely during and after President Obama's election. A newsreport released in the US entitled "Anti-Muslim Activities in the United States" tracked approximately 757 incidents of violence, threats, and discrimination at the local level across the US (Bazian, 2018). In line with Bazian, according to Kishi (2017), the number of attacks against



Muslims in the United States increased significantly between 2015 and 2016, even surpassing the peak that occurred in 2001 after the 9/11.

The increase in discrimination against Muslims is caused by many factors. According to Gallup (2011), the US government has identified more than 160 Muslim-American terrorist suspects and perpetrators in the decade since the 9/11, and their cases were covered by media and received national attention. Apart from the media, other important factors have led to an increase in discriminatory acts due to Islamophobia in the US. According to Bazian (2018), the emergence of the thesis “Clash of Civilisations” also contributed significantly to the rise of Islamophobia in the state. This thesis allows the state, the right-wing counter-jihadist movement, the neoconservative movement, a sizable segment of the transnational Zionist movement, and various liberal groups that include the pro-war left and the new atheist movement to unleash a barrage of Islamophobic discourse in order to rationalise the new world order and assure their central role in it. Thus, Islamophobia became an ideological policy channel in which international and domestic alliances and coalitions are formed, and where participants use Islam and Muslim subjectivity as an effort to structure their various political, economic, and military interests.

All the forces mentioned produced materials to saturate political circles, media coverage, and public discourses to the exclusion or marginalisation of the voices that are not committed to this framing. The case of Islamophobia is the same as the way that the anti-communist and Cold War period produced horizontal and vertical domestic and international alliances and forces committed to the policy. The “Clash of Civilisations” thesis is a very narrow, simple, and a one-dimensional view of post-Cold War conflicts in the contemporary world. The world has been far more complex and fluid all along. In effect, Huntington’s thesis attempts to define and reduce the sources of conflicts to simply cultural differences between peoples. (Bazian, 2018, p. 7)

Discrimination against American Muslims due to Islamophobia is a major challenge that must be faced. Data from the FBI Hate Crime Statistics released in 2018 described several forms of hate crimes (biased crimes), which contain several data on anti-Muslim crimes within it. It

is noted that in the category of incidents and offenses committed based on religious bias, as recorded by law enforcement, the anti-Muslim sentiment came in second at 14.5%. Similarly, in the category of victim reporting records, Muslim victims ranked second with a percentage of 14.6%. These two categories with similar percentages illustrate that almost one in five victims of crimes related to religious bias affect American Muslims. This is a large percentage, considering that American Muslims are a small minority group compared to other religious groups in America (Criminal Justice Information Services Division, 2018).

Incidents, Offenses, Victims, and Known Offenders by Bias Motivation, 2018				
<i>Bias motivation</i>	<i>Incidents</i>	<i>Offenses</i>	<i>Victims</i>	<i>Known offenders</i>
<b>Religion:</b>	<b>1,419</b>	<b>1,550</b>	<b>1,617</b>	<b>917</b>
Anti-Jewish	835	896	920	484
Anti-Catholic	53	59	63	36
Anti-Protestant	34	38	39	22
Anti-Islamic (Muslim)	188	225	236	153
Anti-Other Religion	91	96	109	60
Anti-Multiple Religions, Group	46	50	52	18
Anti-Mormon	9	9	11	8
Anti-Jehovah's Witness	9	9	9	4
Anti-Eastern Orthodox (Russian, Greek, Other)	31	32	33	26
Anti-Other Christian	35	42	43	25
Anti-Buddhist	10	10	11	9
Anti-Hindu	12	14	14	10
Anti-Sikh	60	64	69	49
Anti-Atheism/Agnosticism/etc.	6	6	8	13

**Figure 1:** United States FBI Hate Crime Statistics 2018

Source: Criminal Justice Information Service Division, 2018

The United States public is generally aware that religious discrimination does occur in the country and they admit that a high percentage is affecting Muslim groups. In a survey conducted on the American general public, 82% of respondents stated that Muslims in the US are experiencing discrimination, whereas 57% of them believed that discriminations against Muslims are occurring at a very high level (PEW Research Center, 2017).

In recent years, since the presidential campaign period and later Trump's victory as President of the United States, American Muslims have faced more challenges with growing issues of immigrant restrictions and anti-Muslim sentiments. The results of a survey from the PEW Research Center in 2017 presented a portrait of concerns that reside within the Muslim community under President Trump's

leadership. The results showed that 75% felt high discrimination against the Muslim community, 68% felt concerned regarding Donald Trump as an individual in his role as President, and 62% of Muslims felt that the American society do not view Muslim groups in America as part of the general public. One out of two respondents (50%) also felt that in recent years, the difficulty of being a Muslim in America has increased. One Muslim man who was part of the survey said the following:

Ultraconservative Trump supporters now have a larger voice that was suppressed just years ago, and now they're really allowed to make heard what they think about Muslims and minorities in general. So it's a lot of tensions have been rising and fears that we're going backward. (PEW Research Center, 2017)

In the same survey, about half of American Muslims also said that they had experienced direct discrimination in recent time to when the survey was conducted, with nearly a third (32%) who felt they have been treated with suspicion because of their religion, one in five (19%) who experienced discrimination by airport security, one in five (18%) who experienced verbal abuse, 10% who experienced discrimination from law enforcement, and 6% who received threats and physical attacks (PEW Research Center, 2017).

The Institute of Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) in 2019 released the results of a poll related to American Muslims entitled "Predicting and Preventing Islamophobia," in which part of the report contains data on Islamophobia in particular. The report shows that, in general, individuals who are connected to or know a Muslim have lower levels of Islamophobia. Of the respondents who were close to a Muslim, 57% of them had a favourable view of Muslims, 10% had a negative view, and 33% stated that they had no particular opinion. Meanwhile, for respondents who were somewhat close to Muslims, 47% of them had a favourable view of Muslims, 20% had a negative view, and 33% stated that they had no particular opinion. As for respondents who did not know Muslims, only 21% had a favourable view of Muslims, 26% have a negative view, and more than half (54%) stated that they had no particular opinion. So, it can be concluded that the more connection and interaction exist between non-Muslims and Muslims in America, the

better the views that the non-Muslims will have towards the American Muslims (Mogahed & Mahmood, 2019).

Amongst the people of faith or religious believers themselves, between White Evangelicals, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and those who claim not to be affiliated with one of the religions mentioned (non-affiliated), White Evangelicals have the highest level of Islamophobia, followed by Protestants, Catholics, non-affiliated, Jews, and Muslims. There are two interesting findings from the ISPU poll. The first is that Jews have the lowest level of Islamophobia, apart from Muslims themselves. This then brings us to the second interesting finding, which is on the existence of Islamophobia amongst Muslims themselves, whose value is not far from the level of Islamophobia from the Jews (Mogahed & Mahmood, 2019).

This phenomenon is often termed as “internalised Islamophobia”, which is Islamophobia penetrated the Muslims themselves. This may have developed due to repeated religious-based bullying or stigmatisation of Islam in the media, which led some Muslims to unconsciously accept various negative stereotypes regarding Islam and Muslims. This phenomenon is one of the most important and surprising findings from the ISPU research, as stated by the ISPU Research Director, Dalia Mogahed:

One of the most important and surprising findings we got in this study was the degree to which Muslims have themselves internalised negative stereotypes about their own community. That does underscore the power of the media and political rhetoric that day in and day out paints a narrative of Muslims in a certain way, that Muslims themselves are not immune to adopting that idea. (Abdelaziz, 2018)

### **Educational and Employment Opportunities**

The United States is often seen as a country that offers promising educational and employment opportunities. Many immigrants come from various countries because they are tempted by these promising opportunities. However, what does the Muslim minority community achieve in America in terms of education and employment? Data from the results of the PEW Research Center survey in 2017, releases from

the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (US EEOC), as well as studies from some research journals are used in this discussion to describe the educational and employment opportunities for the Muslim population in the US.

Data on the level of education of the Muslim population that are contained in the 2017 PEW Research Center report were compared using three variables: the Muslim population born in America, the Muslim population born outside America (foreign-born), and the American general population. The results of this survey, which was conducted in 2016 and 2017, showed that the level of those with an undergraduate education (college degree and graduate degree) from the Muslim population groups (both American-born and foreign-born) is similar to that of the American general population (31%). This indicates that there is a similar level of education between the Muslim population and the American general population. However, when referred specifically to the immigrant Muslim population (foreign-born), the data showed that this group had a higher percentage of undergraduate education level (38%) than American-born Muslims (21%) (PEW Research Center, 2017). This may be due to the skilled migrant policy in which the US gives preference to immigrants with certain skills and levels of education.

Although the percentage value of the education levels between the Muslim population and the American general population is similar, this is not the case with job opportunities. Data from the same PEW Research Survey showed that the Muslim population has a higher percentage of unemployment than the general population. The number of adult Muslims with full-time jobs did not even reach half of the total Muslim population that were being surveyed, with a percentage of only 44%. A total of 28% of the Muslim population were still looking for work, of which 10% were already working part-time and seeking a full-time job, while 18% were jobless and seeking a job. Meanwhile, among the American general population, only 12% were still looking for work, of which 6% were working part-time and seeking a full-time job, while 6% were jobless and seeking a job (PEW Research Center, 2017).

When analysing the social structure of the Muslim population in America, data on the size of income is also important because it has an impact on the experience and social life of individuals. Data released by the PEW Research Center divided the income level into five, with the

lowest level for annual income being below USD30,000 and the highest level for annual income being above USD100,000. For the lowest income level, the percentage of Muslims was higher (40%) than the percentage of the American general population (32%). However, for the next three income levels, Muslims had a lower percentage, amounting to 35%, compared to the American general population, which had a total of 45% at the next three levels. Interestingly, for the highest income level, the Muslim population had a similar percentage to the American general population, namely 24% for the former and 23% for the latter (PEW Research Center, 2017).

This finding regarding the high percentage of American Muslims with the highest income level is indeed very interesting and is in stark contrast with what is often being presented, that is, Muslims being less educated and of the middle social class. It is also important to note that at this highest income level, the percentage of Muslim immigrants (foreign-born) is higher than that of American-born Muslims. This finding parallels the level of education described earlier. What is also interesting is that even though, on average, the percentage of Muslims who are in low-income levels is higher than that of the American general population, the level of satisfaction in financial stability among the Muslim population is on a level that is more or less similar to that of ordinary Americans.

Based on the analyses of education, employment opportunities, and income levels described above, it can be concluded that even though, on average, American Muslims have achieved a level of education that is similar to that of the American general population, both in terms of employment opportunities and income levels, the Muslim population are below the level of the American general population. This could be an indication of the presence of discrimination in terms of equal employment opportunities. The US EEOC released official data regarding the filing of prosecution in cases of discrimination in employment based on Islam as well as the percentage compared to cases based on all religions in general. Figure 2 below contains data per fiscal year from 2001 to 2017 (October 1, 2000, to September 30, 2017).

<b>Religion-Based Charges Filed from 10/01/2000                      through 9/30/2011 Showing Percentage Filed on the                      Basis of Religion-Muslim</b>			
Fiscal Year	Total Religion Charges	Muslim Religion	% Religion Muslim
FY2001	2,127	330	15.50%
FY2002	2,572	720	28.00%
FY2003	2,532	598	23.60%
FY2004	2,466	504	20.40%
FY2005	2,340	507	21.70%
FY2006	2,541	593	23.30%
FY2007	2,880	606	21.00%
FY2008	3,273	668	20.40%
FY2009	3,386	804	23.70%
FY2010	3,790	796	21.00%
FY2011	4,151	884	21.30%
FY2012	3,811	780	20.50%
FY 2013	3,721	721	21.60%
FY 2014	3,549	754	21.20%
FY 2015	3,502	708	20.20%
FY 2016	3,825	1,071	28.00%
FY 2017	3,436	802	23.30%

**Figure 2:** Religion-based Charges Filed on the Basis of Religion: Islam  
 Source: U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.

Some conclusions that can be drawn from the data release are as follows:

1. The lowest number of employment discrimination cases based on Islam occurred in the fiscal year 2001 before the 9/11 attacks. This fiscal year is the only year from the available data where the percentage of discrimination in employment based on Islam is below 20 percent (15.5%).
2. After the 9/11 attacks, from the fiscal years 2002 to 2017, discrimination in employment based on Islam was always above 20%, with the highest percentage occurring in the fiscal year 2002 (fiscal year right after the 9/11 attack) and in the fiscal year 2016, where it reached 28%. For the record, the 2016 fiscal year was a campaign year for the United States presidential election, which resulted in the election of President Donald Trump, who is known to have aggressively campaigned for values that are considered to be of white supremacist and also for his policies that are not pro-Muslim since the beginning of his office.

3. The average percentage value of job discrimination based on Islam was between 20% and 28%, which is considered to be a very large percentage considering that the Muslim population in the United States itself only accounts for around 1.1% of the total population (PEW, 2018).
4. The percentage of discrimination in the range of between 20% and 28% also illustrates that one in five cases of religion-based workplace discrimination in the United States occurred against Muslims.

Several cases reported by the US EEOC also illustrate in more detail the form of workplace discrimination experienced by Muslims in the United States. Two cases of discrimination that occurred in 2012 and 2013 respectively were experienced by Muslim women who were employed at the ABM Security Service and Abercrombie & Fitch, where they are fired from their jobs on the grounds of wearing a headscarf. During the sentencing for the Abercrombie & Fitch case, the judge stated that “dismissal of a job on the basis of wearing a headscarf/*khimar* is illegal”. At the time the report was published, Abercrombie & Fitch’s company had received three prosecution cases that occurred at different times and at different branches related to discrimination against workers who wore headscarves/*khimar*. Workplace discrimination occurs not only to Muslim women or due to the wearing of the headscarf, but also to Muslim men. Swift Aviation was fined USD50,000 for ignoring the religious and racial discrimination experienced by a Muslim man in the company. The humiliation, discrimination, and bullying that were targeted at the Muslim male employee were continuous and his reports regarding these discrimination acts to the company were also ignored until he became depressed and was forced to quit his job (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2013).

Workplace discrimination affects many Muslims in America. One study that conducted a statistical analysis of complaints of religious discrimination filed through the US EEOC stated in its conclusion that “although Muslims make up less than 2 percent of the United States population, they accounted for about one-quarter of the 3,386 religious discrimination charges filed with the EEOC” in 2010 (Goodwin, Chenhall & Bilbrey, 2015, p. 8). The same study also showed that “the number of religious discrimination complaints filed by Muslims has increased at a higher rate than the other religious affiliations listed in this



study” (Goodwin, Chenhall & Bilbrey, 2015, p. 9). In other studies that examined the impact of wearing the headscarf on job opportunities, the researchers concluded that “Hijabis were less likely than non-Hijabis to expect job offers for all occupations, regardless of status or public contact” (Ghumman & Jackson, 2010, p. 17).

## **The Role of American Muslim Intellectual Organisations**

### *Zaytuna College*

In 2009, Zaytuna College was founded in Berkeley, California, with a mission to equip its students with Islamic scientific traditions and cultures, as well as critical ideas that shape the modern society. In March 2015, Zaytuna College obtained an accreditation from the Association of Western Schools and Colleges and became the first accredited Muslim campus in the United States (Zaytuna College, n.d.). The city of California is currently home to many Muslim-based groups (Massoud & Moore, 2015). Before becoming a college, it was an institution that was founded by Hamza Yusuf in 1996. The founders of Zaytuna College are: 1) Shaykh Hamza Yusuf Hanson, a white American-born convert; 2) Ricky “Imam Zaid Shakir” Mitchell, an African-American Muslim, and; 3) Prof. Hatem Bazian, an American citizen of Palestinian descent. Hamza Yusuf is one of the most influential Muslim figures in the US and is included in the list of “The Muslim 500”, which is an annual list of influential Muslims compiled by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Amman, Jordan.

Zaytuna College not only expresses the discursive tradition of Islam but also expresses the critical imaginations of the people who use Islamic epistemology to frame and define a multiracial future as a social justice project and practice (Kashani, 2014). Hamza Yusuf tries to familiarise American Muslims with a mode of Islamic practice that emphasises on self-cultivation by strengthening on their compatibility with Islamic traditions through the revitalisation movement. At different levels, three other Muslim American thinkers, namely Yasmin Mogahed, Suhaib Webb, and Yasir Qadhi, have spread similar ideas to the US Muslim population. These figures have offered expressions of Islamic thought and practice that focus on spirituality and efforts to cleanse the heart.

In doing so, they have succeeded in attracting the attention of many American Muslims in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hannini, 2016). Zaytuna College has successfully published the scientific journal *Renovatio*, an Islamic journal that discusses ideas that have shaped our world in the past and the present.

Zaytuna College often conducts interfaith dialogues to establish mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the true teachings of Islam. The expertise of Zaytuna figures in regards to the Islamic scientific tradition allows dialogues to be carried out confidently without the feeling of inferiority. Additionally, there are also programmes on environmental issues that are conducted in collaboration with non-Muslims through organisations, such as the Habitat for Humanity, and state forest departments (Challet, 2015). In regards to the issue of terrorism and radicalism, Hamza Yusuf has specifically warned Muslims against the danger of ISIS in his lecture entitled “The Crisis of ISIS”. The ISIS group itself has declared Hamza Yusuf an apostate because of his criticism of the attack on the French newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, in January 2005 (Abedin, 2019; Hassan, 2017).

Zaytuna College intellectual figures have played an active role in global issues such as: 1) Hamza Yusuf was invited by then-President George W. Bush before the invasion of Iraq and advised the President not to carry out the attack mission. President Bush refused to cancel the invasion, but the name of his operation has been changed. 2) In 2014, Hamza Yusuf founded a forum to promote peace in the Muslim community. 3) Along with other human rights experts, Hamza Yusuf was appointed to the US Human Rights Panel in 2019 to provide advice on human rights and how it relates to the US foreign policy. 4) Hatem Bazian founded the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project at the University of California (UC) Berkeley in 2009 and is also the founder and director of the International Consortium for the Study of Islamophobia.

### *AlMaghrib Institute*

AlMaghrib Institute is an example of how an educational institute established in a Muslim-minority country is able to develop and become an institute that serves and is utilised by Muslims globally, even in the Western world and Muslim-majority countries such as

Malaysia. Founded in the state of Houston, Texas, in 2002, this institute has become one of the largest institutes for Islamic Studies in North America. Through its online teaching system, AlMaghrib also has the flexibility to access teachers from various countries who individually have been recognised for their credibility by the Muslim community from various countries. The offline education centres of AlMaghrib Institute itself can also be found in Canada, England, and Malaysia. AlMaghrib Institute's thematic events and seminars have also been held in more than 40 countries, including Australia, Sweden, and Denmark. AlMaghrib Institute has the vision to become the largest and most useful Islamic learning system, where knowledge taught by the institute can enter various countries around the world and can be accessed anywhere by those who want to understand Islam more deeply.

AlMaghrib Institute is chaired by a Muslim scholar who is well known among Muslim Americans, Dr. Yasir Qadhi. Yasir Qadhi grew up in the US and has an engineering background, but decided to change the course of his education and focus more on Islamic studies. He completed his Islamic studies in Medina and continued his doctoral studies at Yale University, becoming one of the few people who have a combined background of knowledge and learning experiences from both the West and the Islamic world. As a prominent figure, special coverage of him was broadcasted on the PBS TV channel in the programme *Finding Your Roots*. In 2011, *The New York Times Magazine* did a profile of him, calling him "one of the most influential conservative clerics in American Islam" (Elliot, 2011). Similar to Hamza Yusuf, Yasir Qadhi is also one of the Muslim scholars in the United States who received a death threat and was also deemed an apostate by ISIS due to his criticism of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* (Abedin, 2019; Hassan, 2017).

Yasir Qadhi is also a member of the Fiqh Council of North America, a body that issues *fatwa* on various public and social issues, including the *fatwa* statement on fossil fuel divestment that was released by the Fiqh Council of North America as a form of encouragement for the Muslim population to play a more active role in reducing natural damage caused by fossil fuels (Financing The Future, 2019). Although he once leaned towards the Salafi Islamic movement, which tends to be rigid and firm, since leaving it, he argued, "You can't be radical against your own people. You can have differences of opinion, but you will

have to express them in a civilised manner, because this is your society, your culture” (O’Leary, 2009).

### *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research (YIIR) is a non-profit organisation that focuses on the issues of Islamophobia, Islamic belief, and the contribution of Islam. These three main focuses are reflected in the organisation’s motto, which is “dismantling doubts (what is not Islam), fostering faith (what is Islam), inspiring contributions (what Islam does)” (Yaqeen Institute, n.d.).

All the materials and content from the Yaqeen Institute can be accessed free of charge through its website, which not only contains Islamic material in written, audio, and video forms, but also contains toolkits for Islamic studies and discussions. Not limiting to only its own website, YIIR is also active on other online platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

In addition to discussing on issues of fundamental beliefs in Islam to fight the rise of atheism and agnosticism in the Muslim community, YIIR also discusses various contemporary issues and accepts contributions in the form of writing from many Muslim researchers on many aspects of Islam, including discussions of contemporary issues. However, articles that can provide answers to questions about Islam - particularly those that raise doubts in the minds of Muslims or issues that are important to maintain the Islamic faith - remains the main focus of YIIR’s academic research path.

The key figure of YIIR is Omar Suleiman, a Muslim scholar who is not only active in theological-based activities but also in various humanitarian, anti-racism, and civil rights activities. Apart from being the founder and President of YIIR, he is also the founder of the non-profit organization MUHSEN (Muslims Understanding and Helping Special Education Needs), an Islamic organisation that focuses on people with special needs. Omar Suleiman is also an Adjunct Professor at Southern Methodist University, a resident scholar at Valley Ranch Islamic Center, and an advisor to several Muslim financial groups and donation organisations. He is also active in many interfaith works and serves as a Co-Chair Emeritus of Faith Forward Dallas at Thanks-

Giving Square, which is an interfaith coalition for religious leaders for peace and justice. Additionally, he is one of the founders of the East Jefferson Interfaith Clergy Association.

Through his active work in community service, he has received a number of awards, including the Outstanding Civic Achievement from the state government of New Orleans, and an award from The Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University and Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives. Apart from being on the list of the “25 Muslim American Change Makers” released by CNN, he is also included in the list of “The Muslim 500” alongside Hamza Yusuf (“Omar Soleiman,” 2020). His writings and interviews have been published in various media, including CNN, Al Jazeera, *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, *HuffPost*, and *The Dallas Morning News*.

Omar Suleiman’s humanitarian activities have led him to become involved in many advocacy actions for migrants, demonstrations against immigration policies, and the anti-racism movement “Black Lives Matter” (“Imam Omar Suleiman: He got Arrested on Capitol Hill,” 2018). Due to his participation in conducting and voicing on various contemporary issues, in March 2017, ISIS released a video that called for his assassination. Perhaps, Omar Suleiman’s belief in the importance of active Muslim involvement as a way to change the condition and narrative of Islamophobia that exists in society is reflected in one of YIIR’s statement: “Telling our own story is the only way to counter the narrative that has been forced on our community” (“Imam Omar Suleiman: He got Arrested on Capitol Hill,” 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Seeing the dynamics of Muslims in America, especially with the latest socio-political conditions due to COVID-19 as well as the demonstration movements that have occurred throughout America, it appears that Muslims in America still need to bear the issue of Islamophobia with its related physical and psychological threats. They will also need to face the ideological and intellectual challenges to revitalise the Islamic teachings so that Islam can be properly understood by the American society and not be hijacked by radical Islamic groups or anti-Islamic movements. Through international and domestic alliances and coalitions, the issue of Islamophobia has indeed become a tool for ideological-based policies

that fraudulently use Islam and Muslims as reasons to formulate various political, economic, and military interests of the alliance. Additionally, it is also an intellectual challenge that needs to be corrected as necessary, particularly when the issue of Islamophobia and discrimination against American Muslims is included in the framework of racism since Islam is not a race.

The present time is an opportunity for American Muslims to socialise and practice the concept of true Islamic tolerance in American society. Islam has universal values that are compatible with any nation in the world, including the United States. However, it also has distinctive values that should only be applied to its followers and should not be imposed on those outside of Islam. Opportunities for American Muslims to gain higher education and careers in various fields remain wide open because the contribution of Muslim intellectuals and Muslim communities to the American society has always been present and cannot be denied.

Muslim intellectuals and their organisations in America have played significant roles, especially in the field of education and research, and have played an impact on various issues, both domestically and globally. In the future, Muslims intellectuals in the US who currently tend to unite and work together must intensify their research and education programmes as well as consolidate various Muslim communities in the US. Unemployment among Muslim Americans can arise due to discrimination and the low level of education among Muslims, especially African-American Muslims where the majority have a high school level of education or below. Meanwhile, concerning geopolitics, specifically in reference to the “decline” of American influence and the rise of China’s new power, various US domestic and foreign policies that respond to it are hoped to impact the Muslim communities positively, since the US may try to re-embrace Islamic countries to support its existence as a superpower nation at the international level.

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# **A Study Of Dosteo Bisaka’s Contribution To The “Faith Of Unity” Religious Movement In Western Uganda**

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**Abstract:** This study attempts to discuss the emergence of a new religious movement in Uganda called Faith of Unity (FoU). The goal of this paper is to explore why and how FoU emerged and became a dominant religion in Uganda. This study is crucial because it reveals the various approaches of Dosteo Bisaka (the founder of FoU) and his contributions to FoU. It highlights the vision of FoU and identifies the factors that contributed to forming FoU as one of the dominant religious movements in Uganda. The research follows both descriptive and analytical approaches while addressing the topic. It finds FoU to be a suitable example of a new religion in the African contour - albeit having many similarities with Christianity - that emerged as a response to the destitution caused by colonialism in African societies. Last but not least, this paper acknowledges various challenges in studying FoU.

**Keywords:** Politics, Imagined Communities, Imagined Geography, Muslims, Sri Lanka, Identity Crisis.

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## **Introduction to New Religious Movement in Uganda**

Africa in the last 20 to 30 years has been a booming place and has witnessed the birth and massive explosion of what is currently referred to as new religious movements. Many movements claiming to present “new” religious orientations have emerged and continue to emerge on the continent, attracting huge numbers of followers. Although there is no consensus among scholars on whether such movements fall under the rubric of religion or whether the term “new religious movement” is a proper designation, it has been preferred as a neutral term to “cult” or “sect”. “Cult” - which comes from the Latin word *cultus* that literally means “care” - has been mostly used in a derogatory and pejorative sense to refer to any group, whether religious or not, that is seen as marginal and dangerous and whose aim is to exploit the gullible masses (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979; Bromley & Melton, 2002). “Sect”, on the other hand, is mostly used to refer to any organised religious group that breaks away from a parent mainstream religion. The group’s breakaway is seen as a form of protest or call for a return to the original true religion. Such groups are usually regarded as heresies and accused of apostasy by their parent religions (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979; Stark & Finke, 2000). The fact that these terms bear negative and pejorative connotations have driven scholars to settle for the term “new religious movement”, which is more neutral even though there is still no consensus on its definition and what the boundaries of such movements are.

Although new religious movements in Africa share a number of traits and reasons for their emergence, they differ in their attributes, the different shades and articulations they present themselves in, their visions and worldviews, their doctrines and beliefs, their rituals and practices, their leadership and organisation, their sizes and ways in which they recruit members as well as their attitudes towards other religions. This is perhaps the reason why there is no agreed upon term under which to designate them. They are regarded new because they are of recent origin; they emerged mostly after the Second World War and present themselves as being different from prevailing mainstream religions and cultures. They are posited under the rubric of religion because “they profess to offer a vision of the religious or sacred world, or means to reach other objectives such as transcendental knowledge, spiritual illumination, or self-realisation, or because they offer to their adherents answers to fundamental questions” (Ndeda, 2013, p. 34). They offer

innovative religious solutions to problems facing modern societies and the world at large; solutions they regard that mainstream religions are unable to or fail to offer. Indeed, the many political, economic, social, spiritual and cultural disruptions and crises in postcolonial Africa led many Africans to look for answers. While Africans are "notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1969) and religion penetrates through all aspects of their lives, they turned to religion to find answers. When mainstream religions could not provide them with solutions to their crises, new religious movements appear with "good news" and answers to their life problems.

It is difficult to single out one main cause for the emergence and development of new religious movements on the African continent in general and Uganda in particular. In all their diversity, they have emerged and continue to emerge as responses to various challenges. Two theories, however, may sum up the reasons for their emergence and development in Africa: the deprivation theory and sacral trauma. The common denominator underlying these theories, as many scholars have pointed out, has been a catalyst to the emergence of new religions in Africa in one way or another: colonialism and its negative long-term effects on all aspects of African lives. The deprivation theory was first presented by H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), who saw the rise of new sects and denominations in Western Christianity as a result of social forces such as politics, economics and racism (Niebuhr, 1992; Glock, 2018). Members of the Church who are less privileged and lack economic, social and political power become easily attracted to join sects because the latter provides solace and offer support for personal and social prosperity. Similarly, new religious movements attract deprived members of the society by offering religious solutions, a new way of life filled with hope, answers to their powerlessness and also a way to redress their grievances through the garb of religion.

Sacral trauma, on the other hand, was the theory used by Kaczynski (2012) to explain the emergence of new religions in Africa. The disruptions of African spirituality and worldview caused by modernisation and clashes between African and foreign cultures led to the emergence of new religious movements calling for a return to the African way of life (Kaczynski, 2012). While some of these new religious movements emerge as a response to the threats that the presence of foreign religions pose to their African way of life and aim to restore

and preserve their indigenous religious beliefs and practices, others also seek to rehabilitate African traditional religions in new forms that are relevant to present and future contexts (Kaczynski, 2012). These movements have appealed to many Africans and have gained large followers across the continent because they seem to provide immediate remedies to many of the people's problems.

In post-independence Uganda, the negative effects of colonialism and numerous civil wars and struggles for power that followed after independence led to the inadequate and sometimes total absence of proper social, economic and political structures, leaving the country in a state of turmoil and uncertainty. Societies lost hope and became vulnerable and ready to accept any message that appeared to offer answers and solutions to their life problems. In such a midst, many new religious movements appeared on the Ugandan religious scene. Some of these were partly-religious partly-political movements<sup>3</sup> (Tinkasiimire, 2004; Cline, 2003; Behrend, 2011; Turyomumazima, 2005; Mayer, 2001). They presented themselves as offering new hope for the people and satisfying not only the latter's spiritual needs but also healing their social, cultural and political wounds. They reached out mostly to the deprived and marginalised people and offered them a sense of belonging. They also offered to provide instant remedies to the political and economic struggles of marginalised societies. The Lord's Resistance Army and The Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena, for example, presented themselves as spirit-led movements that want to establish democracy, promote nationalism and rule the country in accordance with the Ten Commandments of God. They appealed to many marginalised groups who did not agree with the government's ideology and policies. More importantly, these new movements offered emotional and spiritual satisfaction and immediate answers and solutions to most of the problems their members faced. Members could freely go to them whenever they searched for answers to their failure and suffering in life, material and spiritual needs as well as protection from the evils of the world they lived in. They could find instant solutions to many such

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<sup>3</sup> Movements such as The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, The Marian Workers of the Laity, The Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena, The Group of Mr Anatoli Ssentamu, in Masaka, Central Uganda, The Lord's Resistance Army, World Message Last Warning and many others.

problems, especially through the psychological and physical healing offered by these movements. These movements also offered vision and hope and new perspectives about life and the meaning of existence. They provided a place and space where members easily felt at home and fulfilled their need to practice righteousness, a gap which their previous religious affiliations had failed to fulfill (Welbourn & Ogot, 1966).

Statistics show that in the 1970s, those who identified as following religions other than the state-recognised religions of Islam, Anglicanism and Catholicism constituted 0.7% of the total population of Uganda (Turyomumazima, 2005). This was attributed to the then-President Idi Amin Dada who, it was claimed, suppressed and cracked down on all religions that were not recognised by the state (Turyomumazima, 2005). With the coming of the current government in 1986 and the declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Constitution, the religious terrain in Uganda witnessed the emergence of many new religious movements, with several flourishing in some cases, while several others disappearing as quickly as they had emerged. Although some of these new religious movements have been associated with violence of political and religious nature,<sup>4</sup> an increasing number of them have been continuously appearing and attracting huge numbers of followers. The current census puts those who are affiliated with religions other than traditional religion, Islam and Christianity (with all their denominations) at 1.4% of the total population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The Faith of Unity religion (henceforth known as FoU) is one such new religious movements that emerged in Uganda in the past few decades. It is claimed that contrary to the widespread belief that Pentecostal Christianity and Islam are the fastest-growing religions in Africa, FoU is the fastest-growing religion in Uganda, with members spread across the whole of the Great Lakes Region of Africa (Ukah, 2018 & 2019). This paper aims to reveal the contribution of Dosteo Bisaka to FoU and examine the leading factors that made FoU popular to the common people.

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<sup>4</sup> Such as The Lord's Resistance Army, whose leaders have been charged with many crimes, including abductions, killings and rape, among others. There is also The Movement for the Restoration of Ten Commandments of God, which caused the Kanungu massacre in 2000 where it is believed that more than 500 followers were burned to death.

## **Background and Formation of the Faith of Unity**

The primary source of all information about the founder, history, doctrines, rituals and practices of FoU is the founder himself, who wrote the religion's official scripture. FoU was founded by Dosteo Bisaka on February 22, 1980 in Kapyemi, a small village in Muhorro town in Kagadi District, which is located in the western part of Uganda, about 251 kilometers from the capital city of Kampala. Kagadi, together with five other districts, namely Buliisa, Kakumiro, Kiryandongo, Masindi and Hoima, make up the Bunyoro homeland whose population is estimated to be a little more than two million people (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Bunyoro is a rural area and most of its population practice and depend on agriculture and animal husbandry. The language spoken by the people of Bunyoro is Runyoro.

To properly understand the formation of FoU, it is important to understand the circumstances and context in which it emerged. The present-day Bunyoro was part of the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom, which was founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Bachwezi people. It was under a kingship system ruled by a king named Omukama of Bunyoro. As a vastly powerful, wealthy and prosperous kingdom, it dominated most parts of the Great Lakes Region of Africa until its decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was attributed to, among other factors, the arrival of European colonialists whose presence created conflicts. The confrontations between them and the kingdom rulers as well as with the rulers of neighboring kingdoms led to political instability, which eventually led to the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom's loss of power in the region (Dunbar, 1965; Shane, 2000; Okoth, 2006).

Before the arrival of European colonial missionaries, the people of Bunyoro Kitara practiced indigenous traditional religions that were inherited from their forefathers and passed onto their children. Their cultural and social identities were shaped by their beliefs and traditions and were a force of unity in the society since they brought communities together, both in times of happiness and sadness. When Christian missionaries arrived with their respective denominations, they were very evangelistic and propagated their religion with all their different denominations to the indigenous people, with each denomination aiming to win as many converts as they could. Not only that, they also came imposing their civilisation to indigenous people whose lives,



they claimed, were steeped in "barbaric" and "primitive" beliefs and traditions. They supplemented their missions with services such as education and medical aid to the indigenous people with the belief that such services would stop the latter from practicing their traditional beliefs and join the religion of the civilised service provider. While it is not denied that these services did indeed improve the lives of the indigenous people, the price the latter paid was too heavy. Their social, cultural and spiritual identities and almost entirely their way of life were changed because, for example, in order to become a Christian, one had to abandon all his traditional beliefs and customs and enter into a religion with a worldview and way of life that were totally different from the one he has known his entire life. In simple terms, one had to give up his identity and take on the identity of the "civilised" man in order to become a Christian. Also, the fact that these imported religions came in different denominations, with each denomination competing for converts, created conflicts, divisions, discrimination and sometimes even violence among followers of different groups.

Decades later, in post-independence Bunyoro, the seed had already been sown and communities visibly identified themselves according to the Christian missionaries and divisions based on religious affiliations. For example, as mentioned earlier, during the presidency of Idi Amin, all religions other than the state-recognised ones - which, as a matter of fact, were all imported foreign religions - were suppressed. Moreover, even those state-recognised religions were in constant conflict and competition for power. The country became divided along religious lines brought by foreign agents. It is also important to note that although post-independence Uganda saw a drastic decrease in the number of people associated with traditional indigenous beliefs and practices, not all those who embraced the foreign religions entirely abandoned their traditional beliefs and customs. Practices such as paying homage to Chwezi deities,<sup>5</sup> cannibalism and witchcraft remained rampant, especially in

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5 The Chwezi are believed to have been powerful figures who ruled and dominated the Great Lakes Region in the 14th and 15th centuries. When they died, their spirits were deified because they were believed to have possessed spiritual powers. People venerated them and began seeking their help in cases of uncertainties and also to cater for the wellbeing of individuals and communities. People in the Bunyoro region have continued going to them for good health, wealth, protection from calamities and general wellbeing.

the Bunyoro region. Behrend (2011) attributes the rise of such practices to modern Christianity and increased death rates caused by AIDS and local wars. She argues that although Christianity vehemently opposed practices such as witchcraft, Christian fundamentalist movements unintentionally gave rise to this practice since they recognised witchcraft as a form of Satanic power, which somewhat acknowledged its reality (Behrend, 2011). Also, the fact that Christianity denounced and condemned witchcraft but approved and recognised miracles did not help in stopping these practices because they could be perceived by some as a form of miracle (Behrend, 2011). Also, the region of Bunyoro, just as the rest of the country, equally suffered the consequences of the many civil wars that ravaged the country after independence, which led to the state's inability to provide basic services to citizens.

In the midst of all this, Dosteo Bisaka formed a new religion with which he sought to provide solutions to societies' predicaments. His main purpose was to bring back unity among the people, revitalise African spirituality and strengthen the African way of life that had been dispirited by foreign religions while, at the same time, be cognizant of the needs and requirements of the modern society by rehabilitating some of the indigenous African practices in new forms that are relevant to modern society. In the beginning, Bisaka presented FoU as an association with the official name in Runyoro language: *Itambiro ly'Omukama Ruhanga Owamahe Goona Ery'Obumu*, which loosely translates as "The Association for the Healing Place of God of All Armies" (Ukah, 2018, p. 141). He later changed its name to "Faith of Unity" and took Kapyemi as the official headquarters and the most sacred place for his new religion. The official scripture of FoU was written in Runyoro in 1985, five years after the formation of the religion, and two years later, the official English language translation was published.

### **Dosteo Bisaka: His Early Life, His Calling and Founding of New Religion**

The history of many of the world's great religious traditions shows that they were founded as a result of profound religious experiences undergone by their respective prophets or founders. Such experiences made them the recipients of a message (revelation), which came from outside the physical world. They were then seen by their contemporaries

as individuals who had some kind of special spiritual insight and authority. Such was the case with Dosteo Bisaka, who calls himself *Owobusobozi*, which is Runyoro for "The Almighty one".

Studying the context of Bisaka's birth and the environment in which he grew up is critical in order to understand how and what led him to form this new religion and promote this kind of worldview. Bisaka mentions in *The Book of God* that he was born on June 11, 1930, in Kitoma Kiboizi to a staunchly Catholic family. His grandfather, Alifonsio Wenkere, as well as his father, Petero Byombi, were Catholic Church catechists at their Parish in Bujuni. His father had served the Church for 58 years while his grandfather served for 60 years (Bisaka, 1987). At the age of eight, Bisaka was taken to live with his grandparents. His grandmother, Martha Nyakake, who was also a staunch Catholic, taught him profoundly about the Catholic doctrines, teachings and traditions. She played an immensely important role in his upbringing and had a lifelong influence on his Catholic strand and how he would later formulate FoU's worldview. Bisaka mentions that his grandmother "used to teach him a lot about the goodness of God. The words he was taught stayed in his mind for a long time" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 7). What seems to have been a defining moment in Bisaka's life was his grandmother's experience of the religious violence and atrocities that were carried out on a group of 45 Anglican and Roman Catholic converts (now known as Uganda Martyrs), who were executed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Kingdom of Buganda under the reign of Mwanga II (Faupe, 2007; Okoth, 2006; Kassimir, 1991). This experience was significant to Bisaka because it was clear evidence of the dysfunctional features of violence, intolerance and divisiveness upon which Christianity was rooted. The role that it played in destabilising and disrupting the political institutions of Buganda Kingdom and also causing disunity and division between previously united people "must have left an indelible mark in the mind of young Bisaka to influence the emphasis on religious unity which is the distinctive doctrine of the FoU" (Ukah, 2018, p. 15).

Having grown up in a staunch Catholic family, Bisaka always had the desire and determination to become a Catholic priest. In 1944, he sought admission to the Catholic seminary but failed. This, however, did not weaken his quest and desire to serve in different capacities in the Catholic Church. He went to Nsamizi Teacher's College in Mityana, where he graduated as a Grade III primary school teacher. He taught

at a Catholic primary school in Kagadi for 35 years. He also served as the secretary to the Muhorro Catholic Parish and also as the advisor to the Confraternity of the Legion of Holy Mary Mother of Grace in Muhorro Parish (Bisaka, 1987). He was also appointed into the Diocesan Liturgical Committee by Bishop E. Baharagate, a position that elevated his religious profile.

Bisaka was a “gifted” liturgical song and music composer. His liturgical songs were central to his future ambition and mission and in the founding of FoU. In 1966, he began composing Catholic Church hymns, some of which, such as *Guba Mugisa Kuteranizibwa*, were included in the Runyoro/Rutooro Catholic hymnal books. This marked the first manifestation of the era of *Owobusobozi* although Bisaka claimed that it began in 1930 when he was born (Bisaka, 1987). The gift of composing church hymns elevated Bisaka’s status: he became a well-known figure in Catholic circles in Bunyoro for many years and was recognised by different priests and nuns for his musical talent and even received many gifts, both monetary and non-monetary. Among the members of local clergy, Rev. Fr. Kibira told Bisaka that “the Holy Spirit chose You,” whereas Rev. Fr. Musoke told him that “God chose You”; they believed that Bisaka’s musical talent was a special gift that God had chosen him for (Bisaka, 1987).

Composing hymns was an effortless task for Bisaka because whenever he wrote a new one, “He would receive special inspiration until He would write it up, accompanied by its tune...” (Bisaka, 1987, pp. 9-10). Based on this claim, Bisaka saw himself as someone who had direct communication with the divine, a task for which he had been made ready through many years of Catholic upbringing and teaching under his parents and grandparents as well as his active participation and contribution to the liturgical life of the Bunyoro Catholic community. Although Bisaka had been composing church hymns since 1966, it was in 1975 with the composition of the hymn *Nkaikiriza Ruhanga Murungi*<sup>6</sup> (loosely translated as “I believed, God is good”) that became a turning and defining moment in his religious life and gave rise to the formation of FoU. The hymn became highly popular and a favourite for many parish choirs who used it in Catholic Mass and liturgical celebrations (Ukah, 2019). The significance of this hymn was that whenever it was used in

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<sup>6</sup> It is a hymn made of 24 short sentences.

church, Bisaka claimed to have received an unusual bodily sensation, "a special kind of power" around his arms. This same bodily sensation would occur to him whenever the prayer "Our Father" was sung during the liturgy (Bisaka, 1987). He did not know what to do of or how to interpret these experiences. He said that religious leaders who noticed his unusual bodily change informed him that it occurred because of the praises received for composing *Nkaikiriza* (Bisaka, 1987).

This experience went on for five years until the end of the fifth year when he heard "a voice of God" tell him, "You shall heal people by touching them" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 10). Although the voice persisted several more times, Bisaka remained hesitant for three months because he did not know how to proceed with such a command. On February 22, 1980, he "accepted and touched a person and that person got healed!" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 10). This event marked the official formation of FoU and the start of Bisaka's mission to heal and unite people. It also marked his breaking away from the Catholic Church. Ukah mentions that the sick person that Bisaka touched and healed was a young woman suffering from high fever attributed to malaria, a disease that is endemic in that part of Uganda (Katuura et al., 2007).<sup>7</sup>

Behrend (2011) mentions another version of Bisaka's spiritual experience: when Bisaka was composing *Nkaikiriza* in 1975, he received a revelation from the "Lord God of Hosts" where he went to heaven and God bestowed on him spiritual powers and the power to heal sick people by touching their heads. This vision continued to grow and his spiritual powers gradually became more powerful. During this period, he also increasingly disassociated himself from the Catholic Church. Five years after receiving his spiritual powers, the voice of God commanded him, "You shall heal people by touching them." Although he received this message numerous times, he remained hesitant for three months until one day, on February 22, 1980, he touched a sick person who was instantly healed. He then went on to heal people from various diseases (Behrend, 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> It is, however, not certain if she was indeed suffering from malaria since there is no clear evidence of whether she was clinically examined to determine if that was, indeed, the case.

It appears that in the early stages of FoU, Bisaka wrote the first edition of FoU's scripture. He later wrote a second revised edition that is currently available, where the former version of his spiritual experience is the recognised version (Behrend, 2011). Behrend (2011) states that she was told that after writing the second edition, Bisaka ordered his followers to collect and burn all copies of the first edition.

### **The Faith of Unity's Worldview and Vision**

In the preface of FoU's scripture, Bisaka mentions that The Lord God of Hosts, through talking to him, caused the scripture to be written with the intention to deliver His message of healing and uniting people and bringing an end to disunity. This statement embodies the kind of vision that FoU espouses as well as Bisaka's mission and purpose, which is uniting humanity through healing. According to FoU, Bisaka's birth in 1930 was the beginning of a new age for humanity: the age of healing and uniting mankind into one flock and fighting the disunity that was caused by two previous ages. The first age was the age of human ignorance and lawlessness in the reign of the empire of Satan. The second was the age of Jesus Christ, his religion and the Bible, which were sources of hatred, disunity and disharmony. FoU takes an extremely critical and hostile attitude towards Christianity and the Bible. Bisaka (1987) declares that the Bible has been the main source and cause of division and disharmony among societies: it is in the Bible that "some of the words which have been disuniting people were written" (p. 20). He says that Biblical statements such as "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (John 20: 23) have been the reason for the proliferation of religious sects, mostly because of the many and often contradictory interpretations of such verses by religious leaders. With each leader claiming to represent the correct interpretation, religious differences, conflicts and hatred develops, causing divisions among people and thus violating God's commandment of loving one another (Bisaka, 1987). Furthermore, Bisaka states that "evil spirits" led religious leaders to insert their own words into the Bible because they were "empowered to do so by [John 20: 23]", thus making it a book full of lies and falsehoods that have been teaching hatred and causing disharmony (Bisaka, 1987). Realising that people have been divided and God's commandments

have been violated, The Lord God of Hosts "decided to remove the old words and hand them these new ones of uniting them, so that mutual love may prevail and people unite" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 22). Bisaka viewed Christianity and, as a matter of fact, all other religions as superfluous and regarded them a necessary phase of religious advancement, which, by the inauguration of the third age of unity and oneness, were ineffective and not needed anymore (Bisaka, 1987). Although the birth of Bisaka in 1930 was the beginning of this third age, it was in 1966 when its active mission started with the composition of hymns. The actual practice of healing in 1980 was the official beginning of this age of oneness. It is identified as the age of fighting Satan, healing sickness and unifying humankind, all done by Bisaka, the sacred healer and fighter.

Bisaka's vision of ending disunity through healing also carries a social dimension. FoU sees disunity as a cosmic disease that affects the social body, whereby societies plagued by divisions cannot function to their optimal capabilities, hence affecting their capacity and potential to work towards human thriving. Similarly, physical and spiritual sickness also affects people's ability to optimise their potential to work towards human prosperity. Therefore, "healing people everywhere and making people one" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 6) became Bisaka's main mission and vision. He views healing as a strategic instrument for bringing humankind together. It is through healing sickness and restoring spiritually and physically broken bodies that humankind will realise social, political and religious oneness and unity, thus reaching the sought-after age of oneness and human thriving. Human thriving is God's will for humanity. Bisaka, as the power of God, is considered as the sacred healer and fighter mandated to see the realisation of that goal.

FoU presents itself as a religion that came with "good news" for the people who have been divided, putting an end to disunity and bringing about a new age of oneness and human thriving through healing, both materially and spiritually. It presents a totalising worldview that seeks to redress the believer's general attitude towards life, the world and his relationship with the society as well as the divine.

### **The Reception, Spread and Development of the Faith of Unity**

The emergence of any new form of religious movement challenging traditional and mainstream religiosity is usually met with strong opposition and rejection from mainstream religions as well as skepticism from the general public. Such was the case with FoU; the religious terrain in Uganda, especially the Catholic Church, did not welcome Bisaka's new religion. For fear of undermining the unity of the Church and disrupting and confusing the faithful—coupled with the fear of reoccurrence of religious violence and massacres that were caused by previous religious movements—the Church in Uganda declared Bisaka's religion, together with other new religious movements, as not belonging to the Church (Catholic Bishops of Uganda, 2000). Bisaka himself was excommunicated and the Church strongly warned the public against joining his movement. Similarly, the government of Uganda at the time did not welcome Bisaka's movement; it was banned and Bisaka was imprisoned a few times. This negative reaction from the government can be attributed to various reasons. First, there were reports that Bisaka and his followers were preventing sick people from seeking medical attention in hospitals, which caused a number of them to lose their lives. Secondly, the government also had its suspicion and fear of new religious movements, especially after witnessing the atrocities carried out in the name of religion by previous religious movements. Lastly, the government was under pressure from the Catholic Church, which is an eminently strong and influential institution in Uganda.

The reaction of the Catholic laity and the general public towards Bisaka's movement was divided. Those who were loyal to the Church were happy with the reaction of the Church and the government's decision to ban FoU. Some believed that since Bisaka had served the Catholic Church for a long time but did not attain the status of the clergy, he was disappointed with the Catholic leadership who did not recognise the huge contributions and dedication he had given the Church, leading him to break away and form his religion (Kassimir, 1996). It is also claimed that there were incidents of clashes between Bisaka's followers and some Catholics, where FoU's houses of worship were burnt down (Kassimir, 1996). Conversely, there were also those who were skeptical and suspicious of Bisaka's intentions but were afraid of his potential powers. For Bisaka's followers, however, they had nothing but belief in the power of *Owobusobozi*, who had come to save them from the



hardships that life was throwing at them, especially after realising that neither the government nor their present religious affiliations could provide solutions to their predicaments. Bisaka was a redeemer and a sign of relief to them.

A few years later, in 1995, with the declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Uganda Constitution, the ban on Bisaka's religion was lifted and it has since attracted and continues to attract hundreds and thousands of followers every day, with its growth witnessed both inside and outside of Uganda. It is claimed that it has congregations in more than seven countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda and Canada (Ukah, 2018). The Local Government Development Plan of Kibaale District noted that the number of those registered under other religions increased from 5% to 13% in the period between 1991 and 2002 and this was attributed to the large number of people joining FoU (Kibaale District Local Government, n.d). In one of his fieldworks in Hoima District in 2016, Ukah (2018) mentions that Bisaka initiated more than 800 new followers in one single night. Different reports put the total number of followers of FoU between five and seven million (Ukah, 2014). It has achieved public recognition through various means, including building majestic headquarters in Kapyemi to serve as the its most sacred place and mission control, celebrating Bisaka's birthday every year, which attracts government and local officials as well as the media, and setting up branches countrywide. As of January 2020, FoU has more than 2,000 places of worship administered under the management of 35 divisions (*Bukwenda*), similar to "dioceses", in Uganda alone (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

The rapid growth and spread of FoU in a country such as Uganda, which has a history of religious violence and massacres attributed to new religious movements, is a result of many factors. The first factor is the physical, psychological and spiritual healing and satisfaction that FoU offers or seems to offer to its members. One of the major reasons why most Africans join new religious movements is the search for both physical and spiritual healing. FoU was founded with the main purpose and goal of saving people from physical and spiritual illnesses, restoring their health in order to function to their optimal capabilities. It also considers healing people as a force that unites them against disharmony, which impedes human thriving and prevents them from achieving

contentment. Bisaka, as the divine who is physically present, represents the healing power of God, a power that has the ability to perform miracles and solve people's problems, ranging from as simple as blessing one with a bicycle to as complex as curing incurable diseases. People flock to him in search for answers and solutions for their barrenness, cure from long illnesses, protection from evil spirits and witchcraft, financial wellbeing and many more predicaments that their respective present situations or religions could not provide answers for. Some people are even brought from hospitals and clinics to be healed by Bisaka. Magezi explains that people come with "illnesses which had failed medically but Omukama Ruhanga Owobusobozi Bisaka cures them within a second! And one wonders how it has happened thus they end up confining in the faith" (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Also, converts' professions and testimonies of the miracles performed by Bisaka have been a major factor in attracting people to FoU. A big section of the Faith's scripture is dedicated to testimonies from people who witnessed Bisaka's miracles that changed their lives (Bisaka, 1987). When non-members who might be going through the same predicaments hear of such testimonies, they run to Bisaka and declare their faith for him.

Furthermore, since Bunyoro is a place that is ravaged by practices of cannibalism and witchcraft, many who were caught in such practices were excluded from society and sometimes lynched and killed. When Bisaka came, and after existing religious institutions and the government had failed to combat those practices, he carried out large-scale healing and rehabilitation of witches and cannibals. Since many of those involved in such practices could not find their way out or be allowed back into society, Bisaka's religion gave them an opportunity to heal, redeem and cleanse themselves. He accepted and transformed them into good and productive members of society. This attracted many others to join FoU because not only could they redeem themselves, but they could also receive psychological support where they gain a sense of belonging and feel accepted by society. FoU, for those who joined, means being "enlightened"; as Magezi explained, for many who had been involved in Satanic practices, it was a difficult task to be rid of it completely. Joining FoU and cleansing oneself meant that someone had seen light and joined the ranks of the purified ones (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Bisaka has been, in fact, hailed by

both government and local leaders for being a major force in restoring social order and bringing down the numbers of witches and cannibals in the region by helping to rehabilitate them. One of the region's Member of Parliament was quoted saying, "I thank Owobusobozi Bisaka who has uprooted and healed cannibals" (Mafaranga & Kasooaha, 2013). Another woman Member of Parliament was quoted saying, "I personally know people who used to be drunkards but when they joined the Faith of Unity, they got transformed" (Mugerwa, 2012).

Bisaka's religion also offered its members new and innovative ways of expressing and feeding their spiritual needs. For FoU, unlike other religions, God's power and presence through Bisaka is directly and physically felt; members can directly communicate with him, present their problems and get instant remedies to their problems. Bisaka participates in his followers' liturgies, prayers and rituals, attends there in their time of need, shares in their sorrows and happiness, is easily approachable as anyone could directly lay bare their inner-most feelings in front of him and also fills and satisfies in his followers a spiritual void that other religions could not. His charismatic personality, which is associated with his divine characteristic of performing miracles, made him gain the respect and obedience of his followers, instilling in them the confidence to resort to him for their spiritual and all other needs.

The second factor that attracted people to join FoU can be attributed to the government's failure to provide basic needs, such as education and healthcare, to the people. The government of Uganda has not been able to set up proper structures to provide its citizens with good and adequate services such as proper healthcare. Being a rural area, Bunyoro has no well-established infrastructure with proper road networks and affordable healthcare facilities. Patients find themselves having to walk long distances to reach healthcare centres because they cannot afford transportation costs. Moreover, the healthcare facilities themselves tend to be in an abysmal state with no medical professionals and little or no drugs available, in addition to many people not being able to afford the expenses involved in consulting medical personnel and buying drugs. Faced with such challenges, patients resort to Bisaka, who has a reputation for curing all kinds of illnesses without asking for a single coin. The government's failure to provide people with services has fed directly into the popularity of Bisaka and led people to join him because he provides them with such services at no cost. Another weakness on

the side of the government is its inability to conduct any oversight on the healing and other claims of new religious movements, such as FoU. When there are claims that incurable illnesses are cured in FoU, without the government coming out to clarify to the public on the authenticity of such claims, many people join FoU in hopes of being cured.

Furthermore, the government's failure to provide jobs and create income-generating projects for the people left many living in poverty. Consequently, many people joined FoU looking for financial wellbeing while others joined as a form of protest and frustration against the social deprivation and abject poverty that the government is unable to alleviate them from. They find solace and solidarity by joining others in FoU who are also going through the same predicaments.

Additionally, the current government, which is the same government that once placed a ban on Bisaka's religion, has played a big role in promoting and making FoU popular to the general public. Having gained a significant following and becoming immensely popular and influential in Bunyoro region, Bisaka started to attract influential people from the government. From Members of Parliament to Ministers, and all the way up to the Head of State, all visit Bisaka at his headquarters in Kapyemi on different occasions and join in the official celebrations of FoU. The current President of Uganda himself, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, officially inaugurated both the FoU headquarters in Kapyemi in 2005 and Bisaka's living palace in 2014. The Head of State has, on numerous occasions, hailed Bisaka for uniting people and instilling in them the zeal to work and become productive citizens, which, he says, is in line with the government's vision for the country (Kasooha, 2018). Bisaka has been invited to many official government functions and has been provided with round-the-clock security protection, in addition to many incentives, such as cars and financial support. In return, FoU also takes great pride in its support and association with the current regime despite all its failures and weaknesses. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, according to Bisaka, "provide[s] political healing and unity to the nation, so also, he (Bisaka) provides spiritual and social healing to humanity" (Ukah, 2016). It is, therefore, no surprise that because of Bisaka's influential status, the government has managed to foster an alliance with him in a bid to spread their political ambitions in the region. This alliance has been translated by many people as the government's endorsement and validation of FoU, resulting in many more joining the movement. The

declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Uganda Constitution also paved the way for many to join any religion of their choice, including FoU.

The third factor that led to the rapid spread of FoU in Uganda is the weakness of the Church in providing answers to the ailing state of both the individual and society at large, in addition to the divisions and scandals that have struck the Church, which, for FoU followers, were clear evidence of the truthfulness of Bisaka's message and mission of uniting people who had been divided by the Church. The Church was not able to provide emotional support for people, in that, people go to church not only to worship but also to find a place where they could feel at home and comfortably communicate all their problems before God, but the church has failed to provide this. Most Africans join new religious movements because they find comfort in them; a place where they can freely communicate their feelings, express their desires and bare themselves in front of God (Mbiti, 1969). This is also the case with FoU. Given the dull atmosphere in church, many people joined FoU because they could physically see and meet the divine and present to him all their material and spiritual needs; they could directly and freely communicate to a god who looks like them and understands and feels their emotions.

This emphasis on God's immanence is a force of attraction for joining FoU. Perhaps, it has to do with some African religious imaginations and their conception of the divine. It is a common belief in the traditional African worldview that the spiritual and material worlds are interconnected. God, the Supreme Being and Creator of everything, is believed to be transcendentally occupying the spiritual world while Man occupies the material world. Between God and Man, there are spiritual beings that are believed to act as God's intermediaries but with lesser powers (Mbiti, 1969). They can be found in both animate and inanimate places and objects. God, as the Creator of everything, stands at the top of the hierarchy of spiritual beings, which are believed to be associated with Him and carry out His activities in the material world. As such, He is believed to be remote and not directly involved in the daily affairs of the world (Mbiti, 1969). It is believed that Man cannot approach Him directly, except through these spiritual beings. As a result, Man does not direct his prayers and worship to God except through spiritual beings since they are his direct contact in the material world. In the African

worldview, therefore, although God is believed to be the Supreme Being, Man does not run to Him for his spiritual or material needs because He is remote and far from him. He instead directs his needs towards the spiritual beings, whose power and presence is directly felt. This perhaps explains why people run to Bisaka as a physically present divine being, rather than to the transcendent one.

The fourth reason why people join FoU is because the movement is a sign of hope and vision: a sign of “good news” of ending disunity. The postcolonial crises that affected and caused significant disruptions on the African cultures and way of life led many to lose hope and vision for their future. Their social, political and cultural structures were disrupted and they became divided by the many foreign religions that invaded their land, ultimately losing hope. When FoU emerged with the “good news” of offering a better future and a way out of their predicaments, many people flocked to join. With eye-catching statements such as “Disunity has ended”, many people who had felt lost found hope and faith for a better future; they found new meaning in their lives. They joined FoU because it provided them with a new vision and worldview: one that pushes out foreign, divisive, oppressive, enslaving and deceiving religions; one that aims to bring them into the age of oneness and human thriving; and one that preserves their African way of life while, at the same time, getting rid of and rehabilitating some indigenous practices in new forms that are unique to FoU.

### **Challenges in Studying the Faith of Unity**

FoU has not attracted much scholarly research despite having been founded more than three decades ago and this can be attributed to different reasons. Despite having spread to many areas, both rural and urban, and despite having gained a large following and recognition from the government, many people still consider and perceive it as an aberrant, deceitful, pretentious and dangerous cult that everyone should be guarded against. This perception is not farfetched, given the previous religious violence and massacres by new religious movements. Many academics in Uganda, according to Ukah (2018), consider it as an evil and Satanic movement that does not deserve any scholarly investment. It is also seen by many as a movement would not stand the test of time and will disappear with the death of its founder. They, therefore, do

not consider it worthy of any academic time and investment. Likewise, claims of miracles performed by Bisaka, such as curing incurable illnesses, have led many to distrust and dismiss FoU and regard it as a form of religious brainwashing and exploitation since such claims are never medically proven or verified.

Another challenge facing the study of FoU and new religious movements in general is that most studies of such movements are conducted not entirely for academic purposes, but also for other reasons, such as evangelism and polemics. Regarding the Church's response to "cults" in East Africa, Divito (2008) expresses that they "must be carefully researched and analysed in order to develop effective biblical responses and evangelistic strategies - a task that has yet to be undertaken." Such approaches are not uncommon when studying new religious movements. However, academic research on new religious movements should be carried out for the right purposes of trying to understand their nature, the kind of visions and worldviews they propagate, the behaviours of their practitioners and the kind of change and impact they effect on societies. Studying religions such as FoU for the wrong reasons hampers scholarly efforts for an objective apprehension of the phenomena of new religious movements.

Another challenge in studying FoU culminates from the fact that there is no written commentary on the history of its founder as well as its rituals and practices, except for information provided by the founder himself. The reason for this is because most FoU members consider writing such commentaries as amounting to altering some parts of the revelation in the scripture. In an interview with Magezi, however, he affirmed that since Bisaka "made philosophical statements" in *The Book of God* that require explanations, "one is free to ask questions and make comments" (personal communication, January 22, 2020). Regardless, however, the fact that there is practically no written commentary about FoU suggests members' fear of altering the revelation. There is, therefore, no room for the expansion, development and refinement of ideas, except from Bisaka himself. This presents a challenge for researchers since the available information about FoU is scarce and scattered.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that although it is hard to single out the main reason for the emergence of FoU, there is no gainsaying that it emerged as a response to various challenges existing in the Western Ugandan community. The emergence and development of FoU indicates a response to the social deprivation and trauma caused by colonialism and its resultant disruptions and disorganisations of African societies and their way of life. By selling their imported religions with all their denominations to Africans, missionaries created divisions among otherwise united societies. These foreign religions created tensions and became sources of violence and clashes between African cultures and those of the missionaries. In post-independence Uganda, foreign religions were also used to suppress and deprive those who did not follow certain faiths, thus creating more divisions. FoU appeared as a response to such conflicts and offered solutions to many problems that the government and existing religions had failed to resolve, thus attracting many followers.

Dosteo Bisaka's religious movement attracted the deprived and marginalised members of society by offering religious solutions; in turn, the movement appeared as a new way of life that is filled with hope for the powerless and grieving people through the garb of religion. Through his religious mission, Bisaka wanted to unite humanity and fight disunity by healing sickness and restoring spiritually and physically broken bodies so that humankind will realise social, political and religious oneness and unity.

FoU faced strong opposition and rejection in the beginning, similar to many other new religious movements, by mainstream religions. However, FoU's philosophies and approaches rapidly gained the hearts of the common people and, thus, became the fastest-growing religion in Uganda.

FoU is a good example of a new religion on the African religious terrain with its own new beliefs, doctrines and practices as well as its own new way of defining the relationship between Man and Divine. It is important to note that although FoU presents itself as an African religion that aims at reviving and restoring African beliefs and traditions through healing and uniting people, it is not an African indigenous traditional religion. As it has been observed, it vehemently criticises



most indigenous religious traditions of Bunyoro, such as honoring Chwezi deities and so forth. Also, unlike indigenous African religions that have no specific founder, are orally transmitted and do not aim at proselytising or attracting new members, FoU has a founder and a sacred scripture, with members (*abahereza*) who are appointed by Bisaka himself to spread the movement's message. Furthermore, although FoU is very anti-Christian, there are many striking similarities between the movement and Christianity. FoU's doctrines and concept of deity, scripture, houses of worship, congregational services and even attire, in one way or another, exhibits some Christian Catholic influence; this is perhaps due to Bisaka's Catholic background. To Bisaka and his followers, however, it is such features that make FoU a modern African religion that is distinct from other religions.

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## Book Review

**John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin (Editors) - Key Islamic Political Thinkers, New York: Oxford University Press (2018).**

by Makmor bin Tumin

Discourses on the Islamic State continue in the Muslim world. One of such discourses is led by John L. Esposito and Emad el-Din Shahin, as they brought 11 contributors into 10 chapters in their edited book titled, “Key Islamic Political Thinkers,” tracing the development of Muslim political thought over the past century. Reviews from chapter 1 to 5 below were based on the first two parts of the book (*Founders of Political Islam and Revolutionary Ideologue*) and will be discussed briefly.

In Chapter 1, Ahmad Moussali proposed an analysis of the religious and political thought of Hassan al-Banna, the author focuses on al-Banna’s three central principles: Islam and politics, the Islamic state and *shari’ah*, as well as democracy and *shura* (consultation). Al-Banna opened the door for interpretation for the ideas of sovereignty of God and sovereignty of the *ummah* by saying that it is possible to assimilate democracy with the Islamic concept of *shura* and comprehensive governance. Moussalli, like many other Islamists, was charmed by al-Banna’s mantra, “No governance (*hukm*) except God’s,” the mantra employed by many Islamic movements to legitimise their act. Since the *shari’ah* law is subject to interpretation, in practice, it may differ from society to society. One can expect different voices to be heard in different Muslim countries, hence the mechanism of democracy and *shura* is in place to cater for this principle.

In Chapter 2, Joshua T. White and Niloufer Siddiqui presented their ideas on how Mawlana Mawdudi responded to the problem of the

collapse of the caliphate, which had forced the Muslims to live within the boundaries of the Westphalian nation state concept which created the possibility of postponement, if not abandonment, of the universal *ummah* concept. White and Siddiqui summarised that Mawdudi's ideas helped shape "the contours of modern Islamic discourse", and believed that Mawdudi's stance on the political imperatives of Islam was evolutionary, especially since his early writings gave way to a more practical and applied discussion of state power.

In Chapter 3, Shahrouh Akhavi focuses on Sayyid Qutb's idea of God Sovereignty, in which he noted, "Man-made law is a recipe or guarantee to Jahiliyyah." Western influence, in all aspects of Muslim life, strongly bothered Qutb, and the only solution to him was Islam. According to Akhavi, "activist-minded" Muslims came after him to utilise Qutb's ideas and vindicate their demands for the immediate application of *shari'ah* in all areas of life. Qutb showed little compromise with the government's *'ulama*. Islamic law is the principal source of legislation, hence ruling elites could always define the *shari'ah* so elastically as to distort it beyond all recognition, as explained by Akhavi.

Meanwhile, in Chapter 4, Akhavi highlights the important roles of Ali Shari'ati, not so much as a thinker but rather as an ideologist. Influenced by Marxism-Leninism and Jean Paul Sartre, Shari'ati, as told by Akhavi, had greatly influenced youth. His little compromise with the traditional *'ulama* and the belief mentored by his own father had made him critical about the Twelver Shi'a standing in the current generation of *'ulama*. Akhavi portrays him as both Husayn ibn Ali and Abu Dhar al-Ghifari, which implies that Shari'ati was a man who was against the idea of power, wealth, and status; all aspects which tend to corrupt a ruler. Thus, revolution was the solution for him.

Seeing the Shi'ite theology in two schools of thought emerge, the Akhbari and the Usuli, in Chapter 5, Mojtaba Mahdavi discusses the evolution of Ayatollah Khomeini's thinking through five distinct stages, beginning with political quietism and concluding with political absolutism, implying the changing thought from the Akhbari to Usuli thought. Khomeini feared the increasing secularisation, and the changing of Iranian society had led him into contemplating the importance of interpreting the original source together with the secondary law or

philosophy. In general, his idea's development or progression can be seen as a synthesis of the dialectics of heaven and earth, in which, when necessary, the government is empowered to unilaterally revoke any *shari'ah* agreement it has conducted with the people when those agreements are contrary to the interests of the country or Islam.

The last part of the book (*The "Intellectuals" of Political Islam*) portrays the contemporary intellectuals of Islam, where debates on the importance of free speech and freedom of expression is more prevalent than the *shari'ah* law itself, regardless of their persuasion.

The concept of God sovereignty versus popular sovereignty is pivotal in Islam. In Chapter 6, Peter Woodward describes Hassan al-Turabi's attempts to reconcile the sovereignty concepts by expanding the concepts of Islamic state, democracy, and popular sovereignty. Among the liberal Muslim thinkers, al-Turabi's efforts are obviously acknowledged. However, had al-Turabi confined himself to being just a theorist instead of a politician, according to Woodward, his thought would have attracted more interest and perhaps served as an inspiration for some. Al-Turabi was an ideologist in the fullest sense of the word, turning his ideas into programs of action in Sudan and beyond. Many liberal Muslims, al-Turabi included, discussed the concept of divine sovereignty with hardly any mention of specific verses in the Quran or hadith. Due to this, there are disputes on the inherent dangers contained in the vagueness and lack of textual references in al-Turabi's writings.

In Chapter 7, Azzam Tamimi explained on Rashid al-Ghannushi's innovative endeavors to introduce new dimensions of fresh ideas on public freedom in the Islamic state, citizenship, civil society, women, democracy, and the need for specialisation within the Islamic movements and separation between political practice and Islamic *da'wah* (call to Islam). Al-Ghannushi's intellectual assets lie on his comprehension of both Islamic and Western theories. On matters concerning the system of government, human rights, and civil liberties, al-Ghannushi believes that knowledge has both its own merit and its compatibility should be utilised fully. However, as noted by Tamimi, he is also known for the inconsistency in his discourse.

As a political leader, Tamimi observed, he has been compelled to make compromises, the most notable of which was his decision to remove the reference to Islam from the name of his movement in

order to qualify for registering as a legal political party. On such issue, Azzam Tamimi depicts al-Ghannushi's thought as, at times, more of a political analysis, and may even be too populist. Despite many criticisms, he continued to be democratically elected as the leader of Ennahda, a political party in Tunisia. The fact that al-Ghannushi sees in Western modernity positive aspects that are not only of great benefit but may also be indispensable for a modern Islamic revival made him unpopular among the conservatives and hardline Muslims.

In Chapter 8, Bettina Gräf explores the contributions of Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the concept of *tajdid* or renewal, the "Islamic Solution," the moderation of the middle way (*wasatiya*), the Islamic Awakening, Muslim minorities, gender relations, democracy and pluralism, and his controversial Islamic ruling on limited use of violence. His long age (b. 1926) has been an important factor in moderating different views on contemporary Islamic discourse, especially among the Sunni denomination. He has grappled with many adversaries: Salafism and secularism included. Subscribing to the notion of *wasatiya*, he struggled to make Islamic rulings over the issues of instrumentalisation of Islam by different nation-states and in condemnation of religious extremism in Egypt and elsewhere.

Gräf noted two important decisions by al-Qaradawi, which are the understanding of the local reality of daily life (*fiqh al-waqi'*) and the task of making life easy for Muslims and not difficult and full of interdictions (*yusr la 'usr*). As a teacher, preacher, counselor, monitor, and admonisher, al-Qaradawi has demonstrated a good model for Muslim thinkers to emulate. Although Gräf had mentioned al-Qaradawi's contribution a lot, it is difficult to trace the specific political philosophy which al-Qaradawi embraces, except by saying that he took the middle way (*wasatiyah*).

In Chapter 9, Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, analyse Mohammad Khatami's intellectualism and political activism as a reformist in the Iranian society. The issues of cultural openness, human rights, political participation, and civic liberties are the concerns of Rashid Ghannushi in Tunisia, as discussed by Azzam Tamimi, and the same issues are the concerns of Khatami in Iran, implying that these issues are not issues culturally specific to a society but rather universal (to Muslim) societies, both the Sunni and Shi'i community. The authors were

reflective in the observation of Khatami's acumen when they bring up Max Weber's work on political vocation, in which they emphasised how, in normal times, Khatami might have not chosen "politics as his vocation." Khatami's discourses on cultural openness, human rights, political participation, and civic liberties were derived from the above mentioned Iranian thinker who derived his from European Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

In Chapter 10, basing his discussion on the Neoplatonism movement, especially under Mulla Sadra's illuminationism-rationalism ideology, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi examines the intellectual discourse of Abdolkarim Soroush, very much like Mahdavi did in the last part of Chapter 5. A seventeenth-century Persian Gnostic philosopher, Mulla Sadra's influence on Shi'i contemporary philosophers is extensive. Ghamari-Tabrizi provides interesting comparisons between Ali Shari'ati, pointing to Abu Dhar al-Ghifari's activism, and Soroush, pointing to Ibn Sina's intellectualism, explaining that Soroush's contributions were not only in the field of political philosophy, but just as significant, in theology as well.

Neoplatonism being one of the most important rationalism movements in contemporary Iran, Ghamari explains how Soroush began his journey with an ideology critique, first of Marxism and later of Islamism of pre and post-revolutionary Iran. His hermeneutics and pluralist approach to Islam, as illustrated by Ghamari, reminds us the Nietzschean and Foucauldian line of thinking, particularly his debates on truth claim and historical contingency of Islam. Soroush's contribution in political philosophy perhaps can be judged based on his calling for struggle for participatory democracy through the recognition of competing interpretations of Islam.

Commenting on the entirety of the book; firstly, without *'ulama* of conservative intellectual thought or *shari'ah*-based political Islam, this book shows little nuances to provide a better understanding on contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse. This book should also include thinkers from other regions such as the Southeast Asia, in which many countries with Muslims as majority can be found. Secondly, this book has not seriously dealt with the richness of the thinkers' ideas, but rather is more focused on their activities and ideology, leaving the



readers unsure as to what the political take away was from the political thought that the contemporary intellectual thinkers left us with.

Thirdly, the term “philosophy-based political Islamists” is better suited to describe the liberal Muslim thinkers, and in contrast, the term “*shari’ah*-based political Islamists” is more appropriate to explain the conservative or hardline Muslim thinkers, for the reason that liberalists and conservatives in the west are both products of liberalism; this, however, is not the case in the Islamic world. Fourthly, concepts such as *shari’ah* law, God sovereignty are important concepts, and they should be explained at the outset, perhaps in the introductory chapter.

Lastly, although contemporary Muslim intellectuals discussed in this book seem to convince on the impossibility of the Islamic state, in order to have a better Muslim society, it does not mean that the discussion on family institutions is not important in shaping society. The great western contemporary political philosopher, John Rawls, admitted that if he had the opportunity to reformulate his work “A Theory of Justice,” he certainly would have included the family institution in the equation. Even great western philosophers such as Plato, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau included discussions on the family institution, and the same goes to early Muslim philosophers. We are not so sure whether the lack of mention of family institutions is the thinkers’ decision or that the contributors to this book did not mention the thinkers’ contribution on this matter.

