AMERICAN PURITAN ENCOUNTERS WITH ISLAM: FAITH, CIVILISATION, AND EARLY AMERICAN REFLECTIONS

Rachid Mehdi[1]

ABSTRACT

The melodramatic tone of Barbary captivity narratives enabled influential Puritan ministers such as Cotton Mather and John Cotton to consolidate a distinct Christian identity in deliberate contrast to a perceived Muslim Other. This article examines how such Puritan portrayals of Islam were shaped by theological anxieties and moral self-definition rather than sustained engagement with Islamic intellectual traditions. It further interrogates whether Puritan assumptions about Islam were grounded in objective knowledge or primarily reflected subjective projections. To situate these portrayals within a broader civilisational and ethical context, the study introduces the works of Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbuktī, Muḥammad al-Maghīlī, Ḥusayn Efendi, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn ʿArabī—figures who articulated sophisticated moral, legal, and metaphysical conceptions within the Islamic tradition. Their reflections on justice, moral order, spiritual

[1] Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Adderrahmane Mira University, LESMS Laboratory, Bejaia, Algeria. Email: rachid.mehdi@univ-bejaia.dz

unity, reason, and love reveal a markedly different ethical landscape from the one constructed in Puritan discourse. Through a comparative reading of Puritan texts and Islamic thought, the article argues that early modern encounters with Islam were characterised by a complex interplay of subjective distortion and ethical projection, in which each tradition interpreted the Other through its own moral and spiritual categories.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early modern period, narratives of Barbary captivity —accounts written by European and American sailors, merchants, and adventurers enslaved by North African polities collectively referred to as the Barbary States—circulated widely in colonial America. These texts constituted one of the earliest and most influential channels through which early Americans encountered Islam and North African societies. Captivity narratives such as those by James Leighton and Thomas Pellow, offered vivid depictions of life under Muslim authority, frequently emphasising physical suffering, moral danger, and religious difference. While often presented as factual testimonies, these narratives were deeply shaped by Puritan imagination and theological concerns, and thus functioned not merely as historical records but as socially constructed narratives imbued with moral and religious meaning.

Puritan communities were intensely preoccupied with the moral regulation of communal life and therefore interpreted captivity experiences through a theological and providential lens. For Puritan ministers, the suffering of captives were not simply an unfortunate historical circumstance but a divinely ordained trial—an allegorical reenactment of biblical narratives and a demonstration of the ongoing

struggle between Christian and non-Christian forces. In *Magnalia Christi Americana*, for example, Cotton Mather portrays captivity as a manifestation of divine providence, in which God permits His chosen people to suffer at the hands of Muslims in order ultimately to test and reaffirm their faith.[2] Similarly, John Cotton and other Puritan leaders employed captivity accounts to warn against apostasy, to promote perseverance, and to reinforce a moral dichotomy between a spiritually enlightened Christian world and a threatening Islamic "other".[3] In this way, captivity narratives became a performative space in which Puritan theology dramatised the tension between religious fidelity and worldly adversity.

This article examines how Barbary captivity narratives shaped Puritan perceptions of Islam Puritan views of Islam and contributed to the construction of a distinctive Puritan identity. While existing scholarship has explored the literary features of these narratives and their historical sginificance within early American society,[4] there has been less scholarship probing the theological concepts that Puritans brought to bear upon these narratives, and even less still that placed the texts within a frame of interrogation that acknowledged the role of civilisation as an evaluative category. By foregrounding this dimension, the present study investigates how early modern

---

[2] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England from Its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*, ed. Thomas Robbins (Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1853), Book VII, 25.

[3] John Cotton, *God's Promise to His Plantation* (London: William Jones, 1630), 7–9. See also *The Way of Life* (London: Thomas Underhill, 1641), 22–24.

[4] Daniel J. Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Daniel J. Vitkus, ed., *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); Paul Baepler, *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

encounters with Muslims functioned as a mirror through which Puritans articulated a Christian "self" in contrast to an Islamic "other", thereby revealing underlying civilisational anxieties and moral hierarchy's operative in the early American context.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of primary sources, including Barbary captivity narratives, Puritan sermons, and pastoral writings. These are supplemented by secondary scholarship in early American religious studies to situate the texts within their broader theological and historical contexts. Particular attention is given to recurring typologies, rhetorical strategies, and moral tropes through which Puritan ministers framed Islam as a rival civilisation. This approach also enables a comparative engagement with classical Islamic thinkers, allowing for an examination of both contrast and convergence in ethical, moral, and theological perspectives.

The article proceeds by first reviewing the existing scholarship on Barbary captivity narratives and Puritan theological frameworks. It then identifies the conceptual gap that emerges from the absence of a sustained civilisational analysis. The subsequent discussion explores how Puritan encounters with Islam contributed to enduring stereotypes that cast Islam as a civilisational threat, while simultaneously introducing Islamic thinkers from the same historical milieu who articulated sophisticated visions of justice, reason, moral order, and love. By juxtaposing Puritan representations with Islamic intellectual traditions, the study seeks to illuminate the dissonance between Puritan cultural assumptions and the ethical realities of Islamic thought. Before turning to these comparative reflections, it is therefore necessary to outline the literary and historical conditions under which Barbary captivity narratives emerged, using both textual analysis and a comparative civilisational perspective.

2. METHODOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK

2.1 Barbary Captivity Narratives as Inter-Civilisational Texts

To understand the ideological weight carried by Barbary captivity narratives, it is first necessary to clarify the distinctive features and functions of this genre. Accounts of captivity in Barbary, widely published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, provide a particularly revealing archive for examining early American engagements with Islam. These narratives describe how European and American sailors and travellers were captured and enslaved by North African polities such as Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, often remaining in captivity for extended periods before being ransomed. One of the most frequently cited examples is Thomas Pellow, who recounts more than twenty-three years of captivity in Morocco, emphasising both the physical hardship and psychological strain endured by Christian captives.[5] A similar emphasis on suffering, moral threat, and religious difference appears in James Leighton's account.[6]

Published widely as pamphlets and books in colonial America, these narratives collectively shaped popular understandings of Islam and Muslim societies. Importantly, these texts often blended narrative, moral lesson, and cultural observation, making them crucial artifacts for understanding early American perceptions. For Puritan audiences, captivity narratives were not merely entertaining or sensational accounts; they functioned as didactic texts imbued with theological meaning. They blended narrative description with moral instruction

---

[5] Thomas Pellow, "The History of the Long Captivity and Adventures of Thomas Pellow, in South Barbary," *in White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, ed. Paul Baepler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 82.

[6] Alexander Leighton, "A True and Faithful Account of the Captivity of Alexander Leighton," in *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, ed. Paul Baepler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 19.

and cultural observation, making them powerful instruments for shaping religious consciousness. Within these texts, Islamic civilisation was frequently portrayed as a comprehensive system—legal, religious, political, and social—set in sharp contrast to Christian norms. Laws, modes of worship, governance, and everyday practices were repeatedly juxtaposed with Puritan ideals, reinforcing the perception of Islam as a rival moral order. In this way, the Islamic world appeared simultaneously fascinating, threatening, and theologically intelligible within a Puritan framework.

The civilisational dimension of these narratives is particularly evident in captives' portrayals of Muslim societies as integrated moral systems governed by laws and customs distinct from those of Christian Europe. Pellow, for instance, remarks that Muslims "follow the Koran with a zeal that leaves no room for mercy to those of another faith,"[7] These descriptive passages helped to affirm that Islam was more than an alternate form of spirituality; it was rather an entirely different civilisation, with its own moral order that required careful interpretation by the Christian audience. Samuel Sewall similarly reflects on this perceived civilisational divide when he writes that captives find themselves "in a strange land where laws are not our laws, God is not worshipped as our God, and custom rules where conscience ought."[8] This reflection is striking: it places Islam not only as a religious rival but as a separate civilisation with its own social, legal, and moral traditions.

Puritan ministers further reinforced this civilisational framing through typological and providential interpretations. Cotton Mather, for example, likened Barbary captivity to the Babylonian exile, arguing that God permitted His faithful to suffer under "infidel" rule in order to test and strengthen their faith.[9] In the same manner, John Cotton interpreted captivity in typological terms by portraying the enslavement of Christians in Muslim lands as a divinely ordained trial

---

[7] Pellow, *The History of the Long Captivity*, 112.
[8] Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, ed. M. K. Bates (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878), 2:45.
[9] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), vol. 2, 67.

analogous to Israel's exile ("As our fathers were carried into Babylon, so now are the servants of God snatched into the lands of the Saracen, that they may learn patience, obedience, and the efficacy of prayer"[10]). In addition of the portrayal of the difficulties faced by the captives, these interpretations placed their accounts in a perpetual confrontation between Christian civilisation and non-Christian civilisation. It is, therefore, important to note that these captivity narratives were not just texts employed to passive reports but were active texts involved in shaping the Puritan imagination of global civilisation. They created an imaginative moral and geographic religious geography where Islam occupied a threatening space.

2.2 Scholarly Gaps: Inter-Civilisational and Islamic Perspectives

Although a substantial body of scholarship exists on early American captivity narratives, much of that scholarship has approached these texts primarily from literary and historical perspective, often neglecting more robust theological and civilisational interpretations. Paul Baepler and Timothy Marr, for instance, have analysed narrative structures of various captivity accounts and the cultural impact of the narratives, while others, including Thomas Kidd, have examined broader American views of Islam. Yet comparatively little attention has been given to the theological frameworks through which Puritans interpreted these narratives, and even less to the ways in which Islam was constructed as a civilisation rather than merely a religious other.

The Puritan engagement with captivity narratives was inherently inter-civilisational. By interpreting Muslim societies through biblically grounded hermeneutics, Puritan ministers simultaneously interpreted distant events and local communal identity. Cotton Mather, for instance, presents Islam as a powerful and complex civilisation, yet one ultimately judged by its deviation from Puritan theology. The difference emphasised is not merely doctrinal but civilisational—an alternative social and moral order perceived as

---

[10] John Cotton, *Spiritual Exercises* (London: n.p., 1647), 115.

fundamentally incompatible with Puritan norms.

The absence of a sustained civilisational framework in existing scholarship has led to an underestimation of the depth of Puritan intellectual engagement with Islam, however mediated and polemical that engagement may have been. Captivity narratives are often treated as anecdotal or sensationalist texts rather than as theological and ideological instruments that shaped early American worldviews. This study addresses that lacuna by adopting a synthetic method that integrates literary analysis, theological interpretation, and inter-civilisational comparison.

In addition, few studies place Puritan readings of Islam in dialogue with Islamic intellectual traditions of the same or earlier periods. By juxtaposing Puritan theological hermeneutics with classical Islamic thought, this article seeks to illuminate both divergence and convergence in ethical, moral, and spiritual concerns. Having situated the captivity narratives historically and identified the limitations of existing scholarship, the discussion now turns to the theological frameworks through which Puritans interpreted Islam, beginning with their apocalyptic and typological readings.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Puritans and Apocalyptic Interpretations

The Puritans' interpretive engagement with Islam was shaped decisively by their profound attachment to Scripture. As J. I. Packer famously described them, the Puritans constituted a "Bible movement," for whom Scripture functioned as the ultimate source of knowledge and authority. [11] John Bunyan's well-known preference for the Bible over the universities of Oxford and Cambridge exemplifies this conviction. Within this worldview, all historical events— including encounters with Islam—were interpreted through biblical

---

[11] J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), "Puritanism as a Bible Movement," 34–39.

categories. Puritan interpretations of Islam were therefore deeply typological and apocalyptic. Modern scholars have noted that early Protestant understandings of Islam were driven less by empirical engagement with Islamic texts than by biblical exegesis. Timothy Marr, for instance, observes that Puritan views of Islam were shaped largely by scriptural prophecy and typological speculation rather than by informed study of Muslim theology.[12] As a result, Islam was interpreted within a distinctly Protestant "theology of difference," in which Muslims were cast as heretical agents within a providential drama.

This hermeneutical approach proved highly influential. Khalid Bekkaoui has shown that such interpretations later contributed to justificatory narratives for colonial expansion, framing global conflict as a struggle between good and evil.[13]. Nabil Matar similarly demonstrates that, for many Protestant writers, Islam was not a faith to be understood but a heresy to be refuted and an apocalyptic instrument of divine punishment. Muslims—particularly the Ottomans—were viewed as agents in the unfolding of eschatological history rather than as historical actors with their own theological traditions."[14]

In other terms, Islam was viewed through the lens of eschatology and heresiology. This position is not surprising when we consider that New England's devout were taught, through Gospel interpretation, that the "false prophets […] in the desert" against whom Jesus warned in Matthew were understood to allude to Muḥammad.[15] The Ottoman Empire, in this framework, was further perceived as an apocalyptic sign of divine punishment in the end times.

This mode of interpretation was sufficiently powerful that it

---

[12] Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

[13] Khalid Bekkaoui, "Introduction: The Lure of the Dark Ages," in *The Lure of the Dark Ages: Fantasies and Fictions of the Time-Slip Genre*, ed. Khalid Bekkaoui (Fez: Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah University Press, 2010), 15.

[14] Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15.

[15] Matthew 24:24–26 (King James Version).

became embedded within early American theological thought. It was widely adopted and disseminated by ministers and divines through sermons, church teaching, and published writings. Cotton Mather, like many of his contemporaries, operated firmly within this interpretive tradition. In *The Glory of Goodness*, for instance, Mather portrays the suffering of Christian captives under what he terms "Turkish barbarity" as a microcosmic reflection of the broader cosmic struggle between the Church and the forces of Antichrist.[16] Employing typological interpretation, he comments on the account of a Christian captive enslaved by Turkish masters:

> The Lord shewed his marvelous Power in the deliverance of a poor Englishman, who had been long in cruel Bondage under the Turks; and this I would have all the Israel of God observe, that they may see how the Almighty still rescues his people from the talons of Antichrist."[17]

Typological readings of captivity clearly preoccupied Mather's theological imagination. Accordingly, in *Magnalia,* he similarly interprets the sufferings of the New England saints and the "perils among the heathen" as manifestations of the Church's ongoing eschatological struggle.[18] For Mather, Scripture remained the primary lens through which such circumstances were to be understood: the conflictual relationship between Puritan New England and the Ottoman world was read, through Old Testament prophecy, as part of a divinely ordained historical narrative anticipating God's ultimate triumph over the "powers of darkness."

Mather was by no means unique in adopting this apocalyptic framework. Jonathan Edwards, another prominent Puritan theologian, likewise interpreted the hardships endured by Christian captives in the hands of those he referred to as "Black-a-moors" through an eschatological lens. For Edwards, such trials were signs

---

[16] Cotton Mather, *The Glory of Goodness: Or, The Goodness of God Celebrated; In Remarkable Passages of His Providence* (Boston: Printed by Samuel Green for Benjamin Harris, 1690).

[17] Ibid, 23.

[18] Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), vol. 1, 15–17.

of the imminent establishment of God's kingdom. He taught that "the trials of God's children, whether from heathen hands or from worldly oppression, serve to purify and prepare them; and the day shall come when the ungodly shall be overthrown, and the Lamb shall reign without rival." [19]

It would be mistaken to assume that Puritan theological criticism amounted merely to a denunciation of the suffering of white Christians. Rather, the purpose of their apocalyptic vision was twofold. First, it offered profound spiritual consolation to those affected by Barbary enslavement. By teaching that suffering formed part of God's temporary providential design, captives were encouraged to interpret their ordeal as a test of election and faith. According to writers such as Cotton Mather, the suffering of Christian captives at the hands of what he termed "Turkish barbarity" signified God's ongoing intervention to rescue His people from evil. Mather writes that "the Lord shewed his marvelous Power in the deliverance of a poor Englishman […] that all the Israel of God might observe how the Almighty still rescues his people from the talons of Antichrist."[20]

The eschatological vocabulary employed here—particularly terms such as *deliverance*, *the Israel of God*, and *Antichrist*—transforms individual affliction into a typological re-enactment of the cosmic struggle between Christ and the forces of darkness. Such rhetoric offered consolation not only to readers but especially to Barbary captives themselves, enabling them to interpret their suffering as participation in the grand narrative of salvation rather than as meaningless hardship.

Second, Puritan preachers explicitly linked contemporary political events to God's providential plan, thereby producing a discourse that fused religious ethics with social and civilisational critique. In sermons and captivity narratives alike, the figure of the

---

[19]Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1: Freedom of the Will, ed. Paul Ramsey* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 115.
[20] Cotton Mather, *The Glory of Goodness*, 23.

"Turk" functioned less as a concrete historical agent than as a symbolic representation of humanity estranged from divine truth. As Nabil Matar has observed, Protestant writers in England and America engaged with Islam not out of genuine interest in its theology, but rather as a contrasting moral exemplar against which they measured their own spiritual condition.

The eschatological framework that interwove political events with divine providence thus generated a worldview in which religious morality, imperial rivalry, and civilisational self-definition converged. Through captivity narratives and apocalyptic sermons, Puritan theologians constructed an interpretive lens in which spiritual warfare and imperial competition were inseparably intertwined.

3.2 Implications for Inter-Civilisational Understanding

Beyond their religious significance, Barbary captivity narratives carried far-reaching civilisational implications, shaping how Puritans assessed Muslim society as a competing moral and social order. Historians have observed that New England Puritans were deeply captivated by these accounts; many circulated widely and achieved remarkable popularity, even becoming best-sellers. Puritan preachers exploited captivity narratives not only for typological interpretation of Scripture, but also as instruments for constructing Muslims as civilisationally inferior. Through these texts, Islam was portrayed as a spiritual danger and a moral threat, while Muslim societies were framed as hostile environments surrounding God's chosen people.

In this process, Puritan ministers repeatedly extrapolated the image of Barbary corsairs to Muslims more broadly, contributing to a generalised demonisation of Islam. Such discourse unsurprisingly laid the groundwork for enduring narratives of cultural contrast. A telling example appears in John Atkins's *A Voyage to Guinea*, where early eighteenth-century English perceptions of Africans and Muslims converge within a civilisational hierarchy: "We were all seized with violence and led away as prisoners; our cries were of no avail; the

infidels treated us as though we were cattle."[21] Narratives of this bleak tenor reveal the intersection of religious prejudice and racialised discourse characteristic of early modern captivity literature.[22]

Puritan ministers were quick to mobilise such narratives to extract moral lessons from captivity. In *Magnalia*, Mather describes the experience of Christian captives in North Africa as follows: "The Lord hath permitted His people to taste the bitterness of heathen oppression, that their faith might be purified, and their hearts be drawn nearer unto Him."[23] Here, captivity is interpreted not in historical or political terms, but theologically. Mather seizes the opportunity to frame suffering at Muslim hands as evidence of divine providence rather than as the outcome of geopolitical conflict. These narratives thus served to portray Islam not merely as a different religion, but as a contrasting civilisation—an alternative moral and social order against which Christian identity was sharpened. From a civilisational perspective, such interpretations reinforced a binary worldview: Christian society was imagined as spiritually superior, while Muslims were cast as dangerous adversaries. The way Puritan ministers deployed captivity narratives further deepened a gulf that had already existed for centuries between Christian and Islamic worlds, transforming theological difference into civilisational antagonism.

One phenomenon that particularly intensified Puritan anxiety was conversion to Islam, commonly referred to in early modern discourse as "turning Turk." Reports of captives converting to Islam were sufficiently frequent to provoke alarm, prompting Puritan divines to respond strategically. Rather than focusing on those who had converted—often under coercion—preachers emphasised steadfastness among those who remained faithful. In this context, Increase Mather warned that "To be forced to bow unto the gods of the heathen is to have the very soul assaulted; yet patience and

---

[21] John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies; in His Majesty's Ships, the Swallow and Weymouth* (London: C. Ward and R. Chandler, 1735), 74.
[22] See Nabil Matar, *Britain and Barbary, 1589–1689* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 121–124.
[23] Mather, *Magnalia,* 489.

steadfastness shall preserve the faithful unto the end."[24] As scholars have noted, such rhetoric linked physical coercion to spiritual assault, reinforcing the Calvinist doctrine of perseverance of the saints.[25] By celebrating the resistance of captives against their Muslim oppressors—portrayed as both powerful and morally misguided—Puritan ministers reassured their communities of their divine election. Faithfulness under duress was presented as confirmation of covenantal status. Within this framework, Islam functioned not merely as an external enemy but as a civilisational foil through which Puritan identity was reaffirmed. As Thomas Goodwin famously described the godly community, they were "Children of Light walking in Darkness,"[26] a phrase that encapsulated the Puritan self-understanding of spiritual election amid a fallen and hostile world.

This civilisational contrast is articulated most explicitly in the writings of Jonathan Edwards, one of the most influential Puritan theologians. Edwards framed Christianity and Islam as rival civilisations grounded in opposing epistemologies. He argued that Christianity emerged in regions illuminated by divine revelation and reason, whereas Islam originated among peoples dwelling in what he described as intellectual and spiritual darkness.[27] Christianity, he claimed, spread through rational persuasion and enlightenment; Islam, by contrast, was propagated by coercion, ignorance, and the sword. Through such rhetoric, theological judgment seamlessly transformed into civilisational hierarchy.[28]

---

[24] Increase Mather, *A Relation of the Troubles Which Have Happened in New-England by Reason of the Indians There, from the Year 1614 to the Year 1675* (Boston: John Foster, 1677), 23.

[25] See Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 198–201.

[26] Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: R. Dawlman, 1645), 23.

[27] Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 370–372.

[28] Ibid, 398.

Edwards' discourse exemplifies how Puritan theology merged spiritual concerns with cultural evaluation. Christianity was presented not merely as a revealed religion, but as the embodiment of reason, learning, and moral order. Islam, conversely, was depicted as its antithesis—an empire of coercion, ignorance, and moral obscurity. These texts, widely circulated in colonial America and frequently preached from pulpits, profoundly shaped communal consciousness. They reveal how early American encounters with Islam contributed to a civilisational imagination in which religious identity, moral hierarchy, and cultural superiority were inseparably intertwined.

3.3 Islamic Moral and Legal Thought: A Counterpoint to Puritan Representations

Puritan writers made little effort to understand Islam from within its own theological and moral universe. The recurrent portrayal of North African Muslims as "barbarous," "tyrannical," or "enslaved by passion" reflected a distorted image shaped largely by Calvinist soteriology rather than by sustained engagement with Islamic sources. Drawing upon their Puritan heritage, New England divines assumed that any non-Christian civilisation was morally deficient and, unless conforming to Christian norms, ultimately excluded from salvation. When contrasted with Islamic intellectual sources from the same period, this representation appears deeply asymmetrical: it reveals a sharp disjunction between the Puritans' moral self-image and the rational, juridical, and religious traditions that structured early modern Islamic civilisation.

Islamic theological and legal writings from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries articulate a moral vision fundamentally at odds with Puritan depictions of Muslim society. Across diverse regions of the Islamic world, scholars grounded ethics and governance in principles of justice, communal responsibility, and divine law. A salient example is the fifteenth-century North African jurist Muḥammad al-Maghīlī (d. c. 1505). In his treatise *Tāj al-Dīn fīmā yajibu ʿalā al-mulūk* ("The Crown of Religion Concerning What Is

Required of Kings"), al-Maghīlī insists that rulers are fully accountable before God and bound by divine law. "The king," he argues, "must rule rightfully over his subjects, the powerless must be defended, and God's law must be the only law reigning; one can say that when justice is gone the world order is no more."[29] Political authority, in this framework, is morally legitimate only insofar as it safeguards justice and the welfare of the community. Such arguments directly challenge Puritan portrayals of Muslim rulers as inherently tyrannical or lawless and demonstrate that ethical governance lay at the heart of Islamic political thought.

A similar emphasis on justice appears in the work of the West African scholar Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbuktī (1556–1627), one of the most prominent jurists of Timbuktu. In his *Miʿrāj al-Ṣuʿūd ilā nayl ḥukm mujallab al-Sūdān* ("The Ladder of Ascent toward Comprehending the Legal Ruling on the Enslavement of the Blacks"), composed partly in response to the trans-Saharan slave trade, Aḥmad Bābā articulates a strikingly egalitarian vision of the law. He affirms that enslavement is legitimate only under narrowly defined legal conditions and declares that "No one shall be subjected to slavery but legitimately; for all believers in God, whether black or white, Arab or non-Arab, are equal to Him in their being God's slaves."[30] He condemns slavery justified on racial grounds as a violation of divine justice (*ʿadl*) and as a threat to communal harmony. Such positions stand in direct contradiction to Puritan stereotypes of the "slave Muslim" as a symbol of moral degeneration.

This conception of divine accountability was further elaborated in the Ottoman context by Ebussuʿūd Efendi (1490–1574),

---

[29] Muḥammad al-Maghīlī, quoted in Vasileios Syros, "Al-Maghīlī, Machiavelli, and the Micro-Politics of an Early Modern African Regime: Comparative Reflections on Islamic and Christian Political Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 65, no. 4 (2015): 1174.

[30] Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbuktī, *Miʿrāj al-Ṣuʿūd ilā Nayl Ḥukm Majlūb al-Sūd* [*The Ladder of Ascent in Obtaining the Legal Ruling on Imported Blacks*], in John Ralph Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, vol. 1 (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 113.

one of the empire's most influential jurists. Ebussuʿūd maintained unequivocally that political authority was constrained by the *sharīʿah*, asserting that "the sultan is subject to the law of God; his order is valid only as far as it is in line with the sharīʿa."[31] Sovereignty, in this view, was neither arbitrary nor despotic but morally circumscribed by transcendent norms. These legal and ethical frameworks undermine Puritan claims that Islamic governance lacked moral order and reveal instead a sustained concern with justice, restraint, and responsibility.

Puritan misrepresentation extended beyond law and governance to the question of reason. Contrary to the stereotype of Muslims as irrational or driven by blind obedience, Islamic thinkers had long debated the relationship between reason (*ʿaql*) and revelation (*waḥy*). Far from being opposed, these faculties were frequently understood as complementary paths to divine truth. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), whose influence extended across North Africa and the Ottoman world, articulated this synthesis with particular clarity. In *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences"), he famously compares reason to sight and revelation to light: "Reason is like the eye, and the Law is like the light; the eye is useless without light, and light is wasted upon one who has no eye."[32] The metaphor is striking here: reason and Scripture are deeply intertwined, as the rational faculty is an inner manifestation of divine wisdom which enlightens a believer to discern moral truth. Clearly, he points out that "The aim of knowledge is to transform the soul, not to multiply words."[33] Al-Ghazālī's synthesis of reason and revelation shows that Islamic thought differs greatly from Puritan portrayals of Islam as a religion of unquestioning acceptance or illogical submission.

An even more profound challenge to Puritan caricatures appears in the mystical philosophy of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1165–

---

[31] Ebussuʿūd Efendi, *Risāla fī Ḥukm al-Sulṭān wa al-Sharīʿa* [Treatise on the Authority of the Sultan and the Sharīʿa], Istanbul, 1560s, f. 12r.

[32] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1967), 37.

[33] al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, 3:22.

1240). Puritan narratives routinely depicted Muslims as devoid of love, compassion, or spiritual depth. Yet Ibn ʿArabī articulated a metaphysical vision grounded in *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), according to which all existence manifests the divine reality in diverse forms. In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom"), he writes: "My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks, a temple for idols, and the Kaʿba for the pilgrim. I follow the religion of Love; whichever way its camels take, that is my religion and my faith."[34] Far from promoting fanaticism or rigidity, Ibn ʿArabī presents love as the core of religious truth and spiritual realisation. His concept of the *al-insān al-kāmil* (the Perfect Human) further affirms that knowledge, when illuminated by divine guidance and purified of ego, becomes the highest means of discerning God's attributes.

Taken together, these examples reveal that the Puritan image of Islam was not an objective assessment but a subjective construction shaped by captivity narratives and theological presuppositions. Early modern Islamic thought, as articulated by figures such as al-Maghīlī, Aḥmad Bābā, Ebussuʿūd Efendi, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn ʿArabī, offered a coherent moral, legal, and spiritual framework centred on justice (*ʿadl*), ethical governance, rational discernment, and love. From a civilisational perspective, the Puritan portrayal of Islam as spiritually deficient or politically chaotic emerges less as a reflection of Islamic reality than as a projection of Christian anxieties and identity formation in the early Atlantic world.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Barbary captivity narratives, when read through the lens of Puritan theology, played a significant role in shaping early American religious imagination. Far from being neutral records of individual suffering, these accounts were actively

---

[34] Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. A. Afīfī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā, 1946), 191.

instrumentalised by influential Puritan figures such as Cotton Mather and John Cotton to reinforce a sharply demarcated Christian identity defined against a perceived Muslim "other." Grounded in doctrines of divine election and providential trial, Puritan sermons and writings portrayed Muslim societies as monolithic, barbaric, and ignorant—representations that functioned less as historical descriptions than as polemical constructions serving theological and communal ends.

By juxtaposing these portrayals with the intellectual traditions of Islamic civilisation that the Puritans largely dismissed, this article has shown that such representations were culturally constructed rather than accurate reflections of Islamic thought. The sophisticated works of Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn ʿArabī, Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbuktī, Muḥammad al-Maghīlī, and Ebussuʿūd Efendi reveal a civilisation deeply engaged with questions of justice, ethical governance, reason, and spiritual refinement. African and Ottoman scholars in particular articulated moral frameworks centred on ʿadl (justice) and divine accountability, while al-Ghazālī's synthesis of reason and revelation and Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysics of love challenge Puritan depictions of Islam as irrational or morally deficient.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of a comparative, inter-civilisational approach to early modern cross-cultural encounters. Puritan interpretations of Islam emerge not as neutral assessments of a rival civilisation but as projections of their own theological anxieties and identity formation. Their sermons and captivity literature exerted a lasting influence on Western perceptions of Islam, contributing to enduring narratives of religious and civilisational opposition. Recognising these dynamics enables a more critical deconstruction of inherited historical biases and deepens our understanding of how religious literature continues to shape moral imagination, cultural boundaries, and inter-civilisational discourse.