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# Towards a Theology of Class Struggle: A Critical Analysis of British Muslims' Praxis against Class Inequality

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**Abstract:** The primary goal of Liberation Theology is to change the material conditions of marginalised and oppressed groups in society. Within Islamic Liberation Theology, however, issues related to class and economic inequality are notably missing. This paper seeks to begin this conversation and highlight the necessity of addressing economic exploitation, which affects most of the world's population and Muslims disproportionately. Using a praxis-based methodology, it centres the interpretation of activists from Nijjor Manush, a British Bengali activist group, and seeks to understand how Islam is used as a liberative tool to combat class oppression. Through interviews and focus groups, an alternative and revolutionary Islam emerges. Echoing a Marxist understanding of class, it sees exploitation as an inherent part of the current capitalist system and recognises the necessity of people seizing economic power. This overarching objective is the lens through which activism in the here and now is interpreted and tactics decided. Establishing economic justice therefore means trying to secure "non-reformist reforms" in the short term, which resist the logic of capital and secure the interests of the marginalised, while working towards the ultimate goal of ending economic exploitation and, by extension, abolishing class.

**Keywords:** Islam; praxis; economics; class; inequality; poverty; Marxism; capitalism; Islamic socialism; liberation



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## 1. Introduction

Liberation Theology seeks to use religion to combat the various manifestations of oppression that marginalised groups in society face. Within the subfield of Islamic Liberation Theology, particular focus has been given to issues related to pluralism (Esack 1997), gender (Rahemtulla 2018; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002; Ali 2006; Mernissi 1992) and, to a lesser extent, race (Jackson 2009; Curtis 2006; Mubarak and Walid 2016), with other issues, most notably class, being peripheral. This is not a problem limited to the Islamic context but more broadly applies to studies of religion, which have failed to account for the relationship between faith and class (Rieger 2013). This lack of systematic engagement with class is detrimental to liberation movements, particularly at a time when economic inequality and exploitation affect most of the world's population. This study seeks to bring class and economic inequality into the discussion and answer the primary question, How do those involved in praxis against class oppression use Islam as a liberative tool in the London context? Using interview and focus group data from discussions with members of the British Bengali activist group Nijjor Manush, it centres the religious thought of activists in producing a theology of class struggle.

This study seeks to add to the growing literature within the field of Islamic Liberation Theology and centre the issue of class. The urgency of this cannot be understated in light of the growing inequality between a rich minority and the masses. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and political and economic instability have resulted in a cost-of-living crisis, making the effects of capitalism even more acute and living increasingly precarious, even in much of the Global North. The importance of this discussion is compounded by the economic position of Muslims, who overwhelmingly belong to economically exploited

classes. For example, in London, 9% of Muslims are unemployed, with 44% of those who are employed paid below the London living wage (Vizard et al. 2013). Second, it makes an intervention into the method through which Islamic liberation theologies are developed. To date, most Muslim liberation theologians have focused on hermeneutical analyses of Islamic sources, providing alternative readings to the mainstream interpretations distorted by the powerful. However, as the Argentinian liberation theologian Ivan Petrella (2006) notes, it is only when this academic exercise is attached to a historical project, in other words, a means by which ideas can be transformed into a concrete reality, that they attain real content and can be used to achieve liberation. In focusing on the religious knowledge produced by activists, this paper asserts the importance of praxis and illustrates how Islamic Liberation Theology can refocus on changing the material conditions of marginalised and oppressed groups.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first provides a brief conceptual framework, which defines class, arguing for the use of the analytical approach provided by Marxists. The second briefly discusses how the intrinsic relationship between praxis and any theology of liberation influences methodology. Building on this, the third outlines the British context, paying particular attention to Britain's imperial legacy, a racialised working class and the rise of neoliberalism since the early 1980s. It then gives a brief outline of Nijjor Manush and the activism that it is involved in. The fourth and final section presents the findings from the interviews and extracts key themes that can be used to produce a liberation theology that tackles class and economic inequality. It starts with a critique of apolitical and conservative views, recognising the materialist origins of religious knowledge production. It then outlines what are seen as the economic goals of a liberative Islam, which critiques capitalism and argues for the abolition of class. Finally, it discusses praxis and how economic justice can be established, using Nijjor Manush as a case study.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### *Defining Class*

Although class is regularly referred to in academic and public discourse, definitions and understandings of the concept are often vague and anecdotal. Before developing a theology of class struggle, therefore, it is essential to clarify what is meant by class and demonstrate why a Marxist understanding is the most useful to understand the root causes of class and economic exploitation.

Although Karl Marx predates Max Weber, it is useful to start with the latter's conceptualisation of class, as it dominates public and mainstream political discourse. Weber's works challenged the Marxist framework (which will be discussed in further detail later) by arguing that, rather than being determined by the relation to production, class was shaped by an individual's position in the market, with different classes seeking to improve their relative provision of goods (Allen 2004). Being the consequence of market conditions, they lack "belonging" and are unlikely to develop a common consciousness or act as a unified political force (Gane 2005).

Weber's conceptualisation has inspired countless social stratification models of class. Based on Weber's emphasis on the market, they often focus on typologies that divide groups into classes according to their job title, salary, consumption patterns, etc. (Allen 2004). Following this logic, many have sought to play down the role of class (some even claiming it is redundant) and the dominance of a content middle class (ibid.). They follow Weber's lead in providing a fragmented description of society's economic reality, dividing people into arbitrary groups based on abstract categories. This lack of analytical rigour means that Weberian stratification models provide little insight into the nature of a capitalist economy, people's differing positions within it or the relationship between classes. They present class as a natural phenomenon ordained by fate (or God), which has coincidentally placed people on different steps of the socio-economic ladder. Perhaps more dangerously, it can also be used to promote the idea that people are poor or wealthy solely, or primarily, because of their abilities and efforts. Such models, therefore, fail to recognise (or choose

to ignore) the exploitation present in the production process, which is hidden behind a descriptive classification of economic difference.

A Marxist worldview addresses these issues and focuses on the role that relations of production—the relationship different classes have to the means of production (such as labour, technology, tools and raw materials)—play a role in determining the economic, social, cultural and political structure of society. On this basis, Marx illustrated how, with the exception of collectivist societies, humans have always lived in classed societies, where a minority are able to exploit the majority through controlling the means of production (Marx and Engels 1974; Molyneux 2012). Within the current mode of production, capitalism, the dominance of the capitalist class means that they are able to live off the labour of others, while workers rely on selling their labour to survive (Mo Sung 2013). Due to this imbalance in economic power, capitalists can appropriate the surplus value, which is, put simply, what remains after paying wages, and use this to amass profit. This can be invested in acquiring more capital and increasing socio-political power, through which the capitalist class structure is reproduced (Marx 2013; Wolff 2013). Furthermore, this inequality means that workers have little power over what or how goods are produced and how profits are distributed. This is decided by the capitalist class, which is primarily driven by capital (or wealth) accumulation rather than broader social benefit, meaning that capitalists will prioritise efficient and low-cost production, including by supressing wages (Singer 2000).

Theorists have developed Marx's ideas in various directions and produced further insights based on his understanding of capitalism. The works of what are often termed the "Third World", decolonial or Black Marxists are significant, particularly concerning the British and international socio-economic position of Muslims. They highlight the fundamental role that slavery, imperialism and colonialism played in capital accumulation, which the metropole used to develop, and how the international division of labour maintains an exploitative relationship between the First and Third Worlds,[1] stunting the latter's economic progress (Rodney 2018; Galeano 2009; Tharoor 2017).[2] Others have noted how race has been used, both in the colony and in the metropole, to maintain the capitalist structure (Fanon 2001; Field et al. 2019; Roediger 2007, 2019). The prominent Marxist C.L.R. James (2001, p. 230) summarises this relationship between race and class, which was often overlooked by European Marxists, noting, "The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics. . .but to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental". Factoring in race, as well as other factors, such as gender, is therefore essential in understanding how capitalism operates and maintains an exploitative economic structure.

Ultimately, Marxism challenges the Weberian notion that class is a natural phenomenon by highlighting that it is a *product* of social relations and, therefore, should be seen as a *relationship*, not a thing (Vanneman and Cannon 2018). It highlights how all classed societies are inherently exploitative based on the appropriation of surplus value. While the means through which this is undertaken may differ between different modes of production, this inherent characteristic remains. Today, the capitalist class uses the means of production for its own gain through the exploitation of workers and drive for profit. This not only maintains the status quo but also worsens inequalities, as a smaller group of the economic elite controls the means of production. A Marxist conceptualisation, therefore, goes to the heart of why inequalities exist and provides an analytical framework through which we can understand class and its effects on our current world.

## 3. Methodology

### *Theology and Praxis*

As mentioned earlier, Liberation Theology places great importance on praxis and achieving material change for the marginalised. Liberation theologians do not feign neutrality but acknowledge that oppression exists in the contemporary moment and must be combatted—through praxis. As Freire (2017, p. 52) argues, "Liberation is a praxis: the

action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it". It is not, therefore, a purely academic exercise but must be directed towards worldly change.

To achieve this, a theology of class struggle must be developed precisely in that: the struggle. Esack (1997, p. 111), building on Freire and the work of Brazilian liberation theologian Clodovis Boff ([1982] 2009), asserts that theology is the "second act" that is preceded by political involvement. The centrality of praxis necessitates, therefore, that a liberation theology is produced in conjunction with activists who are involved in the struggle to combat class exploitation. As Esack (1997) argues, from a Muslim perspective, this methodology originates in the Quran, where God says, "And those who strive hard for Us, we shall surely guide them in Our Ways" (29:69),[3] promising Divine knowledge to those who engage in *jihad*.[4]

Building on this, this paper uses qualitative research methods to bridge the gap between practice and theory. Initial in-depth interviews, which lasted between one and three hours, and were followed by more informal conversations in person or online, were used to understand more about Nijjor Manush's activities, the activists' socio-economic backgrounds and experiences, their motivations for getting involved in activism and the role that religion played in informing their political worldviews and engagement. Conversations at the organisation's events, including protests, talks and workshops, were used to build trust and, along with snowball sampling, recruit participants.[5] A focus group expanded on some of the religious themes that came up in the interviews, such as justice; discussed Islam's political and economic goals in greater depth; and explored relevant verses and *hadith*. These research methods were further supplemented by participant observation and open source research, which analysed online media related to Nijjor Manush, including articles and social media. The use of these various methods allowed the study to centre activists, giving them an opportunity to articulate a theology on the shared basis of their beliefs and lived experiences, outlining how Islam and Muslims should intervene in our current moment to end class exploitation.

## 4. Contextualising a Theology of Praxis

Before analysing how Muslim activists in London (re)interpret Islam to combat class and economic inequality, it is important to understand the social context in which they operate. As argued earlier, any liberation theology must be centred on historical change, requiring involvement in specific historical projects. Regarding Britain, two factors are particularly important to understand: the development of a racialised working class and the rise of neoliberalism in the past few decades. These are discussed next, followed by a brief discussion of how Nijjor Manush intervenes in this milieu as a historical project for change.

### *4.1. The Racialised Working Class*

Britain's historical role as an empire and one of the birthplaces of modern capitalism means it played a central role in creating and upholding the international division of labour and the racial dynamics that underpin it. This history reverberates in Britain today, where migrants (mostly from former colonies) populate low-paid and precarious jobs and, notably, sustain social services, such as the NHS.[6]

Migrant communities gravitated towards areas with greater job opportunities, predominantly port cities, such as Cardiff and Liverpool, or industrial and manufacturing hubs, such as Birmingham, Greater Manchester and Glasgow.[7] As the capital, a port city, manufacturing hub and diplomatic centre, London has always attracted disproportionate numbers of migrants. According to 2021 census data, 46% of Londoners are non-white, making its white population, proportionately, the lowest in the country (UK Government 2022). This migrant community is also more diverse than elsewhere, with large Middle Eastern and African groups present in the capital. Like much of the rest of the country, London's working class communities are concentrated in precarious employment, particularly in services and hospitality. Due to the dominance of the capital's financial hub, the City of

London, however, the divide between rich and poor is also higher. The top 10% hold 42.5% of the city's wealth, with the bottom 50% holding only 6.85%, while 28% of Londoners live in poverty, 6% higher than the national average (Trust for London n.d.b). Like elsewhere in the country, these trends disproportionately affect racialised communities. Between October 2020 and September 2021, for example, 39% of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, 34% of Black and 33% of mixed-race people were unemployed (Trust for London n.d.a). These specificities of the London context are important to note since this is the arena of struggle for Nijjor Manush's activists.

Tower Hamlets, which borders the City of London to the east, is particularly important. Whether it was Irish or Jewish refugees fleeing famine and persecution, respectively, in the 1800s, or South Asians in the postwar period, the Brick Lane area, in particular, has been the point of arrival for migrants coming to London for centuries. Today, the borough is 35% Bangladeshi, making it the largest Bangladeshi community in the UK, both in terms of absolute numbers and in terms of proportion of the population (Tower Hamlets Council 2022). According to 2021 census data, however, it is the poorest London borough and has a child poverty rate of 56%, the highest in the country and 25% higher than the national average (Peach 2022). Although Nijjor Manush does not limit its activities to Tower Hamlets, such statistics and its centrality to Bengali life in the UK make it a key site of struggle—explored further next.

The borough, as well as London and the UK as a whole, reflects a racialised capitalist structure, which ensures that minoritised groups overwhelmingly find themselves in the most vulnerable economic positions. Byrne et al. (2020) show how this economic inequality is a major factor in explaining racialised communities' concentration in deprived neighbourhoods and increased health risks, with these groups overwhelmingly ending up in densely populated "internal colonies" in Britain's cities (Charles 2019, p. 168). Therefore, race and class should be seen as mutually constitutive, as Third World Marxists argued, with the legacies of Britain's imperial history visible in its contemporary streets (Goodfellow 2019). In this sense, terms such as "multi-ethnic", "racialised", "British Pakistani/Bengali" and "Black British" often imply a working class position and, as Shilliam (2018, p. 180) argues, "Race is class. . .there is no politics of class that is not already racialised".

### 4.2. The Triumph of Neoliberalism

Although, as we have seen, most racialised groups were always exploited and excluded from centres of power, the postwar period also saw the creation of a variety of state social welfare provisions, such as the NHS, social housing and benefits. Built on the principles of Keynesian economics and to ward off the threat of Marxist-inspired revolutions, such as that which occurred in Russia in 1917, this system sought to blunt the sharpest edges of capitalism. The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 ended this postwar consensus. Influenced by the principles of neoliberal economics espoused by thinkers such as Milton Friedman,[8] Thatcher's government systematically cut back state provisions and allowed the private sector to further encroach into the economy. The subsequent New Labour (1997–2010), Conservative–Liberal Democrats Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015–) governments all adopted this worldview, emphasising private-sector-led growth, which widened the gap between the rich and the poor and led to greater economic exploitation (Charles 2019).

The scaling back of government services, which reached a new level of ferocity with the enforcement of austerity measures after the 2008 global economic crash, disproportionately affected the poor and working class, who depended on these services. Indeed, while government funding for tax credits, social welfare, disability benefits, legal aid, universal credit, etc., continues to be eroded, the 1000 wealthiest Britons doubled their wealth between 2008 and 2016 (Jones 2020).

Directly due to the retreat of government, the private and charity sector has stepped in to provide basic goods and services. The commodification of housing is particularly significant in the London and Nijjor Manush context since, rather than being seen as

a human right accessible to all, the market increasingly dictates housing. As part of Thatcher's push to remove the "lazy" poor's reliance on government handouts, councils did not replace the social housing stocks that were sold off from the 1980s, creating longer waiting lists and increased prices in the private rental market (ibid.). In London, the effects of this are even harsher, with housing costs making up 56% of the net income for London's residents compared to 37% for the rest of England (Trust for London n.d.b). The privatisation of housing and increasing demand have inevitably led to the gentrification of entire neighbourhoods in the city. The consequent unaffordability of rent and local services means that entire populations have been displaced as a result, breaking up established communities and social networks (Trust for London n.d.c). Tower Hamlets, in particular, which borders the City of London and contains Canary Wharf, another financial hub, experienced the highest levels of gentrification of any London borough from 2010 to 2016 (My London n.d.). This commodification of housing, which is a direct result of the shift to neoliberal economics, has disproportionately and negatively impacted the working class, which, as we have seen, often intersects with race, therefore, again affecting British Muslim communities. This is the context that Muslim activists operate in and to which they are responding.

### *4.3. Nijjor Manush*

Nijjor Manush, formed in 2018, is a group of (Muslim) Bengali activists who sought to reclaim and revive a radical socialist politics inspired by the British Black Power and Asian Youth movements of the 1960s and 1970s (see Sivanandan 2019; Field et al. 2019; Shafi and Nagdee 2022).[9] They expressed a frustration that the community had retreated from politics and sought to assimilate within the existing socio-political structures.[10] The group's name, which means "our own people" in Bangla, reflects the organisation's communalism and collective beliefs.[11] Rather than seeing itself as a nationalist project,[12] they describe themselves as an "independent campaigning group that aims to educate young Bengalis in the UK to challenge issues facing women, working class communities and people of colour today" (Nijjor Manush n.d.a).

These goals are reflected in their two main areas of activity. First, Nijjor Manush engages in community education through various events and workshops designed to bridge the gap between culture, history and politics. Indeed, members were critical of events that simply celebrated culture (although acknowledging the necessity of this at times) without attaching it to the realities of the diaspora (See note 12 above). Their Bangla Fora project, launched in November 2021, is particularly important in this regard. It aims to educate participants' on history and social issues while developing practical skills as community organisers. It mixes educational activities about the history of the diaspora with modern anti-racism activism, digital campaigning and community outreach methods (Nijjor Manush n.d.b).

Bangla Fora acts as a bridge between Nijjor Manush's first campaign area, community education, and their second, critical interventions. The latter aims to organise the community around local and international issues that affect them, such as poverty, gentrification and state violence (Nijjor Manush n.d.c). To date, the majority of its activism has centred on the Save Brick Lane campaign, which looks to resist gentrification in the Brick Lane area of Tower Hamlets. As mentioned, this gentrification has had adverse effects across London, particularly in inner-city boroughs. Tower Hamlets has faced particularly large pressure by developers to "regenerate", which has a detrimental effect on local communities. In the Brick Lane case, the owners of the Old Truman Brewery, who own significant amounts of land in the area, are proposing to build a shopping mall with four floors of corporate offices on Brick Lane, which campaigners say threatens the cultural integrity of the area and ignores the needs of local residents, such as affordable housing, work and community spaces (ibid.). Being home to the country's largest Bengali community, which is also overwhelmingly Muslim, Nijjor Manush has been instrumental in resisting these plans, collecting petition signatures from 550 residents and 140 local businesses[13] and organising

protests and a legal challenge to the council's approval of the regeneration plans. Through its involvement, it has become embedded in the local community, earning the trust of many and reviving hope in the possibility of an alternative way of living.[14] Nijjor Manush's grassroots critical interventions are part of a broader socialist historical project, which looks to combat the sources of economic and racial violence. The following section looks at the interplay between this worldview and Islam.

## 5. Developing a Theology of Class Struggle

Nijjor Manush's activism is the most vital component of the hermeneutical circle through which a liberative theology to combat class and economic inequality is developed. Interviews and discussions with members uncovered how religion influenced this praxis. Particular themes and principles emerged that can be extrapolated to lay the foundations of a theology of class struggle, challenging orthodox, apolitical or capitalist interpretations of Islam and outline the economic goals of Islam and means through which economic justice can be achieved in the current epoch.

### *5.1. Challenging Orthodoxy*

Activists showed a dissatisfaction with the way in which Islam was interpreted and practiced by the majority of Muslims, arguing that this either obscured or upheld the unjust political status quo. Reflecting the depoliticisation of the Bengali community mentioned before, an apolitical approach to Islam was also critiqued. For example, Fatima critiqued an "assimilationist" Islam that, in many ways, imitated the integrationalist attitude of many first-generation immigrants, who feared to become involved in politics.[15] This reluctance reflects Muslims' (and other racialised communities') conditional acceptance as "British", which is dependent on being a so-called "good citizen" who does not cause trouble or challenge the status quo, instead showing gratitude for the perceived benefits and compassion shown by their British (read: white) hosts. Additionally, it reflects a particular individualist politic, discussed in detail later, which encourages people to prioritise personal progress over societal and collective concerns.

Influenced by these dual factors, religious spaces and institutions were critiqued by activists for their aversion to politics, which prevented them from protecting the Muslim community's worldly, as well as spiritual, well-being. Tasnima notes that religion and politics are "almost seen as two entities instead of one thing".[16] She observes that mosques' political outlooks are limited to fundraising for particular causes (often abroad) but without asking "why are we fundraising. . .what else do they need?" (See note 16 above). This apolitical trend is exacerbated in the current climate of securitisation and state surveillance, which prevents Muslims and mosques from engaging in politics for fear of repercussions from the state and accusations of extremism (See note 16 above). As a result of these factors, the landscape is dominated by an apolitical Islam, which refuses to challenge the status quo and encourages individualist engagement with society. It refuses to tackle issues such as capitalism and racism in anything more than a superficial manner and fails to address the root causes of class exploitation and economic inequality.

Activists were also heavily critical of a second, more reactionary, trend within Islamic discourse. Rather than obscuring the unjust political reality, like apolitical Islam does, this actively justifies it and espouses its virtues. Azfar notes:

> influential figures in the Muslim community, who don't know what they're talking about at all, they know nothing about race, nothing about feminism, nothing about socialism, but they are. . .just repeating the words of right-wing ideologues.[17]

While, as Azfar notes, these reactionary and oppressive views are not limited to questions related to the economy, with several female activists noting the treatment and positionality of Muslim women in particular,[18] they result in capitalist principles becoming accepted within an Islamic framework:

> Often in passing, what are deemed to be authoritative Muslim public figures basically naturalise capitalism as if we can't question that. It's just natural and always existed, even in the Prophet's time. [And so,] the economic question, they just put it away and they deal with social and cultural questions [instead].[19]

Simplistic arguments, such as "Islam allows private property and trade and therefore, is closer to capitalism than socialism", are used to dismiss systemic critiques and questions around the way society is structured and reinforce the capitalist mode of production, which lies at the root of class and economic inequality.

On a granular level, this reinforces the individualistic neoliberal ethic, which encourages Muslims to pursue material wealth and be unconcerned with broader questions around social inequality. Rather than seeing these as the result of structural issues, this ethic encourages an entrepreneurial spirit, blaming inequality on a lack of individual will or ability to succeed (Klein 2008; Jones 2020). Fatima highlights this trend within the Muslim community:

> I feel like Muslims, from having grown up in this [society], are very much soft capitalists. . .They very much aspire towards having capital, access to capital and climbing up the class hierarchy. . .That's not to say there aren't Muslims who aren't. . .invested in that, but overall I don't think that's a priority for Muslims, to overturn these inequalities because the focus is very much on the self. . .and acquiring assets and commodities to basically live what they deem, I guess, a comfortable life.[20]

This quote provides a sharp assessment of dominant attitudes within Muslim communities and shows how a pro-capitalist Islam has permeated into their worldview and coincided with the broader neoliberal ethic promoted within society. Therefore, activists find themselves challenging an apolitical Islam and a reactionary Islam, which naturalise capitalism and encourage an individualistic worldview. Muslims are encouraged to work hard within the system to improve their condition, rather than focusing on structural critiques and combatting economic exploitation or capitalism.

### *5.2. Developing a Liberative Theological Alternative*

Integral to activists' critiques of mainstream Islamic interpretations was the recognition that a radical alternative was possible. Members of Nijjor Manush reflected Liberation Theology's theoretical assertion that religious knowledge, just like other ideas, is influenced by power relations and that orthodoxy will often reflect the interests of the powerful. This materialist worldview requires acknowledging individuals' positionality and resisting the temptation to essentialise Islam. As Tanzil put it:

> This is not to say that there isn't. . .a perfect text [the Quran] right, but that [it] is the perfect text that's been interpreted by historically constituted beings and so their understanding of this perfect text is always going to be limited.[21]

Tanzil further noted the influence of Ali Shariati, a foundational figure in Islamic Liberation Theology, who highlights the existence of different religions, which either support or oppose oppression:

> There has existed throughout human history. . .a struggle between the religion of deceit, stupefaction and justification of the status quo and the religion of awareness, activism and revolution. (Shariati 1979)

Using metaphors, such as the struggle between Cain and Abel or Red versus Black Shi'ism, Shariati's thought provides the theoretical foundation for a liberative theology that recognises the impact of the material world on religious thought. Regarding the former, for example, Shariati (ibid.) argues that history is a struggle between the systems of Cain, which uses religion to justify reactionary and oppressive structures, and Abel, which uses religion to encourage revolution and establish justice. Within the Shi'a tradition, Cain was represented by the institutionalisation of religion under the Safavids (Black Shi'ism), which

severed it from its true, historical position as the religion of the oppressed (Red Shi'ism) (Shariati n.d.a).

In our current epoch, the influence of capitalism over Islam, as we have seen, is particularly relevant. As Tasnima says, it is important to recognise:

> the way we view religion is going to be influenced by capitalism as well, because it's a system. Religion isn't just here, it's gonna be influenced by every single thing that affects the world. It's not in a vacuum.[22]

This materialist approach to religious knowledge resists the hegemonic claims of a capitalist Islam and allows for the possibility of a liberative alternative to be produced. For several activists, echoing Shariati's claim that a revolutionary religion for the marginalised has always existed, the foundations of this alternative are visible within Islamic intellectual history itself. Of particular importance was the development and attempted implementation of Islamic socialism in many parts of the Muslim world. While the limitations were acknowledged, particularly in its application, this school of thought was a source of hope for several activists that an alternative to a reactionary, capitalist Islam was possible. Azfar, for example, believed that it can be used to overcome the "intellectual. . .backwardness that Muslims find themselves in, especially in the West".[23] Several figures were mentioned, such as Mirza Sultan-Galiev (1892–1940), a Tatar Bolshevik revolutionary; Tan Malaka (1897–1949), an Indonesian Marxist philosopher; Haji Misbach (1876–1926), a communist activist in the Dutch East Indies; and Ihsan Eliacik (1961–), a Turkish theologian and socialist. However, it was Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880–1976), or the *Laal* (Red) Mawlana, whom research participants mentioned the most often. Born under the British Raj, Bhashani's political career spanned over eight decades in British India, post-partition Pakistan and independent Bangladesh. He was a staunch anti-imperialist, proponent of Third World solidarity and advocate for the rights of the poor, whom he wanted to offer spiritual and material emancipation through his brand of Islamic socialism (Uddin 2018). As Fatima explains:

> Mawlana Bhashani did this phenomenal thing [in] the way he organised the peasant class of Bangladesh, and in particular, how he utilised very leftist politics with religion. . .And what was phenomenal about that is because, in contemporary times, people always think socialism and Islam can't go hand in hand, and Mawlana Bhashani is literally the epitome who. . .[embodies] socialist Islam, or [an] Islam that is socialist.[24]

While the context in which these trends of Islamic socialism developed varied greatly from London today, their importance comes in their inspiration and ability to present an alternative to the normalised and hegemonic capitalist Islam that groups such as Nijjor Manush inevitably clash with. It highlights the role that human agency, context and power relations play in our understanding of Islam and paves the way for a liberative Islam that addresses capitalist exploitation, which is at the root of class and economic inequality.

### *5.3. Economic Goals in Islam*

> A revolutionary programme is one set forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system to a better one. . .[whereas] a reform programme is set up by the existing exploitative system as an appeasing handout, to fool the people and to keep them quiet. (Seale 1990, pp. 412–3)

Liberation Theology, rightly, emphasises praxis. However, it is important to also define the goals towards which this is directed and through which current conditions can be interpreted and tactics decided. This overall ideology is essential to give praxis a clear direction, as the above Bobby Seale quote argues. Regarding Liberation Theology in particular, Petrella (2006) noted how, in the aftermath of the fall of the socialist bloc in 1991, Latin American theologians lacked a historical project to which their reflections were attached. To avoid falling into this trap, an Islamic theology must define the economic goals it is interpreted in relation to and judged against.

In response to the question of whether Islam ultimately aimed to abolish class, however, members of Nijjor Manush were not in agreement. Fatima argued that this was not possible in the material world. Rather, within Islam, "There's a recognition this will exist, but it wants to. . .create a society where people can live with dignity".[25] While she acknowledged that even this could not be achieved within an exploitative capitalist system, she did not share the view of other participants—that class needs to be abolished entirely. Tasnima, for example, believed that Islam calls for "the overthrow of everything that we know".[26] Tanzil, recognising that Islam could be interpreted in various ways, used less definitive language but maintained:

> even if it doesn't definitively make that argument for the demolition of class, could one make a reasonable argument that it calls for a classless society. And I think. . .there's some really, really interesting things there, that you could almost see as heirs to ideas like the dictatorship of the proletariat.[27]

This tension can be reconciled by returning to our theoretical understanding of class, analysing how it operates within a capitalist system and through which mechanisms people are made poor. As Tanzil notes:

> it's incumbent upon us to understand how people are made poor because people aren't made poor because of some kind of pathology or biology right. But Islam, clearly, I think, you know, mandates us to understand. . .what are the background conditions that make people poor? (See note 27 above)

This approach prevents Islam from becoming a static system of thought, allowing it to adapt to different conditions. It therefore is no longer enough to simply say poverty, wealth and inequality existed at the time of the Prophet and therefore are acceptable. Rather than being based on such abstract arguments, judgement is based on the material conditions to which people are subjected.

The centrality of justice and anti-oppression in Islam means that these principles can be used as the litmus test against which the question of class abolition is judged. Tasnima, for example, notes that "Islam is a religion for the oppressed. It always will be. . . God is always with the oppressed".[28] Supporting this, Fatima argues, "Justice is central to being Muslim and practicing Islam".[29] The key question therefore is whether class and economic inequality exists because of injustice or not. As a Marxist understanding illustrates, it is the result of an exploitative relationship between the capitalist and working classes, where surplus value is extracted from the latter to enrich the former. Azfar reframes this by making a distinction between poverty and exploitation, arguing that the focus should be on the latter:

> I think, for me, there's a clear, quite explicit injunction in the Quran and hadith against exploitation in the abstract. . .I think that's the question we're dealing with. . .—in the course of building something Islamic. . .how in doing so [do we] create conditions whereby exploitation is negated or no longer allowed, and therefore any sort of distinction between the rich and the poor become one, drastically limited. . .undercutting the root of inequality. So again, the main point, I think, is a distinction between rich and poor, and exploiter, exploited.[30]

This focus on exploitation can be used to reconcile disagreements around whether Islam calls for the abolition or managing of class. An analysis of how class operates and people are made poor within the current capitalist context shows that exploitation is inherent to the system. God's affinity to the oppressed and injunctions to uphold and establish justice make this status quo unacceptable and require Muslims to tackle the oppression that lies at the root of a capitalist system. Only through this can economic justice be established, and it will inevitably lead to the abolition of class and a drastic reduction in inequality.

### *5.4. Interpreting Economic Principles*

A critique of class was not limited to a general aversion to injustice and exploitation, however. Other, more specific principles were extracted from the Quran and *hadith*, which could be used to further support, what Tanzil describes before as, "a reasonable argument. . .for a classless society".[31] The prohibition of theft, for example, Tanzil highlighted with verse 4:29, which commands believers to "not devour wealth among yourselves unrightfully, but. . .trade by mutual consent", could be extended to the idea of surplus value today (See note 31 above). This argument is further supported by constant prohibitions to hoarding wealth, which Tasnima notes is "one of the main reasons why class exists",[32] and an animosity towards wealth accumulation as an end in itself. For example, Surah al-Humaza states:

> Woe to every slanderer, backbiter, who amasses wealth and counts it over. He supposes his wealth will make him immortal! No, indeed! He will surely be cast into the Crusher. (104:1–4)

and Surah al-Ma'un criticises

> the one who drives away the orphan. . .does not urge the feeding of the needy. . .those who show off and deny aid/withhold things of use from others (107:2–7).[33]

Based on these verses, and others, the activists argued that an argument could be made for challenging classed economic systems, which expropriate wealth and facilitate its concentration in the hands of a few.

In addition to this general position, particular mechanisms, such as Islamic taxation, *zakat* specifically, and prohibitions of interest also point towards a desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth.[34] They can be interpreted as directing society towards common ownership, a key principle of a socialist society. Indeed, reflecting on 4:126, "to Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth;[35] and Allah encompasses all things", Tanzil says that here God establishes a "global commons that we all have access to. . .and ideas of enclosure, private property are an anathema to the idea that this is God's property".[36]

This radical interpretation of the Islamic canon provides a critique of capitalism and calls for structural change. Through combining an analysis of contemporary exploitative economic conditions and an assertion of God's preference for the oppressed and criticism of the wealthy, a strong case can be made for a historical project that seeks to abolish class. As an alternative, it seeks to establish the common ownership of the means of production, where wealth is used for the benefit of the collective, not a wealthy minority.

### *5.5. Establishing Economic Justice*

In addition to this normative position, there was a recognition that immediate action needed to be taken to alleviate the condition of the poor and economically exploited. The verse in Surah al-Qasas, "And We desired to show favour to those who were abased[37] in the land, and to make them *imams*,[38] and to make them the heirs, and to establish them in the land" (28:5–6), which is a foundational verse in Islamic Liberation Theology, provides activists with a direction to take praxis in the here and now. Mirroring God's preference for the oppressed, Muslims are tested by whether they stand with the exploited and oppressed.[39] Giving the poor a dignified life, which Fatima emphasised, would be more suitably placed here as a transitory goal until wider systemic change is achieved and the roots of exploitation removed. Indeed, asserting this dignity, as well as other forms of praxis, is a requirement, as emphasised in the *hadith*:

> Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith.[40]

For those who are exploited, God's commands to the privileged, such as giving in charity and not hoarding wealth, are indicators of what their rights are—rights they can

demand, through violence if necessary.[41] As Abu Dharr, a Companion of the Prophet, said, "I am perplexed by a hungry person who has no bread in his house; why does he not arise from among the people, his sword unsheathed and rebel" (Shariati n.d.b, p. 10). Preference for the oppressed and working to establish them in the land, as per 28:5–6, is a guiding principle for Muslim activists and at the core of establishing economic justice.

Although activists agreed on the centrality of economic justice, they noted that the substance was left undefined. Here, tensions between short- and long-term goals, as well as differing perspectives on what justice means, come to the fore. As Mohammed said:

> How we go about [establishing justice] is the ultimate question really and it's something that I grapple with because it also makes you think about your faith and where you stand and [whether you should be] organising merely to overhaul the system or should you be also organising to help plaster the maladies that have come about because of this system. . .I mean, these are questions I often ask myself, and it's also a question of where I stand and how I can go about doing things.[42]

This tension is perhaps best illustrated in discussions around the role of charity and *zakat* in establishing economic justice. While the latter was acknowledged as an obligation of spiritual benefit to the believer,[43] the emphasis on these as the only way to engage political and economic issues was criticised. It reflects a "neoliberal understanding of the faith",[44] which has commodified giving[45] and only allows for a "narrow" solidarity with the oppressed.[46] Consequently, it serves more as a way for Muslims "making themselves feel good"[47] than addressing the "root cause of inequalities and exploitation".[48]

Although activists did recognise the value in even these short-term measures, the lack of structural critique and the absence of a wider historical project were highlighted. By focusing only on the present, these measures lacked any political weight, as Tanzil argued:

> We can look at the deeper meaning behind [*zakat* and *sadaqah*], that there is this duty and obligation towards the made-marginalised. And if you take that deeper meaning, that opens up a completely different kind of politics and engagement that you have with the world. Is it really enough when homeless people are sleeping outside of boarded up houses, when people are drowning in the English Channel, is it really a fulfilment of your duty that every Friday at *jummah*, you put a couple of quid in the bucket?[49]

Rather, if Islam

> has a preference for the poor and it has a normative aspiration of equality. . .then your reading and conceptualisation of justice would be completely different, what we might in the contemporary moment call social justice, right or transformative justice. Whereas, if you don't see class difference, if you don't see any other kind of embedded material difference through reading attempts, then your conceptualisation of justice might be something akin to an individualistic justice, you know, eye for an eye, criminal justice, punitive approaches, those kinds of things. So, I think that the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes justice within Islam, as well as it being a sentiment, a disposition, it has to be read through how we think Islam, and all of its collection of texts, understands the world and its aspirations.[50]

These quotes illustrate the importance of defining economic goals and a clear historical project against which particular tactics and tools for change can be judged. As activists highlight, charity is limited in this regard, and although it can alleviate some of the worst effects of economic exploitation, at best, it fails to address these structural issues, while in many cases, it actually helps to uphold the exploitative status quo.

Conversely, Nijjor Manush took its praxis in a different direction, asserting that economic justice requires addressing *systemic* issues and is attached to social transformation. This can be articulated through what are called "non-reformist reforms" that, although

achieved by working within the system, do not endorse the overall socio-economic structure.[51] In this sense, the ambiguity and lack of codification of the concept of justice in the Quran give grassroots campaigners the necessary flexibility to adapt to changing conditions and demands.

This was reflected in the Save Brick Lane campaign, which Nijjor Manush has led. Here, a conception of justice emerged through a dialectical relationship between activists and the local community, who were threatened by regeneration plans. Fatima explains how "we came in with a particular idea [of justice], but that itself was challenged, it shifted, it then reformulated into something else, it has a different meaning now".[52] She expands:

> Justice isn't just something you arrive at on your own. . .because often knocking on literally hundreds of peoples' doors and speaking to them in English and Bengali, trying to figure out what it is they want and. . .the thing that kept coming up over and over and over again, where they felt like injustice was being done to them, is their housing situation. So, coming to the particular conclusion, and therefore, a particular goal that we want to reach for the campaign was done in relation to what we were observing, alongside the other campaigning groups, but also, coming to that conclusion, based off what we learnt from the collective struggle of the local residents and tenants (See note 52 above).

Here, Fatima illustrates how praxis informs not only theology within the hermeneutical circle but our understanding of social justice and class struggle itself. Through conversation with people during the campaign, it meant demanding good-quality and affordable housing, rents and community spaces, while resisting eviction, home foreclosure and forced displacement. By challenging the power of capital and securing the interests of the working class and racialised communities, Nijjor Manush is seeking to secure non-reformist reforms, which eat away at the overall capitalist power structure.

Activists emphasised that the Save Brick Lane campaign should not be isolated from a broader worldview, which looks to politicise and mobilise the Bangladeshi community. In the absence of hope, Nijjor Manush helps them to imagine an alternative way of living, where not only "they survive, but where they thrive and where they flourish".[53] Therefore, it seeks to build up the Bengali community as a political force that understands the root causes of racial capitalism (supplemented by community education programmes, such as Bangla Fora) and helps them to imagine and work towards a viable alternative. Unlike neoliberal practices of charity, Nijjor Manush activists saw praxis through the lens of a broader worldview, which attaches contemporary struggles to the desire to achieve systemic change. This approach is indicative of a liberative perspective, which balances short- and long-term goals through recourse to the historical project of ending economic exploitation and abolishing class.

## 6. Conclusions

For any liberation theology to be truly liberative, it has to prioritise praxis and achieving material change for the marginalised and oppressed. Within the Islamic context, class and economic exploitation has not been addressed, which is particularly concerning in the current moment, where the inequality has reached unprecedented levels and increasingly more people are finding themselves unable to obtain the necessities to live. Nijjor Manush intervenes in a British context where a racialised working class is being exploited by the expansion of a neoliberal regime, which commodifies basic goods and services, in particular housing.

A praxis-based liberation theology by necessity prioritises the activist, with religious knowledge being developed in and through the struggle. Members of Nijjor Manush recognised the influence that material reality had on religious knowledge and were critical of its hegemonic apolitical and reactionary manifestations. They emphasised the existence of contrarian traditions, particularly Islamic socialist trends, that challenged capitalism and demonstrated the potential of a revolutionary alternative. Through this inspiration and an interpretation of the canonical texts, activists argued that an Islamic liberative project should

aim to remove all forms of economic exploitation. Contradictions in political objectives among members could be reconciled by using a Marxist understanding of class, which sees exploitation as inherent to any class-based system. Based on this and Islam's aversion to injustice, abolishing class becomes the necessary end goal for a liberative theology. This historical project dictates how economic justice is achieved in the here and now. The flexibility afforded by general injunctions to "establish justice" in the Quran allows grassroots organisers to develop their understandings in conjunction with the oppressed and work towards radical "non-reformist reforms". These challenge the foundations of an exploitative economic structure and show that a theology of class struggle is necessary if Muslims want to achieve economic justice.

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## Notes

1 The terms "First" and "Third Worlds" have deliberately been used here in an attempt to reaffirm their continued relevance in the contemporary world. In opposition to other descriptors, such as the Global North and South, these terms not only speak to a particular exploitative relationship between the metropole and the periphery but also speak to a form of solidarity, movement and praxis, which began with high-profile events, such as the Bandung Conference of 1955, which continues today with the legacy and work of Third World Marxists, feminists, etc.

2 Although not a Marxist, Shashi Tharoor's book *Inglorious Empire* gives a detailed account of how wealth was extracted from India to develop Britain.

3 All translated verses of the Quran are based on Ali Quli Qara'i's (2004) translation, unless otherwise stated, with small changes made by the author, where necessary, for clarity.

4 Here, the word *jihad* refers to the verb *jahadu* mentioned in verse 29:69, translated as "to strive hard".

5 Five members of Nijjor Manush took part in this study: Fatima Rajina, Tasnima Uddin, Azfar Shafi, Mohammed Ullah and Sarah Sarwar. They are all part of the organisational core and work closely to decide on Nijjor Manush's identity, activities and future trajectory. One former member, Tanzil Chowdhury, who helped to found the organisation but has since stepped back to focus on other projects and commitments, also participated. All interviewees agreed for their actual names to be used in this paper. In this case, anonymity would have been a form of erasure that would not allow them to take ownership of their words and the vital praxis in which they are involved.

6 For more on the role and struggles of migrants, see Field et al. (2019), Clark and Shankley (2020) and Goodfellow (2019).

7 According to the 2011 census, 97.4% of Asians and 98.1% of Black people, along with 92.4% of mixed-race people, in England live in urban areas (UK Government 2018).

8 For more on the global rise of neoliberalism and the influence of Milton Friedman, see Naomi Klein (2008) and Angus Burgin (2012).

9 Azfar Shafi, co-author of *Race to the Bottom: Reclaiming Antiracism*, is also a member of Nijjor Manush.

10 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021; Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Sarah, interview with author, 13 May 2022; Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

11 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021.

12 Ibid.; Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.

13 Fatima Rajina. Lecture. "Subaltern London: Neighbourhoods of Resistance and Care", London, 17 November 2021.

14 Ibid.; Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

15 Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.

16 Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.

17 Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.

18 Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021; Sarah, interview with author, 13 May 2022.

[19] Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[20] Fatima, interview with author, 16 September 2021.
[21] Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[22] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[23] Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[24] Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[25] Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[26] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[27] Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[28] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[29] Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[30] Azfar, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[31] Tanzil, ibid.
[32] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[33] Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022; "withhold things of use from others" was the translation provided by Tanzil in our discussion, which follows the general meaning provided by other translators.
[34] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021; Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[35] The translation of the first section of this verse is taken from Sahih International.
[36] Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[37] *Ustudifu* is variously translated as *abased*, *oppressed*, (*made*) *weak*, *inferior*, etc.
[38] Qurai does not translate the word *imam*, but this is often translated as *leaders* or *rulers* by other translators.
[39] Fatima, interview with author, 17 November 2021.
[40] Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi (Hadith 34). This hadith was mentioned by both Fatima and Tasnima in interviews with the author.
[41] Tasnima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[42] Mohammed, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
[43] Fatima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[44] Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[45] Tasnima, interview with author, 6 September 2021.
[46] Azfar, interview with author, 4 October 2022.
[47] Mohammed, interview with author, 13 May 2022.
[48] Azfar, interview with author, 4 October, 2022.
[49] Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December, 2022.
[50] Tanzil, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[51] Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.
[52] Fatima, Nijjor Manush focus group discussion with author, 30 January 2022.
[53] Tanzil, interview with author, 2 December 2022.

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