

ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA:
FARID ESACK'S RELIGIO-POLITICAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Yusuf Enes Sezgin: Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa: Farid Esack's Religio-Political Thought
(Under the direction of Cemil Aydin)

In this thesis, through analyzing the religiopolitical ideas of Farid Esack, I explore the local and global historical factors that made possible the emergence of Islamic liberation theology in South Africa. The study reveals how Esack defined and improved Islamic liberation theology in the South African context, how he converged with and diverged from the mainstream transnational Muslim political thought of the time, and how he engaged with Christian liberation theology. I argue that locating Islamic liberation theology within the debate on transnational Islamism of the 1970s onwards helps to explore the often-overlooked internal diversity of contemporary Muslim political thought. Moreover, it might provide important insights into the possible continuities between the emancipatory Muslim thought of the pre-1980s and Islamic liberation theology.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
BDS	Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions
Call	Call of Islam
COSAW	Congress of South African Writers
MJC	Muslim Judicial Council
MYM	Muslim Youth Movement
NPM	Network of Progressive Muslims
NYA	National Youth Action
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
Qiblah	Qiblah Mass Movement
SABSA	South African Black Scholars' Association
SCM	Student Christian Movement
UDF	United Democratic Front
WCRP	World Conference on Religion and Peace

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On September 13, 1986, a young Muslim theologian and anti-apartheid activist, Farid Esack, took the stage in the Central Methodist Church of Johannesburg to deliver the Second Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture amid the chaotic atmosphere dominating South Africa under the apartheid regime. The lecture was organized by the South African Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), an international interfaith organization dedicated to the promotion of justice and peace through religious dialogue and solidarity. Farid Esack was among leading representatives of different religious faith communities of South Africa who contributed substantially to the struggle against apartheid. He served between the years of 1984 and 1990 as the national coordinator of the Call of Islam, a prominent Muslim anti-apartheid organization, and also worked for the WCRP as Vice President for a number of years. Esack began by expressing his pleasure at talking as a member of the South African Muslim community, which had “come home to take its rightful place alongside other communities in the struggle against dehumanization and for justice and peace.”¹ His main focus was not on anti-apartheid struggle, however. Instead, he underlined the necessity of developing a comprehensive notion of justice that would go beyond the political realm. This could be possible, Esack pointed out, as long as his hearers were aware of the oneness of humanity and cared about universal concerns. For example, the liberation of women from the yoke of patriarchy and gender-based

¹ Esack, “The Unfinished Business of Our Liberation Struggle,” Farid Esack’s Personal Website (Outdated), September 13, 1986, <http://www.oocities.org/faridesack/fedesmondutulecture.html>.

oppression had to be an essential part of the struggle for justice. Also, human beings had to pay attention to environmental issues and attempt to prevent the exploitation of natural resources. Last but not least, faith communities had to build trust, and act with solidarity and shared responsibility within an active struggle for justice. “Only in struggling together,” stated Esack, “will we be able to discover in our neighbors of other religions virtues like peace, justice, love, forgiveness and hope.”²

The anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s led Esack to formulate an Islamic theology of liberation through interpreting the Qur’an as a liberating text. He was interested in revealing the revolutionary potential of Islam and developing a radical religiopolitical thought centered on justice, liberation, and pluralism. He believed that the Qur’an urged Muslims to struggle against social injustices such as racism, patriarchy, and economic deprivation. Moreover, interfaith solidarity was one of the building blocks of his theology. Not only co-religionists, but everyone who committed to creating and securing a just sociopolitical system would be comrades of Muslims in their pursuit of justice. This theological perspective was remarkable in a period in which both academic and public discussions concerning the relationship between Islam and politics focused on the topic of Islamism. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, scholars and other observers have increasingly described Islamism as a rising radical political ideology that aims to establish an Islamic system of governance based on sharia law and Islamic moral codes. A thirst for political power in the form of a state and the goal of creating an “ideological community” has been usually the defining feature of Islamist movements since then.³

² Esack, “Our Liberation Struggle.”

³ Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

By the 1990s, however, some scholars such as Olivier Roy and Asef Bayat surprisingly asserted that Islamism had failed completely as a political project, for Islamists did not succeed in their attempts to put into practice their ideology.⁴ Yet, the idea that Islamism is a fundamental political threat to the very existence of the Western world, symbolized by the notion of “the clash of civilizations,” became the hallmark of the debate on Islamist politics, particularly in the post-Cold War and the post-9/11 contexts.⁵ This prevailing perception of Islamism as a political threat, usually called “Islamic fundamentalism,” emerged also in parallel with a dramatic shift in Islamist politics and thought itself that began in the late 1970s. In fact, Islamism rose in the 1970s by appealing to Muslim masses disappointed with the failure of post-colonial nationalism, socialism and liberalism in bringing about justice and equality to the world.⁶ It was not only an outcry against the authoritarian secular leaders ruling Muslim-majority countries as well as against the Western (neo)colonial powers but also a demand for social justice and liberation. The famous Islamist slogan, “Neither East nor West but only Islam!” was very much indicative of both the disappointment and the hope Muslims had at the time.

Since the 1980s, however, due to some profound regional and global developments, Islamists departed considerably from the language of social justice and increasingly adopted socio-politically conservative and authoritarian attitudes. After the revolution of 1979, the liberative spirit of Iranian masses was substantially absorbed into an authoritarian rule in the face of American threats and the Iran-Iraq War. The rise of Iran as a global force exporting the

⁴ For the debate on the failure of Islamism, see Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London: Tauris, 1994) and Bayat, “The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 5, no. 9 (1996): 43-52.

⁵ See Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.

⁶ It is significant to note that, in the same period, “human rights emerged historically as the last utopia,” as a result of the collapse of both cold war and postcolonial ideologies. See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

revolutionary Islamic discourse to Muslim communities around the world had alarmed Saudi Arabia to challenge Iran's growing popularity and political power. The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 presented the Saudi with a golden opportunity to increase its regional power as well as exert greater control over Sunni movements by establishing transnational networks of Muslim militants and providing financial assistance to the Afghan *mujahideen*. Consequently, conflicting geopolitical strategies of Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two most influential Muslim-majority countries limited Islamist politics mostly to the political interests of these religious nation-states.

One major consequence of that shift was the withdrawal of Islamism into its own shell. In Muslim communities, the upsurge of anti-Americanism prompted by the Iranian Revolution as well as the Camp David Accords of 1978 was accompanied by the growth of anti-Soviet sentiment due to the invasion of Afghanistan.⁷ As Cemil Aydin pointed out, those contingent political developments gave rise to the "geopolitical pan-Islamic revival" in the 1980s and the idea of the political unification of Muslims around the world became the hallmark of Islamist politics.⁸ This was a radical departure from the earlier forms of international solidarity that many Islamists had actively practiced together with various subaltern groups including postcolonial nationalists, socialists, pan-Asianists and pan-Africanists. Pan-Islamists of the 1980s embraced the "racialized" Muslim identity and built their political vision on the binary of Muslims vs. non-

⁷ The negotiations and the subsequent agreements signed by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David, under the guidance of the US, was a source of huge disappointment on the part of Muslim masses with Egypt for it had abandoned the Palestinian cause, and also with non-Muslim countries who had not opposed the US-led plan: Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 211-15.

⁸ Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 177.

Muslims.⁹ Therefore, “the persistent illusion of an insular Muslim world” damaged Islamist internationalism severely and relegated “Muslims to reactionary and parochial positions, often against Western claims to universality.”¹⁰ As a result, embracing the idea of an Islamic state, considering global Muslim solidarity as the only way to achieve liberation, empowering Muslim communities, even to the detriment of others, and protecting the geopolitical interests of Muslim nation states constituted substantially the main agenda of Islamist thought and politics.

In the light of the transformation that Islamism went through from the late 1970s on, scholars have often ignored that, since the late 19th century, many pioneers of contemporary Islamism were greatly interested and directly invested in the issues of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, freedom and social justice; and not only political but also theological, philosophical, ethical and socioeconomic concerns were at the top of their intellectual agendas. They often engaged critically and constructively with secular ideologies including liberalism, socialism, and Marxism in search for liberationist political projects and interacted dynamically with anticolonial revolutionaries around the world for freedom and independence. In other words, Islamism has had a rich history of emancipatory politics and thought, from the solidarity between anticolonial Islamists and socialists in British India to the intellectual interaction between Muslim and Marxist intellectuals of the Third World.¹¹

⁹ Muslimness was racialized by European empires in the 19th century on the basis of the prevailing notion that Muslims were racially inferior to (Christian) Europeans. In the late 19th century, the first generation of Pan-Islamists relied on the same racialized Muslim identity as an effective tool in fostering global unity of Muslims in order to challenge the political domination of the West. See Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 3.

¹⁰ Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World*, 226.

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of the commonalities and interaction between nationalism, socialism, and Islamism in the first half of the 20th century, see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Ammar Ali Jan, in his remarkable piece on communism and Islamism in colonial India, criticized the ones who have seen the relationship between those ideologies in terms of overlapping geopolitical interests. He underlined, instead, their “shared historical subjectivity that allow these two political currents to recurrently overlap throughout the twentieth century.” See Jan, “Islam, Communism and the Search for a Fiction,” in *Muslims Against the Muslim*

Islamic liberation theology is no exception to this negligence. Scholars have not given enough attention to the emergence of Islamic liberation theology in the 1980s, although it was quite notable in the face of rising authoritarian, state-based and parochial tendencies within the mainstream Islamism in the same period.¹² As a radical theology that attempted to read and

League (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 255-284. Faridah Zaman, in her significant article on Indian Pan-Islamism in early twentieth century British India, challenged the notion of a “homogeneous” Pan-Islamism and pointed to the diversity of Indian Pan-Islamist thought that had included democratic, republican, and socialist ideas. See Zaman, “The Future of Islam, 1672–1924,” *Modern Intellectual History* (2018): 1-31. For the revolutionary mindset and political role Indian Muslims had during the Indian anticolonial struggle, see also Faridah Zaman, “Revolutionary History and the Post-Colonial Muslim: Re-Writing the ‘Silk Letters Conspiracy’ of 1916,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016): 626-643. Syed Akbar Hyder showed, in his fascinating study on the narrative of *Karbala* and martyrdom in South Asian memory, that Indian Muslims contributed to the struggle of the colonized masses as well as to the language of secular ideologies with their religious symbols. See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For a study that drew attention to Indian Muslim intellectuals, such as Mushir Hussain Kidwai (1878-1937), who had tried to formulate “ethical forms of political economy” based on Islamic teachings through benefitting from socialist ideologies, see Julia Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, Empire, and Secularism in Modern South Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 157. Samee Siddiqui argued, in his comprehensive study on Muhammad Barkatullah (1864-1927), a prominent Muslim intellectual-activist from India, that Barkatullah became a revolutionary anticolonialist with commitment to his Muslim identity and conceptualized a “cosmopolitan, inclusive and egalitarian” pan-Islamism. See Siddiqui, “The Career of Muhammad Barkatullah (1864-1927): From Intellectual to Anticolonial Revolutionary” (Master’s Thesis, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017). For a comparative study on the different anti-colonial perspectives of leading pan-Islamists of the late 19th-early 20th century, see Umar Ryad, “Anti-Imperialism and the Pan-Islamic Movement,” in *Islam and the European Empires*, ed. David Motadel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131-49. For a study on the complex relationship between Islamism and anti-imperialism, see Asef Bayat, “Islamism and Empire: The Incongruous Nature of Islamist Anti-Imperialism,” *Socialist Register* 44 (2008): 38-54. For an insightful comparative study on the ideas of Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon that explored the global aspect of Shariati’s views by situating him within anticolonial political thought, see Arash Davari, “A Return to Which Self? Ali Shari’ati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 34, no. 1 (2014): 86-105. See the letter sent by Fanon to Shariati in 1961, in which the former acknowledged the potential force of Islam in creating an anti-western civilization centered on human emancipation: See Frantz Fanon, “Letter to Ali Shariati,” in *Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom*, eds. Jean Khalifa and Robert J.C. Young (Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 667-669. For a significant study on Malek Bennabi, the prominent Algerian intellectual known for his Third Worldist ideas, his conception of “colonisability,” and his leading role in Algerian Islamism, see Phillip C. Naylor, “The Formative Influence of French Colonialism on the Life and Thought of Malek Bennabi,” *French Colonial History* 7, (2006). Jeffrey J. Byrne, also, mentioned Bennabi as an example of how the Third Worldist moment after the Bandung Conference gave rise to feelings of enthusiasm and hope and led many Algerians to think of Third Worldism as a promising alternative political project. See Jeffrey J. Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution. Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² The alternative theologies were not limited to theologies of liberation. There have emerged various untraditional interpretive approaches, particularly in the second of half of the last century, that introduced the issues of justice, gender, freedom, and human rights into Qur’anic studies. See, for example, Massimo Campanini, *The Qur’an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (New York: Routledge, 2011); Dina El Omari, Juliane Hammer and Mouhanad Khorchide, eds., *Muslim Women and Gender Justice: Concepts, Sources, and Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

practice the Muslim faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed and with the aim of eliminating systematically imposed economic, social and political injustices, Islamic liberation theology clearly contradicted, in many ways, the Islamism of the 1980s. Yet, their parallel developmental processes should also reveal to what extent they were connected. In this regard, a detailed analysis of the religiopolitical ideas of Farid Esack as a Muslim liberation theologian enables us to understand how he defined and improved Islamic liberation theology in the South African context, how he converged with and diverged from the mainstream transnational Muslim political thought of the time, and how he engaged with Christian liberation theology.¹³ I argue that locating Islamic liberation theology within the debate on transnational Islamism of the 1970s onwards helps to explore the often-overlooked internal diversity of contemporary Muslim political thought. Moreover, it might provide important insights into the possible continuities between the emancipatory Muslim thought of the pre-1980s and Islamic liberation theology.

There are two important intellectuals, besides Esack, who were deeply invested in constructing an Islamic theology of liberation.¹⁴ Asghar Ali Engineer (1939-2013), an Indian Muslim intellectual-activist, started to think about the possibilities of crafting a liberative

¹³ Liberation theology is originally a Christian theology that became popular in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. It is an unorthodox reinterpretation of Catholicism that pays attention to the issues of systemic poverty, exploitation, oppression and injustice. According to liberation theologians, Christianity aims at liberating people from all personal and structural bonds and, therefore, calls for an active struggle for justice in solidarity with the oppressed. For more on the history of the concept and the liberation theology movement, see Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). For a recent study that sees liberation theology as a “trans-American intellectual movement,” see Lilian Calles Barger, *The World Come of Age: An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Shabbir Akhtar is another scholar who used the term in his studies. I do not include him in this work because, apart from appropriating the term Islamic liberation theology, he did not present a clear conceptualization and not elaborate on the idea of liberative theology. See Shabbir Akhtar, *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation* (London: Bellew Pub., 1991).

theology in the early 1980s.¹⁵ As a member of both India's Muslim minority and a minority group within the Indian Muslim community, Engineer was struggling against the communal and ethnic violence taking place in India as well as challenging the religious hierarchy and the economic corruption of his community.¹⁶ He tried to demonstrate that the history of Muslims included rational and progressive theologies and looked into the Qur'an to discover the basis of a theology predicated on the values of freedom, equality, peace and distributive justice.¹⁷ In close dialogue with Marxist literature, he criticized theologies of "status quo" and preached resistance to any kind of exploitation and oppression. Until his death in 2013, Engineer continued to write and speak extensively on the issues of South Asian Islam, religious minorities, intercommunal harmony and peace, gender justice, state, secularism and non-violence.¹⁸

¹⁵ Since the late 1970s, Engineer published some newspaper articles discussing Islamo-Marxist organizations in Iran: Engineer, "Another Showdown?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, no. 14 (1979): 655-56; Engineer, "A New Interpretation of Islam," *Economic and Political Weekly* 15, no. 40 (1980): 1654-55. But his first comprehensive study on Islamic liberation theology was the book he published in 1984. See Engineer, ed., *Islam and Revolution* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984). Two of his articles in the book provided a detailed analysis of both the "fundamentalist" and "revolutionary" trends in the history of Islam as well as in the contemporary Muslim communities: "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Muslim World" and "On Developing Liberation Theology in Islam." See also Engineer, *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam* (Pakistan: Kitab Ghar, 1991).

¹⁶ Engineer was affiliated with the Dawoodi Bohras, a group within the Ismaili branch of Shiism. As a result of his increasing discontent with the leadership and policies of the group, he left it and, then, spearheaded the foundation of the Progressive Dawoodi Bohra in the second half of the 1970s.

¹⁷ For a detailed and critical account of Engineer's theology, see Shadaab Rahemtulla, "From the Hereafter to the Here and Now: The Reading of Asghar Ali Engineer," in *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Some of Asghar Ali Engineer's most seminal works: Engineer, *Islam: Gender Justice: Muslims Gender Discrimination* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2013); Engineer, *The Prophet of Non-violence: Spirit of Peace, Compassion & Universality in Islam* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing, 2011); Engineer, ed., *The Role of Minorities in Freedom Struggle* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1986); Engineer, *Rational Approach to Islam* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001); and Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2005).

The Iranian-American scholar Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951) also contributed considerably to the development of the idea of an Islamic theology of liberation.¹⁹ Dabashi argued that both Islamism and Christian liberation theology should be considered as religious traditions of “rebellion” and “resistance” against capitalist modernity. Being anticolonial forces, they also engaged with socialist and nationalist ideologies. However, according to Dabashi, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of an era in which the civilizational conflict between the West and Islam came to an end since both the Western world and Islamic ideology had evaporated with their failures.²⁰ Considering the post-civilizational era with the US being the only global power, Dabashi underlined the necessity of formulating a new Islamic theology of liberation that would introduce a global perspective and discourse and embrace “its ideological rivals and theological alternatives” to ensure a cross-cultural dialogue against the global empire.²¹

Although both Engineer’s and Dabashi’s perspectives on the issue of Islamic liberation theology are remarkable and valuable, there are a number of reasons why I preferred focusing on Farid Esack in my study. First of all, unlike Engineer and Dabashi, Esack spent many years as an

¹⁹ Dabashi, renowned for his works on postcolonialism, Iranian history and culture, modern Islam, and comparative literature, is currently a professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York. His most important work on Islamic liberation theology: Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²⁰ According to Dabashi, the Islamic Revolution in Iran had revealed the fundamental paradox of Islam as a religion of protest: “It morally succeeds precisely at the moment of its political failure” and “it morally fails at the moment of its political success”: Dabashi, *Resisting the Empire*, 17.

²¹ Dabashi named that nascent form of liberation theology as liberation theodicy: “The difference between a liberation theology and a liberation theodicy is,” according to Dabashi, “the difference between an emancipatory movement in categorical isolation from the rest of the world and one integral to the global collapse of all binary oppositions.” See Dabashi, “Liberation Theodicy,” in *Resisting the Empire*, 196-233. Dabashi also argued that the revolutionary legacy of Malcolm X (1925-1965) had the very potential for laying the foundations for the Islamic liberation theodicy since “in the revolutionary character of Malcolm X is gathered the most critical link necessary between the alienated colonial corners of capitalist modernity and the disenfranchised communities in its metropolitan center.” See Dabashi, “Malcolm X as a Muslim revolutionary,” in *Resisting the Empire*, 234-253.

activist in different Islamist organizations and, in the process, developed a critical and constructive engagement with Islamist thought.²² Secondly, Esack is a trained scholar of Qur'anic studies who received madrasa education but, at the same time, became quite critical of the very same traditional teachings that had informed his theological background. Thirdly, as early as the mid-1970s, he met religious organizations that had been influenced by Christian liberation theology. Furthermore, as a veteran of anti-apartheid struggle, he came to know various ideologies such as Black Consciousness, African nationalism, and socialism as well as assumed a leading role in interfaith struggle against apartheid during the 1970s and 1980s. Lastly, he is a prolific Muslim intellectual who has been thinking and writing for almost 40 years on Islamic liberation theology and many other pertinent issues. Given this unique personal history, Esack's religiopolitical thought has been surprisingly understudied and underanalyzed.

Of just a few significant works on theology of liberation in Islam as well as Esack, Shadaab Rahemtulla's book *Qur'an of the Oppressed* is the most comprehensive study ever undertaken.²³ Rahemtulla examined comparatively four liberationist and gender justice-based Qur'anic commentaries including those of Esack and Engineer.²⁴ He argued that all the commentaries underlined justice as the core attribute of both God and Muslim scripture and criticized the existing interpretations for establishing non-egalitarian and exclusive perspectives. They also made the Qur'an speak to various contexts of oppression through new reading

²² I should note here that although Esack deeply engaged with the liberative ideas of Shia intellectuals such as Ali Shariati, he has spoken largely from within the Sunni tradition, whereas the Shia tradition is more dominant in the theologies of liberation constructed by Engineer and Dabashi.

²³ Rahemtulla, *Qur'an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁴ The African American theologian Amina Wadud (b. 1952) and the Pakistani-American scholar Asma Barlas (b. 1950) are the other two theologians Rahemtulla included in his study.

strategies they developed.²⁵ Besides emphasizing the importance of “the immediate present” in Esack’s and Engineer’s hermeneutical efforts, Rahemtulla also pointed to the role of the notion of *tawhid* in all the four commentaries.²⁶ Moreover, he paid particular attention to some parallels between Islamist thought and Esack’s theology of liberation. According Rahemtulla, both approaches were similar in that they read scripture mostly through the immediate context, laid stress on the importance of practice alongside faith, and aimed to bring the Qur’an and ordinary Muslims together by ignoring the Muslim clergy.²⁷

Matthew Palombo’s work that examined the intellectual roots of Islamic liberation theology in South Africa is also striking for its emphasis on Islamism.²⁸ According to Palombo, alongside different ideologies rooted in African humanism such as Gandhian *satyagraha*, Black Consciousness, and Pan-Africanism, Islamist thought was also very influential in shaping the minds of Muslim activists including Esack. That the two traditions had converged in the anti-apartheid struggle laid the groundwork for the birth of Islamic liberation theology as a lay, critical, and praxis-based theology. The political role of Islam was therefore not understood as “state building or power grabbing,” but as “living out faith as political praxis for liberation and seeing Islam as a comprehensive way of life.”²⁹ Halil Yenigun also argued that, in contrast to the politics of Islamism, Islamist discourse included some elements resembling Christian liberation

²⁵ The main reading practices adopted and improved by those figures were praxis-based reflection, historical criticism, textual holism, and careful literary analysis: Rahemtulla, *Qur’an of the Oppressed*, 4.

²⁶ Rahemtulla believed that Wadud, Barlas, and Esack echoed the Iranian revolutionary-intellectual Ali Shariati’s (1933-1977) conception of *tawhid*. I will discuss below the impact of Shariati’s ideas on Esack’s thought.

²⁷ Though similar parallels might be drawn by Rahemtulla between Islamists and the other three scholars as well, he particularly focused on the case of Esack probably because of Esack’s history of Islamist activism.

²⁸ Matthew Palombo, “The Emergence of Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44, no. 1 (2014): 28-61.

²⁹ Palombo, “Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa,” 51.

theology. In that regard, even Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) could be considered, in certain moments, as a Muslim liberation theologian with “his strong emphasis on anti-imperialism and social justice resting upon a God-centric ontology.”³⁰ Yenigun also appreciated Esack’s and Dabashi’s efforts to improve reformist and emancipatory moments of Islamism instead of adopting Western liberalism and secularism, and saw those efforts as the advanced steps of the modern *islah* (reform) tradition of Islam, which goes back to the Muslim activist-intellectual Jamaladdin Afghani (1838-1897).

Suleyman Güder’s study that described liberation theology primarily as an attempt to return to the authentic nature of religion is the first comprehensive analysis of Christian and Islamic liberation theologies in the literature.³¹ Güder argued that both Christian and Muslim liberation theologians converged on three important points in their reinterpretative efforts: the significance of the context, the role of social justice concerns, and the necessity of critical approach. Those are also the criteria used by Güder to decide which Muslim intellectual could be considered liberation theologian.³² In other words, Güder did not differentiate Islamism from Islamic liberation theology, but gathered all the figures who shared the mentioned characteristics

³⁰ Yenigun, “The Political Ontology of Islamic Democracy: An Ontological Narrative of Contemporary Muslim Political Thought” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2013), 257. Yenigun also underscored the fundamentalist elements of Qutb’s thought and reached the conclusion that he was in fact oscillating between liberation theology and fundamentalism, 201.

³¹ Güder, “Hıristiyan ve İslami Kurtuluş Teologlarının Öze Dönüş Mücadelesi: Karşılaştırmalı Bir Analiz [The Quest of the Muslim and Christian Liberation Theologians to Return to the Authentic Self: A Comparative Analysis]” (PhD diss., Yıldız Technical University, 2016). There are actually a few other studies comparing Catholic and Islamic liberation theologies but they either focused on only prominent intellectuals or examined solely general shared characteristics and themes. In other words, they did not extend the scope of their comparison to emancipatory Islamism in general. For example, see Marco Demichelis, “Islamic Liberation Theology. An Inter-Religious Reflection between Gustavo Gutierrez, Farīd Esack and Ḥamīd Dabāšī,” *Oriente Moderno* 94, no. 1 (2014): 125-47; Mehmet Ciftci, “Liberation Theology: A Comparative Study of Christian and Islamic Approaches,” *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1064 (2015): 489-506.

³² He included Qutb, Shariati, Engineer, Esack, Dabashi, and Akhtar in the group of Muslim liberation theologians.

under the name of the latter. Yet, as Güder pointed out, since reform-minded Muslim intellectuals were not tied together by a religious institution like the Catholic Church, it is not possible to talk about a well-defined tradition of Islamic liberation theology whose members were in dialogue with each other.

On the other hand, Asef Bayat drew a clear line between Islamism and Christian liberation theology and asserted that Islamism has never been able to give birth to a theology of liberation.³³ One of the major differences between both traditions, according to Bayat, is their points of departure. Islamists aimed to build an Islamic sociopolitical regime whereas the main goal of liberation theologians was to liberate the poor and the oppressed. More importantly, Islamism was an “expression of cultural identity” manifesting itself against the domination of Western modernity whereas liberation theology waged a struggle for social justice against capitalist exploitation. Unlike the Islamist goal of re-Islamization of society, Christian liberation theologians tended to engage more with secular and humanist ideologies in imagining the future of sociopolitical system. In a similar vein, Siavash Saffari pointed to the dissimilarities between Shi’i Islamism and Shi’i liberation theology in pre-revolutionary Iran.³⁴ Although both Islamists and liberation theologians were anti-imperialist, against authoritarianism, and willing to cooperate with the religious masses in Iran, they significantly diverged from each other. For example, like Bayat, Saffari also saw the main distinction between the two in terms of their

³³ See Bayat, “Not a Theology of Liberation,” in *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 69-91.

³⁴ Saffari, “Two Pro-Mostazafin Discourses in the 1979 Iranian Revolution,” *Contemporary Islam* 11, no. 3 (2017): 287-301. According to Saffari’s classification, Mohammad Nakhshab (1923-1976), Ali Shariati, and Mahmood Taleqani (1911-1979) were part of the liberation theology camp whereas Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), Mohammad Beheshti (1928-1981), and Morteza Motahhari (1919-1979) were Islamists. According to Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, another prominent Shia scholar, Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935-2010), was also a liberation theologian: “Toward an Islamic Liberation Theology: Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and the Principles of Shi’i Resurgence,” in *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).

political projects, namely the creation of an Islamic state and that of a democratic one.

Furthermore, Shi'i Islamists were mostly pro-clergy whereas liberation theologians were clearly anti-clergy. Last but not least, Islamists usually relied on conservative teachings as opposed to the critical and reformist approach of liberation theologians towards religious sources.

I argue that the case of Farid Esack not only complicates the existing debate on Islamic liberation theology but also provides important insights into the points at which Islamist thought and liberation theology converged and diverged. As this thesis will elaborate, Esack's religiopolitical thought took shape essentially within the context of the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1970s and 1980s. As an activist and trained theologian who had, from his early ages, closely interacted with different Muslim organizations influenced by the then rising transnational Islamism, Esack was a firsthand witness to and active participant in the many discussions around Islam and politics. He took a leading role in the development of progressive Islamism in South Africa in the 1980s and then developed the concept of Islamic liberation theology, in the 1990s, on the basis of the political praxis of the anti-apartheid Islamists. I seek to explain the intertwining of practice and theory in his theology and the way he related his thought to Islamist tradition to explore and understand the diverse forms that Islamism took. My main focus is therefore on Esack's early career including his years in Pakistan, his role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and his academic studies in Europe.

CHAPTER II

FROM CAPE TOWN TO KARACHI: EARLY ENCOUNTERS OF ESACK

“Every literary production is inescapably autobiographical” believes Esack and, in line with that, usually starts his speeches and writings by drawing a picture of his early life experience molded by South African apartheid of the 1960s and early 1970s and his religious education in Pakistan between the years 1974-1982.³⁵ Esack was born in 1956, in Wynberg, a southern suburb of Cape Town. Then immediately came a challenging and traumatic life in which he grew up without a father, lost his mother at an early age and lived a life of poverty and racial discrimination. His family was one of the countless displaced communities that emerged from the Group Areas Act.³⁶ In the early 1960s, they were forced to leave Wynberg and moved to Bonteheuwel, a shantytown reserved for “coloreds” in Cape Town, which Esack remembered as “absolute wasteland.”³⁷ Esack’s mother was originally Malay whereas his father was originally Indian. As being part of the “colored” community, Esack experienced, at his early ages, a confusion of

³⁵ Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 1.

³⁶ The Group Areas Act was legislated by the apartheid government in 1950 and implemented over time in order to form racially segregated settlements so that white superiority could be socially and economically reinforced. Most areas in Cape Town began to be zoned and segregated in 1961. See “Cape Town the Segregated City,” South African History Online, produced March 30, 2011; last updated August 27, 2019, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/cape-town-segregated-city>.

³⁷ Farid Esack, interview by Julie Frederikse, South African History Archive (SAHA), AL2460_A05.03.1, transcript, September 25, 1987, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2, http://www.saha.org.za/nonracialism/transcript_of_interview_with_farid_essack.htm. (This is a rare, in-depth interview that explored Esack’s politicization and ideological transformation from his childhood to the years of his anti-apartheid activism.) Esack’s years in Bonteheuwel would become the wellspring for his “theological quest and political engagement”: Charles Villa-Vicencio and Mills Soko, “Farid Esack: Muslim and Democrat,” in *Conversations in Transition: Leading South African Voices* (New Africa Books, 2012), 210.

identity for remaining in between the white and the black communities.³⁸ He never met a black person until he was fourteen since coloured and black communities were living in separate neighborhoods. This was what apartheid meant for him: “to have people living on the other side of the road or the railway line or the hill.”³⁹

What essentially politicized the young Esack was, before apartheid, having to witness his mother’s painful life. Due to the ethnic tensions between Indian and Malay communities, Esack’s mother was disowned by her family after she got married to an Indian man. When her husband left her while Esack was a newborn baby, she was on her own to take care of six sons.⁴⁰ Esack’s childhood memories were shaped profoundly by the desperate poverty he and his family had to endure: “I’d often go to school barefeet... very often there was nothing to eat at our house, and a favourite was sugar and bread.”⁴¹ They were living in a two roomed house in a gang-ridden township where Esack’s mother was raped one night on her way to home from

³⁸ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 1. In other words, Esack was a member of a minority group among the oppressed “non-white” community. An anecdote he shared about the ambivalence surrounding the identity of the “colored” community was as follows: In 1962, “the king of Malesia (...) invited the Malays to come home to Malesia, and he offered to pay their expenses and so on in being repatriated to Malesia (...) They didn’t take the offer up, (...) it was much more because they were afraid of the unknown, rather than a clear statement that we are a part of South Africa, we are a part of the oppressed”: Esack, interview by Frederikse, 4. In the later years, Esack refused being identified with the “colored” community given that it was a racial category imposed by the apartheid regime. See Farid Esack, “Among the Quakers,” *Journal of Woodbrooke College*, no. 4 (Winter 1993/4): 19-26.

³⁹ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 3. See also Logan Cochrane and Waleed Chellan, ““The Group Areas Act Affected Us All’: Apartheid and Socio-Religious Change in the Cape Town Muslim Community, South Africa,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* (2017), Religious Individuals and Collective Identities: Special Issue on Oral History and Religion.

⁴⁰ This was the second time she was abandoned by a husband. Her first spouse had left her with three children before. Esack also would learn in 1982 that he had actually a sister from her mother’s relationship before her first marriage. However, considered a “socially unacceptable shame,” it had been kept in secret for decades. See Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 5. Esack thus became very critical of the social gender norms that exclusively demonized and victimized women including her mother and has written extensively on gender issues. See especially Esack, “Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia,” in *What Men Owe to Women: Men’s Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 3.

work. Living through all the rigours of life for a “non-white” widow in apartheid South Africa, Esack’s mother had no choice but to work as an underpaid factory worker and also to take the burden of domestic responsibilities without anyone helping her.⁴² She passed away in 1971 when she was in her mid-fifties for her heart could not resist the overwork imposed upon her. In Esack’s words, she “succumbed to the triple oppression of women under apartheid: racism, capitalism, and patriarchy.”⁴³ Being witness to his mother’s tragic life would make Esack pay particular attention to gender inequalities alongside other systemic injustices in the following years.

Esack did not inherit a radical political culture from his family. He became politically active in the early 1970s, first, in a non-racial liberal student organization, the National Youth Action (NYA). In NYA, which was established in 1970 by “white schoolchildren of Cape Town,” white, black and “colored” high school students worked together against racial discrimination in education under the apartheid regime.⁴⁴ Esack was happy to become part of a collective effort and thus to feel that “he was a somebody” now.⁴⁵ He soon became the chairperson of the Bonteheuwel branch of NYA and detained in 1970, for the first time, for his political activism. In those years, Esack also came across the radical ideas the Black

⁴² Retrospectively, Esack thought that one of the main reasons for his mother’s solitude was sexism. He and his brothers had taken no responsibility for household duties, for instance. See Esack, interview by Frederikse, 4.

⁴³ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, acknowledgements. Esack has mentioned her mother’s life story in several of his publications for the memory of her suffering has been so essential in his sensitivity to injustice and inequality. See esp. Farid Esack, “Lot and His Offer: 2016 IQSA Presidential Address,” *Journal of the International Qur’anic Studies Association* 2 (2017): 7-33.

⁴⁴ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “World Against Apartheid,” *Department of Political and Security Council Affairs* (March 1971), https://www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/AL.SFF.DOCUMENT.nuun1971_09.

⁴⁵ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 9.

Consciousness Movement (BCM) propagated among “non-white” students.⁴⁶ BCM’s critique of white liberalism and its call for the promotion of black identity as well as radical sociopolitical transformation had politicized the youth and attracted many of them to its ranks. Though Esack was initially reluctant to move to BCM, he soon came to realize that, despite the non-racial fabric of NYA, whites had been superior in the organization, and the rest, including himself, had been willing to become one of them: “In that particular era it wasn’t goodwill that made you reach out towards whites – it was much more your own sense of inferiority, your wanting to be in acceptable company, your wanting to be human, and whiteness representing that which is human.”⁴⁷

It comes no surprise that Esack analyzed later those years from a Fanonian perspective since Frantz Fanon’s writings were highly influential in shaping the Black Consciousness philosophy.⁴⁸ Esack joined, in 1971, the South African Black Scholars’ Association (SABSA), the first organization that threw him into the middle of heavy ideological debates and radical anti-apartheid struggle.⁴⁹ Barney Pityana, Henry Isaacs, Johnny Issel and Mosiuoa Lekota were some of the prominent figures within BCM whose speeches Esack had the opportunity to listen

⁴⁶ The BCM was a student movement that emerged in the late 1960s in parallel with the rise of the Black Power movement in the USA and then became influential in the 1970s when both the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress were banned. Soon after the active role it played in the Soweto Rebellion of 1976, the movement was suppressed by the South African state. See Robert Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986) and Daniel R. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 6.

⁴⁸ Fanon’s writings were highly influential in shaping the Black Consciousness philosophy and the ideas of its leader, Steve Biko. See Thomas K. Ranuga, “Frantz Fanon and Black Consciousness in Azania (South Africa),” *Phylon* (1960-) 47, no. 3 (1986): 182-91.

⁴⁹ SABSA was an extension of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), which played a significant role in the BCM under the leadership of Steve Biko.

to.⁵⁰ BC was the movement, Esack argued, that led the South African “non-white” to gain a sense of power, dignity, self-respect and self-confidence.⁵¹ But the major problem with the BC was their racism against non-black people including the “colored” which, according to Esack, could be understood in the context of apartheid though he preferred later, in the early 1980s, the non-racial and nationalist approach of the African National Congress (ANC) over the former.⁵² Esack spent a year in SABSA and left the organization when he finished high school. He had a more colorful and seminal experience ahead: madrasa education in Pakistan.

Esack was raised in a Muslim environment but did not face any family pressure to become a religious person. Nor did he inherit any Islamic political tradition from his community. He defined his early religious development as “essentially a personal thing.”⁵³ He met the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic global missionary movement, when he was nine years old. This was a turning point in his life journey, particularly in his future career as a Muslim religious leader. The Tablighi Jamaat was popular particularly among Indo-Pakistani Muslims of South Africa but it also extended its activities to other Muslim communities including the Malay, which Esack was part of.⁵⁴ Being a non-political movement, The Tablighi Jamaat aimed to improve Muslim spirituality and morality by relying on traditional Islamic sources. The Jamaat’s focus on personal belief and rituals resulted in the detachment of its followers from daily social and

⁵⁰ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 10.

⁵¹ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 7, 11.

⁵² Esack, interview by Frederikse, 13-14. The nationalism of the ANC was not an ethnic nationalism. Its main focus was on the national unity and equal representation of all South African communities under a non-racist and democratic political regime.

⁵³ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 21. Given the lack of influential Islamic social and political movements in South Africa in the 1970s, it is not surprising that Esack had not grown up within a Muslim anti-apartheid tradition.

⁵⁴ See Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

political matters.⁵⁵ Moreover, the movement was always very critical of the politicization of Muslim youth and of the Muslim minority who actively participated in the anti-apartheid struggle. Still, Esack maintained his relationship with the movement during his primary and secondary education while engaging in anti-apartheid political activities in non-Muslim organizations. In other words, he became a pious Muslim without any religiously motivated political consciousness while simultaneously became an “activist schooled in the black consciousness tradition of the early seventies.”⁵⁶ Therefore, his early political and religious ideas developed independently of each other.

The major product of Esack’s affiliation with the Tablighi Jamaat was his travel to Pakistan in 1974 to receive a traditional madrasa education with the scholarship he got from the organization.⁵⁷ He spent eight years in Karachi completing the *Dars-i Nizami*, a comprehensive curriculum developed by an 18th century scholar, and specializing in *Ulum al-Qur’an*, the sciences of the Qur’an.⁵⁸ He first studied at the *Jami’a al-’Ulum al-Islamiyya* between 1974-1978 and then continued his religious training at the *Jami’a ‘Alimiyya Islamiyya*, where he got his *Dars-i Nizami* degree in 1980.⁵⁹ Then he did some post-graduate work at the *Jami’a Abi Bakr* before his return to South Africa in 1982. These Islamic higher education institutions were

⁵⁵ Ebrahim Moosa, “Worlds ‘Apart’: The Tablighi Jamaat under Apartheid 1963-1993,” *Journal for Islamic Studies* 17 (1997): 28-48.

⁵⁶ Shamil Jeppie, “Amandla and Allahu Akbar Muslims and Resistance in South Africa, C. 1970-1987,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 4, no. 1 (March 1991): 14.

⁵⁷ Esack explained his Pakistan journey as an exceptional event since the mostly Malay-origin Cape Muslims were traveling to Middle Eastern countries then, whereas Indo-Pak Muslims were choosing Pakistan or Afghanistan: Esack, interview by Frederikse, 22.

⁵⁸ Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 266n27.

⁵⁹ This degree was equal to a bachelor’s degree in Islamic Law and Theology: Villa-Vicencio and Soko, “Farid Esack: Muslim and Democrat,” 211. See also “Aims and Objectives of the Jamia,” accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.banuri.edu.pk/en/page/aims-and-objectives-of-the-jamia>.

affiliated with the Deobandi tradition and giving a very strict, traditional religious training to Muslim students coming from all around the world. Esack would never forget the shock he felt when he began his education: “I was a psychological wreck in the beginning.” The shift from the dynamic socio-political atmosphere of South Africa to the onerous and didactic madrasa training was radical for him: “You are now stuck to your books... as if there is no world beyond your books and beyond your spiritual masters.”⁶⁰ Moreover, most of the textbooks he had to study there were from at least six centuries ago and what was taught was a conservative theology that might pave the way for fundamentalist militant movements. While telling the story of those years, Esack usually reminds the audience that some of his classmates later became the founders of the Afghan Taliban.⁶¹ Esack’s anecdote seems intended to show the huge gap between the religious education he had in Pakistan and the fundamentally different theological perspective he developed since the early 1980s in South Africa.⁶² Surprisingly, the roots of his future theological orientation are also to be found in his Pakistan years.

In Pakistan, Esack became engaged with two other organizations that had shaped substantially his perception of religion. One was a classical Islamist organization influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, *Ittihad al-Tullab al-Muslimun*, through which, Esack says, he learned to combine his religious and political commitments. That was an “evolution” for Esack since he “moved from seeing Islam and my [his] political involvement as two separate things” towards a

⁶⁰ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 23.

⁶¹ Farid Esack, *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 5.

⁶² After 9/11 and the US’ global war on terror those Deobandi institutions were increasingly associated with the Taliban, however, as Ingram points out, the relationship between the Deoband movement and the Taliban “is only a thread of the larger fabric that makes up Deoband”: Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 2.

comprehensive understanding of Islam.⁶³ The other was the Student Christian Movement (SCM), through which he engaged in social and educational works supporting the marginalized segments of the society.⁶⁴ Esack's first contact with the organization was made through an invitation by a Catholic priest to a reading group on the Croatian-Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich's critical works on education.⁶⁵ Then, he maintained his contact with SCM and attended many other meetings it organized. Esack was moved by the poor living conditions and religious discrimination that Christian and Hindu minorities of Pakistan faced just because he himself was a member of the Muslim "colored" minority in apartheid South Africa.⁶⁶

Esack also heard about Christian Liberation Theology for the first time through his involvement with SCM. He became impressed as he learned about the participation of the Christian clergy in liberation and social justice movements in different parts of the world from Latin America to the Philippines.⁶⁷ More importantly, witnessing the story of the Pakistani Christians who "tried to making sense of living as Christians in a fundamentally unjust and exploitative society" made Esack think about his Muslimness through the lens of justice and liberation.⁶⁸ He took active role in several social work projects of the SCM helping prisoners,

⁶³ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 24.

⁶⁴ The SCM in Pakistan was later called Breakthrough: Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 5. The movement was part of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), a global ecumenical organization, which cooperated with radical social movements in the late 1960s and 1970s. See Philip Potter and Thomas Wieser, *Seeking and Serving the Truth: The First Hundred Years of the World Student Christian Federation* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 1997).

⁶⁵ The priest who made the invitation was James "Jimmy" deSouza, an Indian Roman catholic priest known for his educational initiatives and humanitarian efforts: Esack, interview by Frederikse, 23. Ivan Illich was also a Catholic priest and famous for his critique of mass education and promotion of the idea of deschooling.

⁶⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 5.

⁶⁷ Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 5.

⁶⁸ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 5.

sweepers, and abandoned children, and thus came to comprehend the social dimensions of religion and the social responsibilities of believers. “Later,” says Esack, “I was to repeat all of the lessons of marrying belief and praxis in South Africa.”⁶⁹ Indeed, from the social role of clergy in resisting oppression to the centrality of the sociopolitical context in understanding and practicing religion, he would effectively incorporate many key elements of Christian liberation theology into his notion of Islamic liberation theology that took shape within the anti-apartheid struggle.⁷⁰ For example, one of the first works of Esack, *The Struggle*, which was published in 1988 as a handbook for Muslim anti-apartheid activists, was largely based on what he learned from the struggle of the Pakistani Christians.⁷¹

Another significant impact on Esack’s approach to Islam of his involvement with the Student Christian Movement was about the religious other and interfaith interaction. His Pakistan experience made Esack aware of “his,” in his own words, “chauvinistic Muslim mind” causing him to neglect the humanity and virtues of the religious other.⁷² The American Catholic educator Norman Wray (1923-2014) had a special place in Esack’s life, in that regard. Wray was a de La Salle Brother who, after working in the US, Sri Lanka, India and Guatemala, spent

⁶⁹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 5.

⁷⁰ As I discuss in Chapter 5, this was not a mere copy-pasting or imitation of what he had encountered in Christian liberation theology but a product of critical engagement, reinterpretation and authentic eclecticism. Also, Christian liberation theology was neither the only nor the main source of his theology, which had sprung predominantly from reformist and revolutionary traditions in Islam.

⁷¹ *The Struggle* was published by the Call of Islam, an Islamist anti-apartheid movement, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3 & 4. In the Introduction of the book, Esack underlines the role of his Pakistan experience in shaping his religious mindset: “The Struggle is the synthesis our group’s reflection on our involvement as Islamists in the struggle for justice in South Africa and that of other friends in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Many of the ideas herein were born from my involvement with a group of ... Christians in Pakistan. Their struggle to find an authentic and meaningful expression of their faith ... first led me to a search for a relevant Islam.” Farid Esack, *The Struggle* (Salt River, Cape Town: Call of Islam, 1988).

⁷² Esack, interview by Frederikse, 23.

almost half a decade in Pakistan serving in educational and social work projects.⁷³ He was also one of the senior figures of SCM. Wray's deep engagement with the marginalized of the Pakistani society was admirable and inspirational for Esack who saw in him the "essential goodness of people that transcends religious barriers."⁷⁴ They also worked closely when Esack, upon the invitation of Wray, taught Islamic studies at St. Patrick's Technical High School in Karachi where Wray was the principal. Spending several years in Pakistan working together with Christian humanitarians, the question of how to approach the religious other from an Islamic point of view would become one of the fundamental issues Esack would deal with in detail in the following years.

It is no doubt that many of Esack's religiopolitical ideas that took shape and matured during the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s can be traced back to his Pakistan years. From his traditional madrasa training to his affiliation with an Islamist organization to his intimate relationship with the Pakistani Christians who struggled for social justice, the Pakistan journey had an enormous impact on both his formulation of an Islamic liberation theology and his determined critique of conservative Muslim theology and politics in South Africa.

⁷³ He helped setting up the St. Patrick's Technical School and established a rehabilitation center for drug users in Karachi. See Rabia Ali, "For Sindh's Drug Users, Chicago-Born Priest Built a 'Village of Hope'," *The Express Tribune*, August 19, 2012, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/424035/for-sindhs-drug-users-chicago-born-priest-built-a-village-of-hope/>.

⁷⁴ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 23. In one of his speeches, Esack expresses Wray's value to him in these words: "My own humanity and Islam was salvaged through the engagement with Norman.": Farid Esack, "Speaking about the Qur'an and Violence with Your Back Against the Wall," Katholische Akademie in Berlin, March 9, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VD7hm1kBZ_c.

CHAPTER III

RISE OF ANTI-APARTHEID ISLAMISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

After eight years of having traditional religious education in Pakistan, Esack went back to South Africa in 1982 as a maulana, a madrasa-trained scholar.⁷⁵ During the 1980s and early 1990s, he was addressed as “Maulana Farid Esack” on many occasions, as one of the religious leaders spearheading the Muslim anti-apartheid struggle, as a featured speaker in the poster of an interfaith gathering or as the author of a scholarly article.⁷⁶ The title “maulana” did not only refer to his educational background but also acknowledged his status within (interfaith) anti-apartheid struggle as a respected Muslim religious leader. Moreover, being a member of the Muslim ulama had the advantage of addressing Muslim masses with an authoritative voice. It was therefore also a strategic asset that Esack could and, in fact, did use in persuading ordinary Muslims to participate in the struggle against the apartheid regime.⁷⁷ Despite the fact that Esack was very critical of religious hierarchies and going to hold the belief that the ones who are the target of injustices should take the lead in liberation movement irrespective of any social or religious status, his religious title was with him during the struggle.⁷⁸ Yet, it was not only about

⁷⁵ The “maulana” or “mawlana” is used, particularly in Indian communities, for respected Muslim leaders who have a formal madrasa degree.

⁷⁶ See for example Maulana Farid Esack, “Religion in the service of politics and service in the politics of religion,” *World Faiths Encounter* 4 (1993): 35-42. Though it seems that Esack is still addressed with that title on occasion, it is likely that the widespread use of the title was peculiar to the 1980s and early 90s when Esack was a popular community leader.

⁷⁷ In the following chapters, I will touch upon the issue of how he positioned himself as an untraditional and progressive clergyman and how he communicated ordinary Muslims.

⁷⁸ “Our authenticity is determined by our willingness to become of them [the poor and non-person] and by the struggle to be transformed by them even as we strive to transform them. Many of us in the contemporary Islamic

pragmatism. During the 1980s, Esack considerably balanced activism with intellectual production. As a theologian, he was heavily invested in finding ways of merging his religious belief and his commitment to social justice. He especially worked on the Qur'an to understand and interpret its message in a society suffering from enormous injustices, and thus started to set the cornerstones of his conception of Islamic liberation theology. In sum, as a leading Muslim activist-scholar, Esack drew an unusual portrait of maulana in apartheid South Africa.

Upon his return to South Africa, Esack became the principal of a seminary in Natal where the students were mostly converted black Muslims. He was not content with the missionary pedagogy that dominated the institution because of the assumed hierarchical relationship between the already “enlightened” Muslim and the new convert that had to be educated.⁷⁹ He resigned from his job after a year.⁸⁰ On the other hand, as soon as coming back to the country, Esack took part in several religious and political organizations and got highly involved in interfaith as well as in Muslim anti-apartheid struggle. He first became a member of both the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) and the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and soon assumed important roles in both organizations. But the major organization Esack engaged in and devoted

movement have done an enormous amount to shake the thrones of religious monopolists who appropriated Islam for their own unfulfilled lives and broken egos. ... We cannot be a substitute for them [professional theologians]. The people must take responsibility for their religious lives. This ought to be the ideal that we must work towards.”: Farid Esack, “Mosques: The Battle for Control – Some Reflections,” Speech, Muslim Youth Movement Seminar, June 18, 1989, <http://www.oocities.org/faridesack/femosques.html>.

⁷⁹ His close dialogue with the Christian Pakistanis had not only changed his approach towards the religious other but also made him rethink of the issues of religious knowledge, practice and identity during his years of interfaith anti-apartheid struggle. After many years, he would publish a critical article on the notion of *dawah* and missionary Islam in which he argued that *dawah* was basically a contemporary phenomenon that had become popular “as part of post-colonial contestation for Muslim territories.” See Esack, “Islamic Da’wah and Christian Mission: A Muslim Perspective,” in *Christian-Muslim Encounter in Africa*, ed. Karel T. August and Christof Sauer (Cape Town, South Africa: AcadSa Publishing, 2007), 21-29.

⁸⁰ That was also due to him having disagreements with the school management concerning his teaching methods informed by Ivan Illich’s critical pedagogy. But the main reason for his departure was the disagreement he had with the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) who ran the seminary. He left the MYM and then had to resign from the job since his ideological position was considered dangerous for students. See Esack, interview by Frederikse, 25.

his time and energy to was the Call of Islam, a progressive Islamist movement that he and his friends had founded in 1984 to fight against apartheid.⁸¹ Esack was the national coordinator of the Call between 1984 and 1990. Furthermore, as I discuss it below in detail, he can be considered as the theologian of the movement since he took a leading role in creating a new Islamist discourse and terminology around which the idea of Islamic liberation theology took shape. During the same period, he also became one of the prominent Muslim figures within both the United Democratic Front (UDF), the umbrella organization of the popular anti-apartheid movement formed in 1983, and the South African Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, a worldwide interfaith movement committed to make major religious traditions an instrument of peace, freedom, and justice.⁸²

The 1980s was the golden years of Muslim anti-apartheid activism as well as the grassroots anti-apartheid politics led by the UDF. After Imam Haron was murdered in 1969, there was undoubtedly a leadership vacuum in the South African Muslim community.⁸³ Nor was

⁸¹ The term “progressive Islamism” was used by Esack himself to describe the Call. I will explain in the next chapter why he used it to differentiate the distinctive approach of the movement from other Islamist organizations.

⁸² World Conference on Religion and Peace Records, 1967-1995, DG 078, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, <https://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/peace/DG051-099/DG078WCRP.html>.

⁸³ Imam Abdullah Haron (1924-1969) was a much-respected religious leader and anti-apartheid activist from the Cape area. He was a symbolic figure in the South African Muslim community with his pioneering efforts to mobilize Muslims, particularly the youth, against the apartheid regime. He founded in 1958 the Claremont Muslim Youth Movement, a mosque-based organization that organized meetings and published declarations denouncing the unjust policies of the state. In his later years, Haron joined a banned and in-exile opposition movement, the Pan-Africanist Congress. He was detained in 1969 for his involvement in the PAC and passed away in detention after being interrogated by the South African Security Branch for four months. More than 40,000 people attended his funeral and he became the role model for Muslim activists in the subsequent years. Though, in the same period, there were a number of leading (mostly Indian) Muslim anti-apartheid activists such as Yusuf Dadoo, Ismail Ahmed (Molvi) and Yusuf Cachalia, brothers; Amina Cachalia, Ahmed Kathrada, Dullah Omar and Fatima Meer, what had distinguished Haron from those figures was his insistence on the promotion of both an identifiable Muslim identity that was sensitive to injustice and oppression and a distinctively Muslim anti-apartheid discourse. In that regard, his path can be considered as a forerunner of anti-apartheid Islamism that emerged a decade later. See Barney Desai and Cardiff Marney, *The Killing of the Imam* (London: Quartet Books, 1978) and Ursula Günther, “The Memory of Imam Haron in Consolidating Muslim Resistance in the Apartheid Struggle,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (2004): 117–50.

there an Islamic political organization that could mobilize Muslim masses in line with their sociopolitical concerns. During the 1970s and 1980s, the number of the Muslim youth enrolled at universities was on the rise. Those urbanized and educated young Muslims were in search of a new and comprehensive Islamic interpretation through which they could make sense of the prevailing conditions of apartheid South Africa as well as of the modern world. The traditional teachings of the ulama organizations and “apolitical” religious movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat and different Sufi groups were insufficient in addressing their questions.⁸⁴ On top of that, the Muslim youth were deeply upset because of the silence of the Muslim clergy regarding Imam Haron’s death.⁸⁵ The majority of the Muslim religious leaders had chosen to shut their eyes to the injustices of the apartheid regime while criticizing the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The critique of this double standard would be one of the fundamental pillars of the nascent anti-apartheid Islamism.⁸⁶

The incapacity of existing Islamic organizations to deal with the sociopolitical reality faced by the South African Muslim youth was accompanied by two major historical moments, one local and the other global. The 1976 Soweto uprising and the 1980 school boycotts were

⁸⁴ Many Muslim anti-apartheid activists including Esack would argue that the religious organizations who had portrayed themselves as non-political were in fact consciously pursuing a political agenda designed not to confront the status quo and to exclusively protect the interests of the Muslim community.

⁸⁵ Esack was one of them. After many years, he would lambaste the fainthearted ulama while giving testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Piet Meiring, “Faith in Reconciliation in South Africa: Insights from the South African Experience,” University of Otago Center for Theology and Public Issues, accessed August 5, 2019, <https://www.otago.ac.nz/ctpi/otago106231.pdf>, 6.

⁸⁶ Esack was interested in exposing the underlying theological thinking behind that hypocritical approach of the ulama organizations: “If it is us [Muslims] then we must invoke the verses relating to justice, opposition to tyranny and protest against human rights violations, but when it comes to others [non-Muslims] then it is a manifestation of Divine Wrath and something that they jolly well deserve: Esack, *But Musa Went to Firaun!: A Compilation of Questions and Answers about the Role of Muslims in the South African Struggle for Liberation* (Maitland, South Africa: Call of Islam, 1989), 16.

significant countrywide events that politicized “non-white” student masses in South Africa.⁸⁷ They also contributed to the radicalization of Muslim youth.⁸⁸ Rashied Omar, one of the then influential Muslim anti-apartheid activists, was one of them: “I led the student protest at my school and got imprisoned. I was suspended from school, put on trial, and lost a whole year (...) As a result of this experience in 1976, I became much more committed as an anti-apartheid activist to struggle for peace and justice.”⁸⁹ On the other hand, the rise of Islamist global networks and the dissemination of Islamist ideas all around the world during the 1970s had a considerable impact on the South African Muslim community too. In 1970, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) emerged as the main Islamist youth movement in South Africa and soon became “the first national Muslim organization” having several branches in Natal, Transvaal, and the Cape.⁹⁰ It was followed by the Qiblah Mass Movement established shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. These Islamists movements created a political language merged with Islamic principles that politicized and energized Muslim youth, and also led to various

⁸⁷ When, besides the very poor conditions of the education system provided to the “non-white” majority, the government made the Afrikaans language compulsory for “non-white” schooling in 1976, students went on strike and unsurprisingly encountered a quite violent response by the state. Then, the protests spread across the country like wildfire and an unprecedented resistance occurred against the apartheid rule. Similarly, students started class boycotts in reaction to the unfair apartheid education in 1980. Sylvia Vollenhoven, “South Africa at the Crossroads,” *Third World Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1986): 486-506.

⁸⁸ Farid Esack, “Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice,” *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988): 473-98. See also Inga Niehaus, “South Africa’s Muslims Between Participation and Exclusion – The Political Role of a Religious Minority During the Transition to Democracy,” in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Islamic Civilisation in Southern Africa*, eds. Mahomed Haroon and Uleman Essop Dangor (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2009), 157-171. According to Niehaus, the increasing student mobilization brought about an immediate “necessity to respond to the socio-economic reality Muslims were confronted with in their communities, universities and their workplaces”, 159.

⁸⁹ Burcu Munyas, interview with A. Rashied Omar, *Beyond Intractability*, July 2005, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/profile/a-rashied-omar>.

⁹⁰ Abdulkader Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa,” *Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center*, July 25, 2018, <https://mesbar.org/islamism-in-south-africa/>.

discussions on the relationship between Islam and politics that would include Esack as an active participant.⁹¹

The MYM was founded in Durban by “professionals and young businessmen.”⁹² Its chief concern was to promote “the Islamic way of life” in South Africa. It encouraged Muslims to read translations of Qur’an, strived to increase the agency of Muslim women in public sphere, particularly in mosques, and urged the ulama members to become publicly more accessible. Starting with the late 1970s, MYM considered Islam to be also an ideology and committed itself to the ideal of Islamization of society. It, therefore, gave priority to religious training and organizing youth. This was basically the effect of the MYM’s increasing interaction with overseas Islamist movements. In the same period, the MYM also started to denounce the apartheid rule more openly. Many MYM members participated in anti-government campaigns and protests in the period after the Soweto uprising. *Al-Qalam*, the official newspaper of the MYM, constituted an important part of the alternative media in South Africa and dedicated its efforts to uncovering state violence.⁹³ Yet, the anti-apartheid struggle was not the main topic on MYM’s agenda until the late 1980s. Its primary goal was to develop a new Islamic understanding and practice that would pervade the whole South African society. It thus

⁹¹ There were other, less influential, organizations that had been either directly established or substantially influenced by transnational Islamist actors. For instance, the Muslim Students’ Association (MSA) started to organize nationally from the early 1970s on whereas the Islamic Council of South Africa (ICSA) was founded in 1975 under the guidance of *Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami* (the Muslim World League) of Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, most members of al-Jihad (or al-Jihaad), a small but active anti-apartheid movement led by Ismail Joubert (known as Tatamkhulu Afrika after he became affiliated with the armed wing of the ANC in the early 1980s) converted into Shiism under the influence of the Iranian Revolution.

⁹² See *Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa Celebrating 40 Years of Activism* (Durban: Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, 2012), http://mym.za.org/images/downloads/40_year_print.pdf; and Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995).

⁹³ See Muhammed Haron, “The Alternative South African Muslim Press: Muslim News & Al-Qalam,” *Islamic Studies* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 457-480.

challenged primarily the conservative ulama organizations, particularly in terms of Islamic knowledge and the leadership of the Muslim community.⁹⁴

The Qiblah, on the other hand, was an Islamist mass movement that strived to mobilize South African Muslims against apartheid, particularly in the first half of the 1980s. It was established by Achmad Cassiem, a veteran Muslim anti-apartheid activist, who had taken part in the armed activities of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in the early 1960s and got imprisoned on Robben Island for several years. The Qiblah was a strong proponent of a revolutionary struggle against the apartheid regime, which rested upon Islamic teachings and values.

“Ideology, and especially the ideology of Islam,” Cassiem argued, “encourages and creates social consciousness, identity, solidarity and inspires positive action on a scale which no other ideology has done or can do.”⁹⁵ The success of the Iranian revolutionaries was the proof. The Qiblah both organized and engaged in various protests, rallies and funerals and represented the militant force among Muslims with its resistance to the state authority at the streets of the Cape. Furthermore, approving of the use of violence in a revolutionary struggle, it became part of the armed struggle against the state by 1984 and was violently crushed by the regime from then on.⁹⁶

It should come as no surprise that Esack joined the MYM after returning to the country. In the early 1980s, the MYM was the mainstream Islamist movement in South Africa, which was widely organized and highly appealing to Muslim youth. As a former anti-apartheid activist involved in the Black Consciousness tradition, he came back from Pakistan as an educated young

⁹⁴ Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence*.

⁹⁵ Achmad Cassiem, *Quest for Unity* (Great Britain: IHRC Press, 2011), 86.

⁹⁶ Muhammed Haron, “Qibla Mass Movement and Its Leadership: Engaging with the Quran in an African Setting” (paper presented at 10th International Conference on Quranic Researches, Qum, Iran, April 2017), 20, https://www.academia.edu/31722804/Qibla_Mass_Movement_and_its_Leadership_Engaging_with_the_Quran_in_a_n_African_Setting; Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.”

person who was in search of a struggle in which he could merge his religious and political commitments. Moreover, the MYM's teachings and methods closely resembled the Muslim Brotherhood tradition, which Esack had been familiar with from Pakistan.⁹⁷ Yet, due to his early experience with Christian Pakistanis and the realities of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, he could not embrace the existing form of Islamism as a whole and grew increasingly disgruntled with the exclusionary religiopolitical discourse of the MYM. After serving briefly on the National Executive of the MYM, Esack left the movement in 1983. A few years after his contentious departure, he would describe his old MYM friends as Muslim "fundamentalists" who saw Islam as the only path to the truth and were not friendly towards Christians: "It was pleasant being in that crowd, but... there was one thing that bothered me all the time, that if my friends from Pakistan were to come to South Africa, would I be able to introduce them to my MYM friends... and I could not, and that made me feel that there were contradictions in my life."⁹⁸

But the rupture between the MYM and Esack came out of the diverging approaches occurred within the organization concerning the issue of partaking in the UDF. The UDF came into being in 1983 amid widespread protests against the new Tricameral Parliament, which was designed by the apartheid regime to break the rising power of opposition politics.⁹⁹ "As a united

⁹⁷ According to Esack, the MYM was in fact part of a transnational Islamist network coordinated by the Muslim Brotherhood and it was the most powerful Islamist movement in the early 1980s.

⁹⁸ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 25. In the following years, Esack would use the term fundamentalism with more caution by drawing attention to the different meanings it designated in Christian and Islamic contexts and prefer the term "Resurgent Islam" to describe mainstream Islamist trends. See Farid Esack, "Contemporary Religious Thought in South Africa and the Emergence of Qur'anic Hermeneutical Notions," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2, no. 2 (1991): 212.

⁹⁹ For a broader history of the apartheid regime and the role of the UDF in the anti-apartheid struggle, see Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford University Press, 2014). Introduced by the Constitution of 1983, the Tricameral Parliament provided Indian and "colored" communities with partial political representation whereas black South Africans would remain unrepresented. Most "coloreds" and Indians, of which Muslims had constituted a considerable part, did not accept the new system, and the call for boycott for the 1984 election became very

front of religious, civic, trade, and student organizations,” the UDF had also paved the way for Muslims to join “the national anti-apartheid struggle according to their religious rather than ethnic identity.” Some MYM members including Esack wanted the MYM to be an affiliate of the UDF to be part of the mainstream anti-apartheid struggle.¹⁰⁰ When the MYM leadership decided not to cooperate with the UDF, Esack had to leave the movement together with his friends Ebrahim Rasool, Adli Jacobs, and Shamil Manie. Before their departure, those four Muslim activists had already personally known each other well and “joined other UDF activists in door-to-door activities, such as the Million Signature campaign, to mobilize affected communities against the tricameral elections and distribute *Grassroots* newsletters at bus stops and train stations.”¹⁰¹

A mass rally organized by those friends in 1984 became the founding moment of a new South African Islamist movement. The organization gathered almost 8000 Muslims at a mosque

successful when the voter turnout was recorded very low in those communities: Vollenhoven, “South Africa at the Crossroads.” According to Inga Niehaus, this was the time by which Muslims should decide whether they would take side with the apartheid-regime or root for the underdog by supporting the anti-apartheid struggle. After the elections, it was clear that the second option had been embraced by a vast majority of the Muslim community: Niehaus, “South Africa’s Muslims Between Participation and Exclusion.”

¹⁰⁰ Jill E. Kelly, “‘It Is Because of Our Islam That We Are There’: The Call of Islam in the United Democratic Front Era,” *African Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (2009): 120. Serving in the commission of political affairs and responsible for contacting different actors of anti-apartheid struggle, Esack had the opportunity to meet Don Mattera, Neville Alexander and John James Issel and strongly advocated for the affiliation with the UDF: Esack, interview by Frederikse, 27.

¹⁰¹ Adli Jacobs, *Punching Above Its Weight: The Story of the Call of Islam* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014), Kindle edition. *Grassroots* was a popular anti-apartheid community newspaper that focused on “the everyday struggles of ordinary people.” See Ineke van Kessel, “Grassroots’: From Washing Lines to Utopia” in *South Africa’s Resistance Press*, eds. Les Switzer and Mohamed Adhikari (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 283-326. *Grassroots* also gave wide coverage to the South African Muslim community and published many articles, particularly about Muslim anti-apartheid movements and activists. See, for example, “Muslims call for election boycott,” *Grassroots* 5, no. 5, June 1984, 13; “Imam flees S. Africa,” *Grassroots* 6, no. 8, October 1985, 3 (a detailed coverage of how Hassan Solomon fled the country to Saudi Arabia); “Call adapting to political conditions,” *Grassroots* 8, no. 10, December 1987, 4; “Qibla man gets six years,” *Grassroots* 9, no. 8, November 1988, 5 (published with a half-page family photo of Achmad Cassiem, his wife, and their three children).

in the Cape against the tricameral elections.¹⁰² That was one of the biggest protests led by Muslims at the time and the participants were “Muslims who wanted to fight Apartheid from a Muslim perspective,” emphasized Adli Jacobs.¹⁰³ The organizers who called themselves “Muslims against oppression” handed out a newsletter titled “the Call of Islam,” which would become soon the name of the new movement.¹⁰⁴ The success of the organization encouraged them to launch a new initiative in Cape Town that aimed to mobilize Muslims against the apartheid state.¹⁰⁵ With very limited financial and organizational sources but with great commitment and promising community support, they founded the Call the same year and immediately joined the UDF in its struggle for liberation.¹⁰⁶ Call leaders including Esack were very active in the grassroot movement and served in the administrative bodies of the UDF.

¹⁰² Some of the speakers at the event were Farid Esack, Hassan Solomon, Ebrahim Rasool, and Ebrahim Moosa.

¹⁰³ Jacobs, *Story of the Call of Islam*.

¹⁰⁴ Written in a poster of the rally was a quote from Ali, a cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, known for his devotion to justice: “Three kinds of people shall not be under the shade of Allah’s mercy on the Day of Judgement. The oppressor, the one who assists the oppressor and the one who remains silent in the face of oppression.” Muslims Against Oppression, “Mass Rally,” poster, ca 1984, South African History Online Archives, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/call-islam-mass-rally-muslims-against-oppression>.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted here that Cape Town has some distinct demographic characteristics, particularly in terms of its “colored” and Muslim populations. It is the second most populous city and having the largest Muslim population in South Africa. The ratio of Muslims to the general population in the city is also considerably higher than other cities. The vast majority of the Muslim population consists of those termed “colored.” Also, Cape Town has been historically populated mostly by “colored” people due to its status under the apartheid regime. According to some studies, Muslims’ attachment to their religious identity is very strong there, compared to ethnic and national identities. See, for example, Yusuf da Costa, “Muslims in Greater Cape Town: A Problem of Identity,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 2 (June 1994): 235-246. This is important to understand the nature of Muslim anti-apartheid activism which was most powerful in the Cape Town area as well as the social context within which both Farid Esack and the Call of Islam pursued most of their political activities.

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, however, Call became officially affiliated with the UDF in 1987: “Call of Islam Joins the UDF,” *Grassroots* 8, no. 3, May 1987, 2.

The Call was a closed organization led by a small cadre of Muslim activists.¹⁰⁷ It worked in cells and recruited members through certain procedures to make sure of their ideological fit with the organization, and the public membership was not allowed.¹⁰⁸ It was therefore an effective movement consisting of committed members. On the other hand, the Call engaged in massive mobilization efforts and became a driving force in the Muslim anti-apartheid struggle. It “organized mass rallies, public meetings, Friday sermons focused on the “call” of Islam, door-to-door campaigns, funerals, boycotts, and religious and political pamphlets, and published a monthly newsletter.”¹⁰⁹ It also contributed significantly to the organization of interfaith meetings and protests. Although the Call did not openly support the armed struggle, some of its members participated in the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC).¹¹⁰

According to the Call, all the oppressed of South Africa was suffering under the same racist and discriminatory regime. The problem was, therefore, not a religious one peculiar to the Muslim community, but a human problem influencing all those termed “non-white” regardless of their religion or faith.¹¹¹ Since the trouble was one, then the struggle had to be one. The Call paid

¹⁰⁷ Though Adli Jacobs did not mention Imam Hassan Solomon as part of the cadre, Esack said that Solomon was both a co-founder of the movement and its first and only *amir*, the supreme leader, until he went into exile in 1985. Solomon was an eminent public figure invited very often to speak at rallies, sermons, and interfaith gatherings.

¹⁰⁸ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 30. According to both Jacobs and Esack, the total number of Call members was no more than two hundred countrywide.

¹⁰⁹ Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.” As Shamil Jeppie pointed out, the funerals of Muslims killed by the security forces had often turned into mass protests led by anti-apartheid movements where “Amandla jostled with Allahu Akbar – an Islamic revolutionary call:” Jeppie, “Amandla and Allahu Akbar,” 15. One of those funerals was that of the 31-year-old Ebrahim Carelse from Cape Town, where Hassan Solomon led the procession that had been attended by thousands of people: “10,000 mourners at the funeral of Ebrahim Carelse,” *Congress Resister* 3, no. 3, October 1985, 1 (published with a photo of the coffin seen in front of the banner, which read the following verse from the Qur’an: “Oh who you believe! We have ordered you to retaliate in the crime of murder”).

¹¹⁰ Jacobs, *Story of the Call of Islam*. In a lecture he delivered in London in 1988, Esack said that he had supported, in the Cape Town Supreme Court, a number of Muslim militants who defended themselves with reference to the Islamic teachings. Esack argued in the court that they were theologically right since “the Qur’an did not only allow victims of oppression to take up arms in defense of their dignity but also encouraged them to do.”

¹¹¹ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands.”

more attention to the local conditions of South Africa than holding on to universal Islamic ideas, unlike the MYM and the Qiblah.¹¹² They supported interfaith solidarity, defended arm-in-arm struggle with non-Muslims, and promoted women's participation in the anti-apartheid struggle. "The texts of the Call of Islam inscribed a vision of reality for developing a new anti-apartheid Muslim discourse against the state" and the emerging discourse also shook the authority of the traditional Ulama.¹¹³ Contrary to the ulama's conservative goal of the "preservation of Islam," the priority for the Call was, above all, to fight for the cause of the disenfranchised and struggle for liberation with anyone who committed herself to the "objective of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and just South Africa."¹¹⁴

The leading role Esack played within the Call as the national coordinator was significant not only in terms of the strategic and political choices of the movement but also in terms of its ideological and theological orientation. His expertise in Islamic studies and his early encounter with Christian liberation theology enabled Esack to come up with the idea of a liberative theology he and his friends would collectively shape during the anti-apartheid struggle. In an interview in the year 1987, Esack said he came to believe that what they had been experimenting theologically with the Call made them the pioneers in Islamic liberation theology, particularly after he witnessed the level of appreciation their works had obtained in overseas meetings.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Kelly, "The Call of Islam."

¹¹³ Iqbal Jhazbhay, "The Politics of Interpretation: The Call of Islam and Ulama Disciplinary Power in South Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2002): 45.

¹¹⁴ Ebrahim Moosa, "Muslim Conservatism in South Africa," *The Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69 (December 1989), 78; Esack, "Three Islamic Strands," 492.

¹¹⁵ Esack, interview by Frederikse, 24.

Esack was also the author of the fundamental texts published by the Call during the 1980s.¹¹⁶ From the mutualism between action and faith to the emphasis put on the agency of the downtrodden, there were clear signs of a liberation theology embedded in those texts. Therefore, without downplaying the collective effort put into the Call's struggle and the influence on the Call of non-Muslim anti-apartheid organizations, it is necessary to acknowledge Esack's major role in the development of an Islamic liberation theology in South Africa.

¹¹⁶ See Esack, *The Struggle*; Esack, *But Musa Went to Firaun*; Esack, "Review of Faith" (n.p., 1984) as mentioned in Palombo, "Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa," 47.

CHAPTER IV

ISLAM AND POLITICS: INTRA-MUSLIM DEBATES AND DIVERGING PATHS

Islamist Challenge to the Conservative Ulama

There was one very important common thread running through the rising anti-apartheid Islamist movements of the 1980s: They all posed a serious challenge to the authority of the traditional ulama organizations in South Africa represented mainly by the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), the Jamiatul Ulama of Transvaal, the Jamiatul Ulama of Natal, and the Majlisul Ulama of South Africa. Those ulama bodies consisted of traditionally-trained theologians who were responsible for “the interpretation of the law, ethics, morality and religious values of Islam” and, thus, had “the authority and power over the religious symbols.”¹¹⁷ They were also the standard-bearer of a politically conservative approach and had considerable social authority within the South African Muslim community.¹¹⁸ The Islamist challenge to their authority was multifaceted. First, Islamists broke up the monopoly over interpretation of religious sources. That monopoly had been almost exclusively enjoyed by the Muslim clergy over decades. Second, Islamists proposed alternative political routes to the “apolitical” stance of the ulama organizations. Those alternative routes were much more attractive to the Muslim youth who were desperately discontent with the apartheid regime. Third, Islamists challenged also the social power of the clergy. They did so particularly by way of creating new social organizations and

¹¹⁷ Ebrahim Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism in South Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69 (December 1989): 73-81.

¹¹⁸ The only exception was the MJC. See Rabia Pandey, “A Critical Look at the Role of the Muslim Judicial Council in the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa from 1960-1994,” (Honors thesis, University of Cape Town, 1994).

transforming some of the ulama-dominated social spaces, such as mosques, into lively platforms for critical social debates.

Iqbal Jhazbhay, a former Call member, argued that the tense relationship between modern Islamic movements and the ulama was shaped substantially by the “sharp conflict between those who were searching for meaning in the Qur’an and its relevance to their lives in South Africa and those who claimed to have exclusive access to interpretative understanding.”¹¹⁹ The latter consisted of scholars who were trained in traditional religious institutions and thus became “authorized” commentators of Islamic sources.¹²⁰ They, therefore, considered themselves and were considered by the majority of the South African Muslim community as the sole legitimate class of people who could produce religious meaning and laws. This authority was seriously challenged by a new generation of youth and professionals who were educated in modern institutions.¹²¹ The religious knowledge provided by the ulama members was inadequate in addressing the social and political problems they had been wrestling with on a daily basis. This inadequacy made them heavily interested in discovering “social and political aspects of Islam” in the South African context.

In this regard, one major source of knowledge for them would be the writings of Islamist intellectuals such as Hasan al-Banna, Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati. Those

¹¹⁹ Jhazbhay, “The Politics of Interpretation,” 458.

¹²⁰ The Deobandi tradition and the Tablighi Jamaat were influential in the formation of and support for some of those organizations. See Ingram, *Deoband Movement and Global*, 166 and Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa*, 70.

¹²¹ Abdulkader Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.” Esack and Ebrahim Moosa, both of whom were maulanas, were exceptions in that sense. Yet, they were not part of the ivory-tower clergy but just in the middle of the struggle alongside lay people. Fatima Meer, a prominent Muslim intellectual and anti-apartheid activist, emphasized the emancipatory role different ulama groups played in colonial India and Iran in the 1970s against the oppressive regimes, and she appreciated a group of South African young clergy including Esack who fought racism and injustice, against the backdrop of the conservative ulama groups who remained silent about the apartheid regime: Meer, foreword to *But Musa Went to Firaun!: A Compilation of Questions and Answers about the Role of Muslims in the South African Struggle for Liberation*, by Farid Esack (Maitland, South Africa: Call of Islam, 1989).

figures, who challenged the archaic and conservative nature of the ulama authority, provided the new generation of South African Muslims with a fresh religious perspective. Through that perspective, they became able to reconsider the meaning of Muslimness in their own circumstances and to deal with the issues surrounding them, from secularism to racism to socio-economic deprivation. Besides Islamist literature, another fundamental source of knowledge was the reading and discussion groups, called *halaqat* (circles). First the MYM and then the Call established *halaqat* in order to critically read and discuss portions from the Qur'an and the Sunnah and interpret them in light of contemporary social and political developments. This was, no doubt, a radical departure from the traditional religious knowledge production.

First, each Muslim, irrespective of whether s/he had religious training or not, was encouraged to participate in producing religious knowledge. In other words, the ulama bodies were no longer the only authority in that respect. That was the process of what Esack called the “deprofessionalization of Islam.” According to Esack, “the only long-term solution to the problem of this mutually destructive symbiotic relationship” between the “omnipotent imam” and the “Muslim patient” who “lends himself to religious leadership” was to forge a new theology free from the domination and obscurantism of the clergy.¹²² Second, the same process also brought about questioning the capability as well as the intention of the Muslim clergy to reform the religious discourse. The ulama’s fierce reaction against “novel” interpretations coming from “non-professional” Muslims and their insistence on ready-made recipes were not in any way promising. As a result, the ulama’s “disciplinary power based on supervision and control,” particularly “in the domain of interpretation of the Qur’an,” was undermined by

¹²² Farid Esack, “Mosques: The Battle for Control – Some Reflections,” Farid Esack’s Personal Website (Outdated), 1989, 10-11.

Islamists who decisively went beyond the long-established limits on religious knowledge production.¹²³

According to Ebrahim Moosa, a prominent Muslim scholar and a former MYM leader, the conservative nature of the political discourse generated by the ulama organizations can be explained under three broad categories.¹²⁴ Firstly, they strictly advocated the idea of obedience to as well as non-confrontation with, the ruling authority. They asserted that unless it prevented Muslims from performing their basic religious practices and having some autonomous social space, there was no place, theologically, for challenging political authority, no matter how oppressive it was in other domains. This became clearer in their position of not explicitly condemning the apartheid regime despite its widespread and systematic employment of racist, discriminatory and violent policies towards those termed “non-white” people including Muslims. Moosa argued that “this type of political theology,” which aimed to “promote a policy of moderation and cohesion against lawlessness and chaos,” was “neither unauthentic nor inaccurate in terms of the mainstream Muslim tradition.”¹²⁵

Secondly, when political mobilization among Muslims was on the rise in the 1980s due to the hardening conditions of the apartheid regime and the transnational effect of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, most ulama members regarded the increasing activism and the accompanying pro-revolutionary discourse as the “politics of heresy.” The emergence of an Islamic state through Iranian people’s own efforts was a great political success on behalf of the

¹²³ Jhazbhay, “Politics of Interpretation,” 463.

¹²⁴ Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism.”

¹²⁵ Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism.” It is important to note here that the mainstream Muslim tradition Moosa pointed to was the Sunni tradition. Shiism, as a minority tradition, has had a more contentious relationship with political authorities since its birth. See Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

“ummah,” global Muslim community, and this was not only very welcomed but also taken as an inspirational example by many Muslims around the world. When it came to the South African context, “for the first time,” Moosa argued, “Muslims found a point of reference for their religious-moral struggle which coincided with the revolutionary zeal prevalent at the time among liberation movements in South Africa.”¹²⁶ In this context, the ulama, as the flag-bearer of traditional Sunni Islam, immediately produced an anti-Shia discourse which fiercely condemned and even accused as “heretic” and “unbeliever” the ones who espoused the revolutionary ideology of Iran.¹²⁷ Moosa contended that it was essentially not about confessional disputes but about power relations. The “deepening animosity between radicals and conservatives disguised itself in a controversy over the legitimacy of Shi’ism” and sectarian polemics was selectively used by the Muslim clergy “in order to theologically discredit groups hostile to the political interests of the conservative Ulama.”¹²⁸

Esack also was quite critical of the ulama’s passivity and its accusations against the Islamist movements. In his writings and preachings during the anti-apartheid struggle, he continuously challenged the theological arguments put forward by the ulama. He argued that it was not possible to separate revelation and revolution since “revolution is a part of revelation.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, “neutrality in the face of Apartheid borders on kufr [rejection of

¹²⁶ Ebrahim Moosa, “Discursive Voices of Diaspora Islam in South Africa,” *Jurnal Antropologi dan Sosiologi* 20 (1993): 54.

¹²⁷ The major target was the Qiblah for it was the main organization who, despite its Sunni identity, appropriated the radical ideology and discourse of the Iranian revolution. Cassiem was also a strong critic of Muslim collaborationists and he always denounced the organizations and individuals that cooperated with the state. Cassiem’s heavy denouncements, together with his pro-Iranian position, set the ground for the fight between the Qiblah and the Ulama bodies. See Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.”

¹²⁸ Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism,” 76.

¹²⁹ Esack, *Musa Went to Firaun*, 30.

God],” according to Esack, since Muslims had to struggle against injustices as part of their belief.¹³⁰ Islam was not a religion of moderation but a religion that required the believer to take action against oppression. Esack would formulate that binary later as “accommodation theology vs. liberation theology.”

The third criticism the ulama organizations directed against the Muslim anti-apartheid struggle was the cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims. They argued that being together with non-Muslims, who were assumed to follow untruthful paths, would pollute the “pristine character of Islam” and bring about the “dislocation of existing socio-moral structures and the deterioration of Shar’i (religious) authority.”¹³¹ This belief led the Muslim clergy to use the notion of *fitnah*, namely sedition and civil strife, as a weapon against untraditional religious ideas and political practices of Islamists. The majority of the ulama thought that the Islamist activism was politicizing Islam, breaking the unity of the ummah and putting the interests of the Muslim community in danger. They, therefore, were causing *fitnah* and contributing to infidel politics. Furthermore, the political cooperation of Islamists with leftists, Christians or atheists was the sign of “heresy and deviation.” Esack utterly rejected those claims and insistently underlined the necessity of a unified struggle by drawing attention to the South African reality:

If we are thinking of Muslims running into separate directions when the police start shooting, or Muslim factory workers striking on a different day from the other workers... then it would hardly make any sense. The truth is that our people-Muslim and non-Muslim-live together. We have suffered together and our children have died on the streets of Cape Town together.¹³²

¹³⁰ Esack, *Musa Went to Firaun*, 41.

¹³¹ Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism.”

¹³² Esack, *Musa Went to Firaun*, 49.

Abdulkader Tayob described this discourse of *fitnah* rightly as the “ideology of conservatism” whose program was constituted by “passivism, self-preservation, and the symbol of the community.”¹³³ This is exactly why Islamist anti-apartheid politics, with its considerable amount of community support, was so annoying and threatening for the traditional Muslim clergy.

Besides challenging the Ulama in the spheres of religious knowledge production and local politics, Islamists also aimed to transform the nature of social spaces and organizations dominated by the conservative Ulama ideology. Abdullah Haron was the first religious leader who turned his mosque “into a versatile community center” in which social and political issues were constantly discussed both among Muslims themselves and with members from non-Muslim communities.¹³⁴ The same mosque, under the leadership of first Hassan Solomon and then Rashied Omar, would be a home for young Muslim activists struggling against the apartheid regime: “During the anti-apartheid years,” pointed out Rashied Omar, “our mosque was a place for people to come together to express their grievances concerning the situation in the apartheid regime. There would be meetings of young people planning protests inside the mosque. For us, this was not political activity; this was a struggle for justice.”¹³⁵ Esack also pointed out the need for the democratization of mosque administrations. He suggested that *shura*, the principle of consultation, should be understood in a broader sense as a “process of participatory democracy”

¹³³ Tayob, “Fitnah: The Ideology of Conservative Islam,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69 (December 1989): 71. Similarly, Moosa asserted that that discourse was “narrow, sectarian and exclusivist” in the sense that it would give no way to any other political project other than conservative politics: Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism.”

¹³⁴ Jeppie, “Amandla and Allahu Akbar,” 6.

¹³⁵ Munyas, interview with Omar. Imam Hassan Solomon was one the co-founders of the Call of Islam while Rashied Omar was elected as president of the MYM in 1987.

and that, alongside accountability, it should become the chief principle of mosque management.¹³⁶

Also, during the 1970s and the 1980s, Islamist movements attempted seriously to involve women actively in their organizations and to increase awareness of injustices that Muslim women experienced in social life. For example, the MYM campaigned for “women to be allowed spaces in mosques” and that campaign “attracted the most vitriolic response from the “ulama.”¹³⁷ They frequently discussed the issue of women’s roles in Islam through critically engaging with religious sources. The Call took a step further and developed a more progressive agenda of which gender justice was one of the fundamental topics.¹³⁸ Since its inception in 1984, the Call insistently stressed its belief in the equality of men and women and the need for women’s liberation. They “deliberately appointed woman marshals for marches and funerals and ensured that its activists mixed with members of the opposite gender in public meetings. Internally, men and women met together, prayed together and had mixed *halaqāt*.”¹³⁹ In response to the increasing visibility of Muslim women in public spaces and their gradual social empowerment, “conservatives mount a moral crusade in order to blame radical activists for the breakdown in

¹³⁶ Esack, “Battle for Control.”

¹³⁷ Naeem Jeenah, “The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa in the 1990s,” (Master’s thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2001), 13.

¹³⁸ Esack was a prominent figure in the formation of that progressive perspective. However, surprisingly, he did not draw attention to the issue of gender in the publications he authored for the Call in the 1980s. This may have to do with the Call’s strategy of not appalling the Muslim community with its “too radical” notions but disclosing its approach gradually.

¹³⁹ Jeenah, “Islamic Feminisms in South Africa,” 25. Esack criticized the Qiblah for not opening space for women in the leadership of the movement and using a sexist language in its publications. He also told a very interesting anecdote about the Call’s decision to depose its first and only *amir* (chief), Imam Hassan Solomon, because of his conservative approach of not letting women to take leadership positions in the organization: Esack, “Liberation, Human Rights, Gender and Islamic Law: The South African Case,” in *Islamic Law Reforms and Human Rights*, eds. Tore Lindholm and Kari Vogt (Nordic Human Rights Publications, 1992), 181.

family and religious morality.”¹⁴⁰ Resorting to the accusation of immorality as well as of causing *fitnah* was another sign of the deterioration of the ulama authority, this time in social life.

Transnational Islamism versus South African Struggle

The serious conflicts between the Islamist movements and the conservative Muslim clergy, ranging from production of religious knowledge to their political approaches to the contest over social spaces, did not mean that the two sides constituted homogenous entities without any internal diversity or divisions. In fact, Islamist organizations differed considerably from each other in terms of political goals and strategies. They sometimes stood side by side against the ulama and the apartheid regime, and attempted to unify the struggle; other times, they openly challenged and even fought each other over diverging policies. More importantly, they sharply parted ways on theorizing Muslim politics. On the one hand, they all laid great stress on the political aspect of Islam and based their political and social projects on the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition; on the other, they had conflicting interpretations regarding political teachings embedded in religious sources as well as regarding the necessities of South African politics. The main point of divergence among Islamist anti-apartheid movements was about how they related their struggle to universal understanding of Islamism. There were different positions in that regard ranging from supporting transnational Muslim community to searching for a particularly South African Islam. This diversity was reflected in other crucial points of conflict such as how they approached fundamental religious sources, particularly the Qur’an, what kind of society and state they aimed at, and with whom they considered it necessary to carry out political struggle.

¹⁴⁰ Moosa, “Muslim Conservatism.”

As Esack himself pointed out, “developments in the world of Islam as a whole were essentially reflected in the dynamics of the Islamic movement in South Africa.”¹⁴¹ The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) was the major actor in that regard. From its inception, it had very close relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e Islami. They invited speakers from those movements to give series of seminars to students.¹⁴² Those speakers “clearly stood out in their significant contribution to the Muslim Youth Movement’s systematic exposure to the global Islamist traditions.”¹⁴³ Furthermore, some works of the leading Islamist intellectuals Sayyid Qutb and Abu’l Ala Maududi were translated and published by *Al-Qalam*, the newspaper of the MYM, and they were widely discussed in *halaqat* groups.¹⁴⁴ *Al-Qalam* also carried messages and news from different Muslim communities around the world to South African Muslims.¹⁴⁵ As Shamil Jeppie pointed out, the global trend of Islamism shaped substantially the organizational and conceptual nature of the South African Islamist movements: “This development was a radical break from everything organizational that had gone before. And so, via the published track, the cassette, the youth camp and conference, and visiting scholars – most

¹⁴¹ Farid Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 478.

¹⁴² Khurshid Ahmed and Khurram Murad from the Jamaat-e Islami, and Jamal Badawi and Ahmed Sagr from the Muslim Brotherhood were the notable guests visiting MYM’s seminars: See Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 479. On the other hand, Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari (1914-1974), a leading Pakistani scholar who was one of the founders of World Federation of Islamic Missions, gave many lectures in South Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s on various topics such as knowledge and the self, the principle of unity (*tawhid*), westernized Muslims, women in Islam, and Darwinism and birth control: See Fazlur Rahman Ansari, *Islam to the Modern Mind: Lectures in South Africa 1970 and 1972*, ed. Yasien Mohamed (Hidden Treasure Press, 1999). Esack noted that Ansari’s inspirational lectures contributed to the radicalization of the Muslim Youth in the 1970s but did not mention if he was one of those young people: Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 477.

¹⁴³ Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.”

¹⁴⁴ Qutb’s *Milestones* and Maududi’s *Towards Understanding Islam* were amongst those works: Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 479. Muhammed Haron noted that some of those works were translated even into Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa with the assistance of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated international youth organization: Haron, “Alternative South African Muslim Press,” 462n17.

¹⁴⁵ See Haron, “Alternative South African Muslim Press.”

often not formally trained ‘religious experts’ – the ‘Islamic revival’ was imported, felt, and imagined.¹⁴⁶

In this context, it was clear that the MYM was heavily interested in global Islamist thought at the expense of ignoring South African realities. The effects on the MYM’s political discourse of global Islamist trends was obvious in many aspects. First of all, MYM members started to perceive Islam “as a way of life” that encompasses not only religious but also social and political fields.¹⁴⁷ Based chiefly on Maududi’s teachings, they espoused the idea that Islam was not a religion; it was, on the contrary, a *deen/din*, which rejects reducing religion into private sphere and embraces all aspects of life.¹⁴⁸ The idea of Islam as a comprehensive way of life was accompanied by the perception of Islam as an ideology. The MYM believed that Islam preached the guiding principles for a just political struggle and a comprehensive social project. The goal was to reach an Islamized society and then create an Islamic political regime. They had a “bottom up” approach, which was not revolutionary but gradualist. The MYM would undertake the role of “vanguard” in this project of Islamizing the South African society.¹⁴⁹

They [MYM] promoted the visibility of Muslims in all spheres of life, thereby projecting a strong sense of Islamic identity in their public activities. They set up a newspaper in 1974 called al-Qalam; founded a missionary movement (Islamic Da’wa Movement); established a book and tape service which later became a chain of bookstores (International Book Services); set up a national *zakāt* collection fund (1977); and formed professional bodies for Muslim medical doctors, accountants and lawyers. Clearly, the Muslim Youth Movement wished to Islamize South Africa anew.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ Jeppie, “Amandla and Allahu Akbar,” 11.

¹⁴⁷ Tayob, *Muslim Youth Movement*.

¹⁴⁸ Abdulkader Tayob, “Muslims’ Discourse on Alliance Against Apartheid,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 3, no. 2 (September 1990): 35.

¹⁴⁹ Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.” This idea reminds Sayyid Qutb’s vanguardism. It is here important to note that, as Jeppie pointed out, for South African Islamist movements, “a text of singular significance was *Milestones*” authored by Qutb: Jeppie, “Amandla and Allahu Akbar,” 11.

¹⁵⁰ Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.”

The Iranian revolution also had tremendous influence on South African Islamism. Although the MYM did not attempt to follow the revolutionary path, they did not consider the Iranian revolution “as anything else but an outstanding symbol for the power of Islam.”¹⁵¹ It was a fundamental source of self-confidence and political determination for South African Islamists. In terms of political strategy, the MYM was especially interested in the pivotal role Iranian mullahs played in the success of the revolution, and they began to send students abroad for better religious education.¹⁵² However, the major effect of the revolution on South African Islamism was the foundation of the Qiblah Mass Movement in 1980. Achmad Cassiem, a determined anti-apartheid activist and the ideologue of the Qiblah, tried to adapt the ideas and strategies of the revolution to the South African context.¹⁵³

According to Achmad Cassiem, the MYM was an elitist organization which was education-oriented and politically moderate.¹⁵⁴ For him, Islam was a revolutionary ideology, and it was not simply an ideology among other ideologies, but the only true one.¹⁵⁵ Cassiem believed that the struggle between the apartheid regime and the oppressed majority was a variation of the confrontation between the Shah’s regime in Iran and the oppressed masses led by Ruhollah Khomeini, whose “sayings and image” had been popularized “in the streets of Cape Town” by

¹⁵¹ See Uta Lehmann, “The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on Muslim Organizations in South Africa during the Struggle against Apartheid,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 19, no. 1 (2006): 23-39.

¹⁵² Tayob, *Muslim Youth Movement*.

¹⁵³ “Qiblah as a movement,” Esack argued, “assumed the mantle of the local defenders of the Islamic revolution and more significantly saw the revolution as a means of liberation in the here and now”: Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 484.

¹⁵⁴ See Haron, “Qibla Mass Movement.”

¹⁵⁵ Cassiem ambitiously asserted that “Islam, the Deen of the oppressed, is the ideology of liberation against which any other ‘isms’ pales into significance”: Achmad Cassiem, *Quest for Unity*, 91.

the Qiblah.¹⁵⁶ This perspective was in stark contrast with the gradualist approach of the MYM. Not surprisingly, the struggle of Qiblah members, which had started through challenging the state in the streets, ended up participating in the armed resistance.¹⁵⁷

However, unlike the popular belief, Cassiem's ideology was not shaped exclusively by Islamic teachings. He was in close contact with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which brought together the ideas of nationalism, socialism, and pan-Africanism.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, some Qiblah members were "also PAC members."¹⁵⁹ Cassiem himself did not give credit to socialism as an ideology but he always considered all the oppressed of South Africa as the natural component of a Islamic struggle for justice.¹⁶⁰ For him, the long-standing African experience of colonialism and racism should come to an end with a common struggle led by the Muslim ummah, which he defined as "the vanguard of the oppressed."¹⁶¹ Also, although substantially influenced by the Iranian experience, Cassiem did not explicitly present an Islamic state as the final goal of the struggle.¹⁶² It is thus clear that the (South) African context was more decisive in

¹⁵⁶ Tayob, "Islamism in South Africa."

¹⁵⁷ Haron, "Qibla Mass Movement," 20.

¹⁵⁸ Jeppie, "Amandla and Allahu Akbar," 10.

¹⁵⁹ Haron, "Qibla Mass Movement," 20.

¹⁶⁰ "Islam, the revolutionary heritage of Azania, is the heritage of all the oppressed people in Azania": Cassiem, *Quest for Unity*, 86. Azania is an alternative name for South Africa used by pan-Africanists who argue that the term has an Arabic root and refers to the original name of the region as opposed to the colonial term of South Africa.

¹⁶¹ Cassiem, *Quest for Unity*, 91. Here Cassiem defined ummah as "the global community of truth, action and justice."

¹⁶² Palombo, "Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa," 43. Mohammed Haron drew attention to the same issue: "It is interesting to observe that no mention was made of the formation of an Islamic state in South Africa as was so convincingly stated by a few western based Think Tanks that consider it [Qiblah] as a terrorist organization": Haron, "Qibla Mass Movement," 18.

shaping Cassiem's (and the Qiblah's) ideological position than the MYM's despite the fact that transnational Islamism had a huge impact also on Cassiem's political thinking and strategy.

Esack, the then national coordinator of the Call, argued that "If the MYM were the first to fuse the process of Islamization with the collective wisdom of the latter-day Islamic Movement (...) and if Qiblah were the first to introduce South African Muslims to a political and revolutionary Islam which identified with the oppressed masses, then the Call of Islam was the first to draw its inspiration from universal peace movements and to emphasize the essential oneness of humankind."¹⁶³ Esack's emphasis on "universal movements" other than Islamist ones and on the "oneness of humankind" instead of the "Muslim ummah" reveals how the Call differentiated itself from the MYM and the Qiblah. The Call developed a radical critique of global Islamist trends and attempted to construct a South African Islamism that essentially drew on the experience and the needs of South Africans engaging in the anti-apartheid struggle. In that regard, the Call became open to benefit critically from non-Islamic ideologies and theologies, and to constructive dialogue with non-Muslim organizations and persons constituting the main component of the anti-apartheid struggle. That approach laid the groundwork for South African Islamic liberation theology and would also constitute the core of Esack's own conceptualization.

According to the Call, what Muslims experienced in apartheid South Africa was not about their religious identity or ideology but about the discriminatory and racist political regime denying the majority of South Africans the right to live as human.¹⁶⁴ It was thus necessary to

¹⁶³ Esack, "Three Islamic Strands," 491.

¹⁶⁴ The Call's approach to the anti-apartheid struggle closely resembled Malcolm X's words about the nature of the oppression they had faced in the USA: "We're not brutalized because we're Baptists. We're not brutalized because we're Methodists. We're not brutalized because we're Muslims. We're not brutalized because we're Catholics. We're brutalized because we are black people in America": *Malcolm X: Speech Excerpt from Los Angeles* (Greenwood, IN: Educational Video Group, 1962), https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C2787248.

build political struggle not within a closed Muslim community with exclusive references to Islamist literature, but together with the oppressed masses of South Africa regardless of their religious, cultural and ideological background. It did not mean, however, that the Call gave up claim to Islam as its base for political thought and action. It continued to base its ideas on the Qur'an and the Sunnah and benefit selectively from Islamist literature. For example, the Call members were reading the works of Ali Shariati and Mahmoud Taleghani but the impact they had on the Call was minimal, Esack asserted, when compared to the influence of transnational Islamist discourse on the MYM and the Qiblah.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, as Esack pointed out, ideologically, the Call was coming from the Islamist tradition and its search for a South African Islam resulted in a “marriage between the Islamic Movement idea of a comprehensive Islam and “the Struggle,” the battle against apartheid.”¹⁶⁶ The Call thus described itself as part of “the progressive Islamic movement” or “progressive Islamism” during the anti-apartheid struggle.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Esack also underlined the fact that the Call was the only group who had engaged with the tradition of the Mojahedin-e Khalq whereas other Islamist groups denounced the organization in line with the official position of the Iranian regime led by Khomeini: Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 491. On the other hand, there were also occasional references to Islamist thinkers such as Muhammed Abduh, Mohammad Salim Al-Awa, and Rached Ghannouchi in Esack’s own works published in the 1980s.

¹⁶⁶ Jeenah, “Islamic Feminisms in South Africa,” 95. It is clear that the idea of a comprehensive Islam that Esack and the Call embraced was one of the fundamental pillars of Islamist thought and their embrace shows the significant continuities between the mainstream Islamism and the progressive approach of the Call even though the Call was not willing to admit the level of interaction they had had with Islamist literature.

¹⁶⁷ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 478n18. Though not defined clearly and systematically, the term “progressive” was used by South African Muslim activists including Esack to underline the anti-systemic, justice-oriented character of their struggle. More importantly, since the term was popular among leftist organizations constituting the backbone of the broader anti-apartheid coalition, its employment was also probably pointing to the fact that progressive Muslims had considered themselves part of the mainstream struggle. Besides the popularity of the term in apartheid South Africa, it is possible that Esack and his friends might have adopted it from Iran. Esack mentioned, in one of his articles on “progressive Islam,” that the term had been already employed in the early 1980s to describe Islamic anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist trends in Iran led by Ali Shariati and the Mujahidin-i Khalq, whose ideas had been circulated widely among Call members in the same period. See Farid Esack, “In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 78-97 and Esack, “Progressive Islam – A Rose by Any Name? American Soft Power in the War for the Hearts and Minds of Muslims,” *ReOrient* 4, no. 1 (Autumn, 2018): 78-106.

On the other hand, the Call directed very harsh criticisms against other Islamist movements. For example, Esack criticized the MYM for having a “simplistic appreciation of the universality of Islam” and, therefore, being stuck to a “vaguely defined social and cultural ‘commitment to the establishment of Allah’s order in South Africa.’”¹⁶⁸ According to the Call, the fundamental political responsibility of South African Muslims was to unconditionally confront any evil and injustice in their society irrespective of who suffered most and who led the opposition. Also, unlike the Qiblah, the Call emphasized that Muslims should not be the vanguard but comrades of the oppressed. Since they were all human and exposed to the same cruelty, then their struggle should be based on solidarity and cooperation without any hierarchy of religion, ethnicity, gender or ideology. “Most conscientious Muslims under apartheid,” Ebrahim Moosa similarly argued, “felt that this immoral practice had to be resisted and combated because it was deemed an affront to a common humanity. Self-serving ethnic and religious interests had to be cast aside on moral grounds since they conflicted with the universal vision of Islam” that acknowledged that humanity was a single community.¹⁶⁹

The turning point for the divergence in South African Islamism was the hot discussions that took place around the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the early 1980s. Since its inception, the Call closely cooperated with the UDF and, thus, became part of the mainstream anti-apartheid struggle dominated by the then exiled African National Congress (ANC). Its main cadre consisted of ex-MYM members and some progressive ulama, and it “was to a large extent the birthchild of activists, torn in their allegiance between the UDF and the MYM.”¹⁷⁰ When the

¹⁶⁸ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 480-81.

¹⁶⁹ Ebrahim Moosa, “The Dilemma of Islamic Rights Schemes,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 15, no. 1/2 (2000): 213.

¹⁷⁰ “Rasool and Imam Hassan Solomon were both on the Western Cape executive of the UDF whilst being senior members of the MYM. When Rasool and Solomon were confronted by the MYM with no alternative but to choose

UDF was founded, the MYM decidedly stood against its members who were eager to take part in the UDF and took a stand of “positive neutrality” which meant joining the anti-apartheid struggle without cooperation with any non-Muslim organization.¹⁷¹

As Esack pointed out, there were three objections by the MYM to “alliances with the religious Other in general and with the UDF in particular.”¹⁷² Firstly, political alliances compromise the superiority of Islam as “the principal liberating power.” Secondly, becoming part of a secular movement poses a challenge to the holistic view of Islam and makes it a religion among others. Thirdly, Muslims cannot accept democracy as a political system simply because it attempts to share the absolute sovereignty of God. In response to the objections, the Call heartily defended both its political alliance with the UDF and its general political discourse promoting interfaith and interideological solidarity. The Call’s position had relied on theological, political and strategic arguments. For the first, the Call put forward the same argument it had presented against the ulama accusations. Under oppressive and unjust conditions, Muslims had the responsibility to stand for justice and there was no ban on cooperation with non-Muslims in fundamental Islamic sources. Moreover, the fact that Prophet Muhammad himself had been part of that sort of cooperation constituted an inspiring and supportive example for Call members.¹⁷³

between the MYM and the UDF, they chose to leave the MYM. Rasool, Solomon and another senior MYM figure Moulana Farid Esack (the author) along with Adli Jacobs and Shamil Manie were responsible for the formation of the Call of Islam.” Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 490.

¹⁷¹ Jill E.Kelly, “‘It Is Because of Our Islam That We Are There’: The Call of Islam in the United Democratic Front Era,” *African Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (2009): 118-39.

¹⁷² Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 44.

¹⁷³ Jacobs, *Story of the Call of Islam*. Prophet Muhammad formed with the prominent Meccan leaders an organization called “the Alliance of the Virtuous” (*Hilf al-Fudul*) to secure justice in Meccan society. This was before Muhammed became prophet but Prophet Muhammad himself later appreciated his role in the organization, as did Muslim scholars of the following centuries.

For the second, the Call believed that its participation in a non-Muslim organization was not in any way downgrading the prestige of Islam. Call members took part in the struggle confidently with their Muslim identity.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, the Islamic anti-apartheid discourse they generated was greatly appreciated by their non-Muslim comrades.¹⁷⁵ For the third, The Call's goal was neither to Islamize the South African society nor to establish an Islamic political system in a country in which Muslims constituted less than two percent of the population. Moreover, the Call did not think that the only way to establish a just system was to base it on Islamic law. What was crucial for a just sociopolitical system was, according to the Call, being free from any form of inequality and discrimination. Besides MYM's objections, Achmad Cassiem also denounced the UDF as a "movement devoid of revolutionary method, revolutionary action and 'ideological clarity'" and harshly criticized and even attacked Muslims supporting it, primarily Call members,

¹⁷⁴ Muslim leaders participated in street protests and interfaith gatherings usually in their religious clothing, used often Islamic slogans and banners, and did not avoid using Muslim terminology and referencing Islamic sources in their speeches. See, for example, Zubeida Vallie, *Imam Solomon, Rashied Omar and an Anglican priest, among others at a funeral for slain activist, Cape Town*, photograph, ca 1980s, UCT Libraries Digital Collections: Islandora Repository, Western Cape, SA, <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/collection/islandora-12657>; Alan Taylor, *Religious leaders at detainees service, Cape Town*, photograph, ca 1989, UCT Libraries Digital Collections: Islandora Repository, Western Cape, SA, <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/islandora/object/islandora%3A17924>. They were also confident in criticizing their Christian comrades for the privileged position they occupied in the anti-apartheid struggle: "We are tired of your arrogance and indifference to us who are adherents of other faiths (...) We are tired of you, who today through your powerful church structures and access to money have acquired enormous influence in the struggle to regain the land (...) We are tired of the way you want to Christianize solutions to the problems of our country (...) That new South Africa is going to come about because you respect our integrity and indeed realize that for you to define your existence in a meaningful manner, you need me." Esack, "The Unfinished Business of Our Liberation Struggle."

¹⁷⁵ For example, *Sechaba*, official organ of the ANC, published a short version of a lecture on the liberation struggle in South Africa that Esack had delivered in London. In another example, an ANC representative, Mendi Misamang, mentioned Esack and Shaikh Abdul Hamid Gabier, a former chairman of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), alongside ANC leaders such as Oliver Tambo to show that the ANC was cooperating with various religious actors against the "fallacious theology" of pro-apartheid forces. There were also some articles published in *Phakamani*, official publication of the ANC Department of Religious Affairs, proving the reciprocal relationship between the mainstream anti-apartheid movement and progressive Muslims: See Farid Esack, "Canon Collins Memorial Lecture: The Bases of Our Hopes," *Sechaba* 22, no. 1, January 1989, 3-6; Mendi Msimang, "Our Revolution Is not yet Won, Our Tyrant Still Occupies the Throne," *Sechaba* 23, no. 3, March 1989, 6; Shaikh Abdul Hamid Gabier, "The Letter to Islamic Community," *Phakamani* 1, no. 1, 1987, 15; "Muslims Urged to Unite against Apartheid," *Phakamani* 3, no. 2, November 1989, 24.

mainly for falling outside of the belief that “Islamic is the only solution.”¹⁷⁶ In that regard, the Call gave references to “the roles of Musa and Yeshua in Egypt as well as the Prophet Muhammad’s treaty at Hudaibiyyah” and underlined the virtues of negotiation between the leaders of the fighting sides if there occurred an opportunity for that.¹⁷⁷ The Call argued that the option of negotiation would prevent revolutionary violence from becoming the only path to solution and enable the oppressed side to reveal its ethical ethos to the oppressors.¹⁷⁸

The Call’s alliance with the UDF meant its rejection of the *ummah* as a political ideal. Esack, as one of the ideologues and leaders of the Call, attached great importance to the debate on the Muslim unity within the South African context. Despite its popularity among Muslims around the world during the 1980s, the political idea of the global *ummah* was not attainable in South Africa. In fact, it “has never been a reality,” Esack pointed out, “since the death of the Holy Prophet.”¹⁷⁹ Without looking to the reasons for the rise of that idea then, Esack simply began with looking at the local reality. The disenfranchised of the country was in the need of “maximum unity” to eradicate the apartheid regime, and the elimination of the apartheid regime was necessary to bring justice to South Africa. Struggle for justice was the responsibility of all Muslims. The essence was justice whereas the form might change according to the context. The desired form in a non-Muslim majority South Africa was “a united, non-racial, non-sexist, and

¹⁷⁶ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 487.

¹⁷⁷ Palombo, “Islamic Liberation Theology in South Africa,” 44.

¹⁷⁸ Esack, *Musa Went to Firaun*, 24-25.

¹⁷⁹ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 495.

democratic” country. Muslims, as a minority, had to partake in the struggle as long as it remained committed to materializing justice.¹⁸⁰

On the other hand, Esack did not ignore the existence of the *ummah*. He underlined, however, that the *ummah* was not necessarily a political collectivity but primarily a social reality. In a manual he authored for Call activists, Esack pointed to the four-stage strategy of spreading awareness: myself, my circle of faith (the *halqah*), my community of faith (the *ummah*), and the community of the oppressed.¹⁸¹ What differentiated Esack from other Islamists was the introduction of the last stage into the scheme. Most Islamists considered the community of faith as the social basis of their political activism whereas Esack saw the community of the oppressed as the real place for political struggle. Being part of the *ummah*, Muslims both had the advantage of capitalizing on their religious heritage and the responsibility for correcting the failing elements of their tradition. At the same time, Muslims had to advance the struggle into the realm of society because the target was not liberation for only co-religionists but for all the marginalized. Esack believed that in many cases the call for Muslim unity was a call for a “single understanding of Islam” at the expense of alternative views and a thirst for political power and authority in the name of a certain communal identity.¹⁸² That was in contrast with the real strength of the idea of the *ummah*: the “unequivocal rejection of tribalism and racism” and “rejoicing in inclusivism and diversity.”¹⁸³ According to Esack, the *ummah*, “at its best, is thus

¹⁸⁰ For a detailed analysis of the interfaith dialogue and solidarity during the anti-apartheid struggle, see Matthew Palombo, “Interfaith Praxis in the South African Struggle for Liberation: Toward a Liberatio-Political Framework for Muslim-Christian Relations” (PhD diss., University of Johannesburg, 2014).

¹⁸¹ Esack, *The Struggle*, 60.

¹⁸² Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 143.

¹⁸³ Farid Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity: For What and With Whom? Muslim Reflections from a Post-Apartheid South Africa in the Throes of Globalisation,” in *Cultural Diversity in Islam*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

an open-ended community under one universal God and transcends the boundaries, however elusive, of ancestry or ethnicity.”¹⁸⁴

The discordance between the Call and other Muslim organizations about the controversial issues such as the *ummah* did not necessarily make the former move away from Muslim masses, however. First of all, some of the leading figures of the Call, including Esack, were at the same time ulama members serving within the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC).¹⁸⁵ They used their positions within the clergy in order both to encourage the MJC to engage in the anti-apartheid struggle more bravely and actively, and to make use of people’s respect to the clergy as an effective tool of disseminating their “radical” ideas.¹⁸⁶ Secondly, they were cautious, not shocking Muslim masses with their unpopular notions. They thus adopted a “policy of *tadrij*” (gradualism) and exposed their reformist agenda step by step in order to convince ordinary Muslims of the reliability of their ideology.¹⁸⁷ Thirdly, they occasionally agreed with the ulama and Muslim masses over some “sensitive issues” such as the common reaction against the

¹⁸⁴ Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity.”

¹⁸⁵ Esack said that his membership of the MJC was mostly symbolic.

¹⁸⁶ Pandey, “Role of the Muslim Judicial Council.”

¹⁸⁷ Jeenah, “Islamic Feminisms in South Africa,” 27. Esack, one of the theorists of the gradualist strategy, made sometimes conflicting statements on his ideological commitments. For example, in a book he had authored for the Muslim audience in 1989, he said “We have only Islam and we know of no other ideology to inspire us,” whereas, in a paper he delivered in 1990 and provided a critical account of Soviet socialism and called for self-critique in the ANC community, he had not hidden his appreciation of socialism: “I for one am convinced of two things: the inherent immorality of a free-market economy and the inherent moral superiority of socialism. Not being a materialist, I can freely appeal to the moral superiority of a worldview without being contradictory. The yearning for egalitarianism and a common humanity runs too deep in the human spirit for the ideal of socialism to be abandoned”: Esack, *But Musa Went to Firaun*, 31; Esack, “Glasnost and the Mass Democratic Movement,” Farid Esack’s Personal Website (Outdated), 1990, accessed August 5, 2019, <http://www.oocities.org/faridesack/feglasnost.html>.

Ahmadiyya community, which was considered as heretic by the majority of the Muslim community.¹⁸⁸

It is clear that the primary basis on which the Call built its religiopolitical philosophy and struggle was not global Islamist thought but the South African experience of apartheid. Yet, only the idea of a comprehensive Islam, one of the fundamental pillars of Islamist thought, that Esack and the Call had embraced was enough to show the significant continuities between the mainstream Islamism and the progressive approach of the Call. In other words, the level of interaction they had with transnational Islamism and the commonalities they had with other South African Islamist organizations seem more influential than Call members were willing to admit. The untraditional and anti-traditional attitudes, the understanding of Islam as a way of life, the belief in the inseparable nature of Islam and politics, the conception of Islam as a revolutionary religion, and the foundational role of fundamental religious texts in constructing an ideology were all influential in shaping the Call's progressive perspective. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Call diverged from the mainstream Islamism of the day in significant ways and thus paved the way for an Islamic theology of liberation. The focus on the local conditions and the agency of the oppressed, the receptiveness to non-Muslim people and perspectives, the support for a secular democratic political regime, and the importance given to interfaith solidarity were the chief elements of the nascent theology, which Esack would bring to maturity in the 1990s.

¹⁸⁸ Tayob, "Islamism in South Africa." See also "Muslims rally against Ahmadias," *Grassroots* 8, no. 1, February 1987, 3. Esack had a leading role in the campaign against the Ahmadiyya community, which had intensified in the year 1987 due to the lawsuits filed by the Ahmadias. The Call organized some meetings to mobilize Muslim masses against that community and Esack was one of the regular speakers of those events. See "Muslims Rally against Ahmadias," *Grassroots* 8, no. 1, February 1987, 3, and Call of Islam, "Rally Against Ahmadias," poster, ca 1987, South African History Online Archives, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/call-islam-rally-against-ahmadias>. However, in the following years, Esack expressed his deep regret for partaking in the persecution of the Ahmadiyya community: "I am deeply ashamed of what I and others did (...) I need to take some kind of action, as much for my own sake as in an attempt to restore relations with those whose humanity I undermined and whose property I destroyed": Villa-Vicencio and Soko, "Farid Esack: Muslim and Democrat," 216.

CHAPTER V

TRANSLATING PRACTICE INTO THEORY: ESACK'S CONCEPTION OF ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Esack Parting Ways: Anti-Apartheid Struggle in Retrospect

An Islamic liberation theology in South Africa emerged from the converging experiences of local Muslim communities, their minority status, the major effects of global Islamist developments, and the direct and extensive impact of the anti-apartheid struggle including the provocative sociopolitical atmosphere, the exceptional interfaith solidarity, and the intellectual dynamism of the political opponents. The early 1980s was the period in which the embryonic form of this theology came into existence mostly in relation to the diverging paths of the Islamist anti-apartheid movements, which I discussed in detail in the previous chapter. It gradually matured towards the late 1980s when the Call saw its ideology and activism improving hand in hand in the context of the rising anti-apartheid struggle. This was also the time when the MYM transformed itself later into an active player within oppositional forces thanks to its adoption of contextualist approach, and thus helped constituting a new platform for dialogue and solidarity alongside the Call.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the “task of formulating the equivalent of a Muslim liberation theology,” Ebrahim Moosa succinctly pointed out, “largely fell on the shoulders of a younger generation of ‘ulama’ and activists under the influence of Islamic revivalism in the 1980s who began to describe the rudimentary elements of a contextual Islam in

¹⁸⁹ Tayob, “Islamism in South Africa.”

South Africa.”¹⁹⁰ Esack was a leading figure in that respect and, ironically, his conceptualization of Islamic liberation theology gained momentum after he left the Call and then the country.

In 1988, Salman Rushdie, a famous Indian-born British writer, published a novel titled “The Satanic Verses.” Though the book was acclaimed by many literary critics, it led to great anger and mass protests in Muslim communities all around the world who considered it insulting and hostile to the Qur’an and the life of Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹¹ The same year, amidst the hot debates and increasing assaults on Rushdie, *The Weekly Mail*, an anti-apartheid newspaper, and the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) jointly invited Rushdie to a book fest in Johannesburg themed on censorship.¹⁹² The South African Muslim community banded together on the condemnation of Rushdie’s proposed visit and launched a public campaign that succeeded in leading to its cancellation.¹⁹³ The Call had aligned itself with the other, mostly conservative, Muslim organizations in protesting the event. However, there were different ideas within the Call about how to approach the issue. The leadership, including Esack, was in principle neither against the publishing of the book nor against Rushdie’s visit to South Africa, despite being critical of the content of the book and empathizing with the aggrieved Muslim population. However, many Call members including some senior figures “bitterly opposed the tolerant statements” of the leadership and also supported the call for Rushdie’s death.¹⁹⁴ The subsequent

¹⁹⁰ Moosa, “The Dilemma of Islamic Rights Schemes,” 19.

¹⁹¹ See Ziauddin Sardar, “The Satanic Verses,” in *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim* (London: Granta Books, 2005), 278-93.

¹⁹² Anton Harber, “South Africa: Clash of the Booker Titans,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/23/salman-rushdie-nadine-gordimer-jm-coetzee>.

¹⁹³ Paul Trehwela, “Islam, South Africa and the Satanic Verses,” *Searchlight South Africa* 1, no. 3 (July 1989): 31-50.

¹⁹⁴ Widespread reaction against Rushdie climaxed globally by February 1989 as Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, Islamic legal decree, that called for Rushdie’s assassination. According to Esack, apostasy was one of the issues that revealed “the inability of the clerics and others to make the connections between their

intra-group disputes resulted in Esack's resignation from, first, his position as National Coordinator and, then, the organization itself in 1990.¹⁹⁵

The year 1990 also marked a monumental milestone in the history of the apartheid regime. The way for formal negotiations between the state and the ANC leader Nelson Mandela was paved with President F. W. de Klerk's declaration in February 1990 of the ANC's unbanning and Mandela's release. That was also the beginning of the transition from popular politics to party politics in South Africa. The UDF was dissolved in 1991 and many of the affiliated organizations became integrated into ANC politics. Unsurprisingly, the Call openly supported the negotiations and ANC's political agenda, and several Call members joined the party.¹⁹⁶ In the same period, Esack had detached himself from South African politics and gone to England in order to pursue his doctoral studies at the University of Birmingham, after a long wearying period of anti-apartheid activism and following his acrimonious departure from the Call.¹⁹⁷ That was in fact an opportunity for Esack to engage in a process of self-critique and to observe, with critical distance, progressive Islamist politics in South Africa, which he had been part of for long years.

Until his return to South Africa in the second half of the 1990s as a Commissioner for Gender Equality, Esack would have plenty of time to think about the shortcomings of

vocal commitments to human rights and their theology" in South Africa: Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 253, endnote no. 19.

¹⁹⁵ Esack, "Liberation, Human Rights, Gender and Islamic Law," 177n21; Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 236 and 253, endnote no. 19.

¹⁹⁶ For example, Ebrahim Rasool, the co-founder and, by 1990, National Coordinator of the Call, has assumed various important positions in party ranks, the national parliament and provincial governments, and also served as South Africa's Ambassador to the USA between 2010-2015.

¹⁹⁷ Esack was affiliated with the Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC) and his PhD program was funded by Christian Aid, a UK charity fighting global poverty. After he completed his dissertation in 1995, he went to Frankfurt, Germany, to study Biblical hermeneutics as a postdoctoral researcher at the Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology.

progressive Muslim politics, which had begun to lose its influence during the transition period of 1990-1994. The main reason for the decline was, as Esack argued, the fact that Muslim anti-apartheid theology had remained as a minority theology. Neither progressive Muslims' "ad hoc theologizing" during the liberation struggle had gained widespread acceptance in the South African Muslim community, nor had all those who embraced the emergent theology internalized it. Conservative Muslim organizations, on the contrary, became quickly adapted to the changing circumstances and managed to maintain their social power. The conservative reaction came out of the Rushdie affair and the harsh criticisms against those, including Esack, who defended the freedom of expression could be considered a sign for that. Moreover, as Rashied Omar put it explicitly, the "once-vibrant anti-apartheid interreligious movement" was not successful in making "the transition from a "theology of resistance" to a "theology of reconstruction.""¹⁹⁸ Therefore, during the transition period, there was a lack of attention to social injustices other than racism even though liberation, according to Esack, did not mean simply "an end to racialism" but "the empowering of all sections of the marginalized."¹⁹⁹

Esack argued that progressive Islamists also suffered from "the absence of purely moral imperatives," since the struggle for power had just started as the struggle of liberation had come close to the end.²⁰⁰ Esack's response to his friends who questioned Esack's absence from the political scene during South Africa's transition to democracy was acidulous: "I have the right to say that I am not going to play my religion in the service of any kind of politics."²⁰¹ Esack was

¹⁹⁸ A. Rashied Omar, "From Resistance to Reconstruction: Challenges Facing Muslim-Christian Relations in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa*, ed. Benjamin Soares (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2006), 292.

¹⁹⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 249.

²⁰⁰ Esack, "Liberation, Human Rights, Gender and Islamic Law," 194.

²⁰¹ Esack, "Religion in the service of politics," 41.

critical of the increasing integration of progressive Muslims with party politics. What he was concerned about most was the retreat of progressive Islam from the streets and community spaces into the ranks of political parties and academic institutions. That would disjoin their liberative theology from ordinary people and transform it into a “middle-class discourse.”²⁰² Ironically, however, Esack himself was part of the same trend, as he had been busy with intellectual work far away from the country. The only excuse for his retreat could be his efforts to develop a comprehensive theology of liberation that would introduce a “new and inclusivist sense of morality forged within a struggle for human rights.”²⁰³ Being aware of the reasons making progressive Muslim discourse less popular and less influential, Esack’s main goal was to formulate a pluralist and liberative theology that would go beyond the confines of the apartheid context and address a wide variety of contexts of injustice and oppression. His critical engagement with Islamist thought and his confident and open-minded dialogue with non-Islamic theologies and ideologies would be the most valuable assets to his intellectual efforts.

A Liberative and Pluralist Theology: Molding Islamist Thought with Political Praxis

Farid Esack published an article in 1991 in which he developed some key hermeneutical concepts that would constitute the backbone of his conception of Islamic liberation theology.²⁰⁴ There he promisingly noted that Cape Town, the center of the Islamist anti-apartheid mobilization in the 1980s, had been witnessing “the emergence of serious re-interpretative Islamic legal and social thought” and reached the conclusion that “praxis, evidently, is giving

²⁰² Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 250.

²⁰³ Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity.”

²⁰⁴ Esack, “Emergence of Qur’anic Hermeneutical Notions,” 206-26.

birth to theory, or is, at least, nurturing it.”²⁰⁵ Esack’s own personal history was an important part of the mentioned intellectual dynamism and praxis in the South African Muslim community.²⁰⁶ When Esack published, in 1997, his first academic book titled “Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression,” those re-interpretive efforts became concrete in a considerable form. The book, based on Esack’s PhD dissertation, presented a detailed proposal for a new radical theology for Muslims, which came out of his persistent “search for a South African qur’anic hermeneutics of pluralism for liberation.”²⁰⁷

Esack’s departure point in constructing his theology was the idea that meaning production is always contextual. Contemporary hermeneutics revealed, according to Esack, that any interpretive effort is bounded by language, culture, and tradition. Furthermore, every interpreter necessarily brings a “baggage of race, class, gender, and personal history,” among other things, into the way she makes meaning of a text.²⁰⁸ Interpreting the Qur’an is no exception. Esack maintained that there is no way of providing an “objective” and “neutral” interpretation of the Qur’anic text. It is therefore necessary for any interpreter to point out the context in which she engages with the Qur’an. That is why Esack underlined, first of all, the South African context that informed his reading and he explained in detail the anti-apartheid

²⁰⁵ Esack, “Emergence of Qur’anic Hermeneutical Notions,” 222.

²⁰⁶ Ebrahim Moosa, Abdul Rashied Omar, Ebrahim Rasool, Sa’diyya Shaikh and Abdulkader Tayob were the Muslim intellectuals Esack mentioned in his book *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism* for their efforts to “rethink creatively the role of Islam in a religiously plural and patriarchal society”: 14.

²⁰⁷ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 9. He completed the dissertation, titled “Side-by-side with the Other: towards a Qur’anic hermeneutic of religious pluralism for liberation,” in 1995 at the University of Birmingham, under the supervision of Christian Troll S.J., a German theologian, scholar of Islam and Jesuit priest, who has written on Muslim-Christian relations. See for example Christian W. Troll, *Muslims Ask, Christians Answer*, trans. David Marshall (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2012).

²⁰⁸ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 10.

struggle of which he partook.²⁰⁹ Esack's specific focus on "context" took place against the backdrop of the traditional Qur'anic exegesis that dealt substantially with the text itself, and, most of the time, at the expense of ignoring the context. Yet, Esack was cautious in acknowledging the universal message of the Qur'an, which, he argued, can be "recognized in the middle of an ongoing struggle to rediscover meaning in it."²¹⁰ He also pointed out that the Qur'an "is also an integrated whole with a definite ethos" and, thus, has definitely "something to say" to the context.²¹¹ Therefore, one of his main objectives was to prove that "it is possible to live in faithfulness to both the Qur'an and to one's present context."²¹²

Esack was particularly interested in the sociopolitical function of religion in society. According to him, under oppressive conditions, religion plays two roles.²¹³ Either it becomes a tool for oppression through "accommodation theology," which actively collaborates with forces of oppression or passively buttresses their power by not challenging their legitimacy and preaching obedience and quietism to the believers. Or it becomes a tool for emancipation through "liberation theology," which calls for active struggle against oppressive forces and considers challenging unjust authorities and eliminating injustices as part of true faith.²¹⁴ Esack

²⁰⁹ Esack devoted the first chapter of *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism* mostly to describing the post-1970 period during which both Islamist and interfaith anti-apartheid movements emerged in South Africa.

²¹⁰ It continues as follows: "The challenge for every generation of believers is to discover their own moment of liberation, their own intermission in revelation, their own frustrations with God, joy with His consoling grace, and their own guidance by the principle of progressive revelation": Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 60.

²¹¹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 106.

²¹² Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 14.

²¹³ Though Esack did not mention it, the dualistic understanding of theology revokes one of the most famous books written by Shariati. See Ali Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Albuquerque, NM: Abjad Book Designers and Builders, 1989?), accessed March 11, 2020, <http://www.ezania.net/stuff/books/shariati/religion.vs.religion.pdf>. In that book, Shariati draws a line between two conflicting conceptions of religion: "religion of revolution" and "religion of legitimation."

²¹⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 7-8.

argued that, in the apartheid era, both theologies manifested themselves within Muslim communities as well as other religious communities in South Africa. For example, the famous Kairos Document published by a group of anti-apartheid clergymen in Soweto in 1985 urged South African Christians to build a “prophetic theology” that would fight the oppression and injustices in society, which had been persistently justified by “State Theology” and ignored by “Church Theology.”²¹⁵ Similarly, Esack, with his belief in the role Muslims should play in liberating South Africans from the unjust apartheid regime, was very critical of the conservative Muslim clergy for their conformist and “apolitical” stance during the anti-apartheid struggle.²¹⁶ He believed that the majority of the South African Muslim community had adopted, what he called, “accommodation theology,” and this was one of the main reasons for Esack’s insistence on theorizing as well as practicing a liberative understanding of Islam.

One of the terms Esack put at the center of his liberation theology was “praxis,” a term he borrowed from Christian liberation theologians.²¹⁷ He argued that one cannot theorize liberation theology without practicing it. In other words, it is not possible to confine liberation theology to the realm of ideas and produce it within isolated intellectual circles or elite academic institutions.

²¹⁵ “The South Africa Kairos Document 1985,” Kairos Southern Africa website, posted May 8, 2011, <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>. See also Bonganjalo Goba, “The Kairos Document and Its Implications for Liberation in South Africa,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 2 (1987): 313-25.

²¹⁶ Against the major conservative argument that Muslims had enjoyed freedom of religion in South Africa, Esack was reproachfully asking: “Does Allah want us to pray in front of Him and then turn a blind eye to the suffering of others around us just because we were allowed to pray?” His answer was a sharp “no”: “Muslims are commanded to oppose oppression and to speak the truth in the face of tyrants”: Esack, *But Musa Went to Firaun*, 9 and 16.

²¹⁷ Esack referenced Rebecca Chopp in his book *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism* but it was a widely used term in various works of liberation theologians including Gustavo Gutierrez’s groundbreaking work: Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 5-10. Christian liberation theologians had borrowed the term from Marxist literature. See also Zoe Bennett, “‘Action is the life of all’: the praxis-based epistemology of liberation theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 39-54.

It must start with acknowledging the realities of ordinary people facing various kinds of injustice and inequality on a daily basis and joining them in their struggle for justice. Then comes the “theological reflection that emerges from it and the reshaping of praxis based on that reflection.”²¹⁸ This praxis-based theology, “orthopraxis” in Esack’s terms, is in stark contrast to traditional theologies, which require having true belief before proper conduct. The main problem with traditional theologies, Esack maintained, is that their doctrines are the “results of intellectual labor that has often endured for centuries” and “have consistently become increasingly rigid in a process that followed the systemization of theology.”²¹⁹ They are, therefore, not always able to address the needs of Muslim communities emerging in particular historical contexts. Furthermore, in many instances, traditional theologies themselves come to prevent the believers from producing religious meaning pertaining to their urgent needs because of “untouchable” religious doctrines. Orthopraxis, however, underlines the changing and dynamic nature of the (re)production of religious meaning and sees religious practice as a natural component of that process.

As Rahemtulla pointed out, the crucial place of the context and the restored agency of the laity in interpreting the Qur’an revealed some significant parallels between Islamist thought and Islamic liberation theology.²²⁰ For example, the prominent Islamist figures Sayyid Qutb and Abu’l-A’la Mawdudi both asserted that each individual Muslim had to address herself to the message of the Qur’an without an intermediary since the “Qur’an spoke directly to the believers, addressing their immediate circumstances and struggles.” In South Africa, the Arabic Study

²¹⁸ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 8.

²¹⁹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 13.

²²⁰ Shadaab Rahemtulla, *Qur’an of the Oppressed: Liberation Theology and Gender Justice in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 17-18.

Circle was the precursor to the proliferation of Islamist study circles by the 1970s.²²¹ It was founded in Durban in 1950 with the aim of teaching Arabic to ordinary Muslims so that they could be able to read the original text of the Qur'an without leaning on the expertise of the Muslim clergy. That was the main reason for the harsh criticism they had faced from the traditional ulama. The MYM, who followed the Islamist tradition represented by Qutb and Mawdudi, and then the Call took it as a model and organized circles (*halaqat*) in which their members got the opportunity to discuss and reflect on a translation of the Qur'an alongside other texts in light of their own experiences.²²² Those circles laid the groundwork for Islamic liberation theology in South Africa by enabling ordinary Muslims to merge their religious world view with the anti-apartheid struggle.²²³

“I believe that the Transcendent, God,” said Esack, “has intervened and is intervening in history.”²²⁴ At the core of this intervention, he argued, lies religious praxis, the ceaseless efforts of believers to understand and live their religion. Among those efforts, those of a certain group have a privileged place in Islam, according to Esack. It is the *mustad'afun*, “people of ‘inferior’ social status who are vulnerable, marginalized or oppressed in the socio-economic sense.”²²⁵

²²¹ See Shamil Jeppie, *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007).

²²² They also discussed prophetic teachings and Islamist writings in those circles. Esack said that Ali Shariati, Sayyid Qutb and Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi were the three most read Islamist intellectuals in that period: Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 33.

²²³ Bible study circles also were very influential in the development of Christian liberation theology. For example, Christian Base Communities (CEBs) in Latin America were revolutionary in the sense that lay people engaged with the Bible and reflected on it in line with their daily experiences. They also organized many dimensions of social and political life with the help of those communal organizations. See Andrew Dawson, “The origins and character of the base ecclesial community: a Brazilian perspective” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 139-158.

²²⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 10.

²²⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 98.

Esack noted that progressive Islamists adopted the notion as a result of their engagement with the revolutionary tradition in Iran, particularly Ali Shariati's thought and the political ideology of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, an Islamo-Marxist revolutionary organization.²²⁶ The pro-*mustad'afun* discourse was premised on the idea that the Qur'an was clearly on the side of the *mustad'afun* against the oppressors (*mustakbirun*) and the former would become the agent of sociopolitical transformation with God's help.²²⁷ What liberation theology had to prioritize in interpreting the Qur'anic scripture, therefore, was to empower those people and support their struggle for liberation. The "preferential option for the oppressed," Esack pointed out, "is reflected in the particularized identification of God Himself with the oppressed, the lifestyles and methodology of all the Abrahamic prophets, the Qur'anic denunciation of the powerful and accumulation of wealth, and the Qur'an's message of liberation to women and slaves."²²⁸

What is more important for a liberative view of Islam is the Qur'an's "unconditional" support for the liberation of the *mustad'afun*. Esack argued that, according to the Qur'an, whether the oppressed person is Muslim or not does not matter because all human beings have the right to be free from all kinds of restraint and oppression. As creatures of God, their lives and freedom are intrinsically and equally valuable. Freedom from oppression is also necessary for human beings to be able to "worship God freely."²²⁹ Any form of hegemonic or oppressive

²²⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 83. See also Saffari, "Two Pro-Mostazafin Discourses."

²²⁷ Esack referenced several verses of the Qur'an showing God's support for *mustad'afun*. The one frequently circulated among the Iranian revolutionaries as well was Qur'an 28:5: "But it was Our will to bestow Our favour upon those [very people] who were deemed [so] utterly low in the land, and to make them forerunners in faith and to make them heirs [to Pharaoh's glory]": The Message of the Qur'an 28:5, trans. Muhammad Asad (Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1980).

²²⁸ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 99. Esack might have adopted the term from Christian liberation theologians who had employed a very similar term: "the preferential option for the poor."

²²⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 180.

relations between people has the potential to put barriers between human beings and God in a way that the former could not be in submission only to the latter. In this regard, Esack put forward that liberation theology should work towards, above all, “freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on uncritical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of injustice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion.”²³⁰ The concept of *tawhid* and the story of the Exodus were very critical in helping Esack reach that conclusion.

As Esack pointed out, the notion of *tawhid* became popular among anti-apartheid Islamists of the 1980s through the works of Ali Shariati.²³¹ According to Shariati, *tawhid* was a “worldview aimed at realizing the unity of God in human relations and socio-economic systems.” One major implication of that conception in Islamist thought in South Africa would be the rejection of all social, political, and economic inequalities, racial division in the first place. Since the Qur’an did not discriminate on the basis of race or ethnicity, the very nature of the apartheid regime was considered by Islamists as the “antithesis of *tawhid*.” According to Esack, *tawhid* also implies the “Qur’anic objective of an egalitarian social order” and, thus, necessitates struggling for socioeconomic justice as the prophetic tradition demonstrated clearly with its solidarity with the marginalized and downtrodden.²³² In that regard, *tawhid*, originally an Islamist notion, became one of the fundamental pillars of Islamic liberation theology.²³³

²³⁰ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 83.

²³¹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 91. In fact, *tawhid* was one of the fundamental concepts of modern Muslim political thought, from Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh to Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Maududi to Ismail al-Faruqi but the one Esack and his friends adopted was based on Shariati’s formulation of the concept in revolutionary terms.

²³² Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 101.

²³³ Rahemtulla, *Qur’an of the Oppressed*, 30-31. According to Rahemtulla, *tawhid* should play a very central role in any Islamic theology of liberation: “What makes *tawhid* so provocative as a point of departure for a liberating

The story of the Exodus added another dimension to a liberative and pluralist conception of Islamic theology. A radical interpretation of the Exodus was, in fact, the hallmark of Christian liberation theology.²³⁴ Many liberation theologians saw the liberation from slavery of the Israelites living in the ancient Egypt as a clear sign for God’s indisputable support for the oppressed. They maintained that the “liberating intervention of God” through the leadership of Moses made the Exodus more than a historical fact or a biblical story.²³⁵ It was actually a paradigm which transcended history and revealed how religious and political dimensions of faith had converged at the theme of liberation.²³⁶ Worked on how the story was told in the Qur’an, Esack would embrace the Exodus paradigm with its major sociopolitical implications.²³⁷ Moreover, Esack argued that the way South African Islamists had used the Exodus paradigm was unique for its emphasis on solidarity with the “marginalized and oppressed religious Other.”²³⁸ According to Esack, until the elimination of oppressive conditions, Prophet Moses was responsible for leading the Israelites’ struggle for liberation rather than preaching religious truths to them. “Neither God, nor Moses,” underlined Esack, “abandoned the Israelites before they

Islamic theology is that it not only weds the struggle for justice to the single most important tenet in Islam, but also foregrounds the specificity of Muslim theology.”

²³⁴ See for example Enrique Dussel, “Exodus as a Paradigm in Liberation Theology,” in “The Exodus - A Lasting Paradigm,” *Continuum: International Journal for Theology* 189 (1987): 83-92; Peter Hebblethwaite, “Let My People Go: The Exodus and Liberation Theology,” *Religion, State and Society: The Keston Journal* 21, no. 1 (1993): 105-114.

²³⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 152.

²³⁶ Hebblethwaite, “Let My People Go,” 106.

²³⁷ Farid Esack, “The Exodus Paradigm in the Qur’an in the Light of Re-interpretative Islamic Thought in South Africa,” *Islamochristiana* 17 (1991): 83-97. For a critique of Esack’s appropriation of the Exodus Paradigm, see Rahemtulla, *Qur’an of the Oppressed*, 25-29.

²³⁸ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 194. In Christian liberation theology literature, the Exodus paradigm was usually not interpreted in terms of the question of the religious other.

reached the Promised Land despite their recalcitrance in *kufr*.”²³⁹ In other words, acting in solidarity with the religious Other was not only allowed but also encouraged in the Qur’an. This is the point where liberation and pluralism would weave into each other in Esack’s conception of liberation theology.

The issue of the religious Other was the main question Esack dealt with in his studies of the relationship between Islam and liberation. This was because the major conflict within the South African Muslim community over the role of Islam in the anti-apartheid struggle was about the matter of cooperation with non-Muslim people and non-Islamic movements. Esack argued that the traditional teachings that had become influential in shaping Islamic theologies for centuries caused religious exclusivism on the part of Muslim communities.²⁴⁰ Islamist thought was no exception in that regard.²⁴¹ Despite their religiously untraditional and politically anti-apartheid approach, many South African Islamists did not see the religious Other as a legitimate partner in the struggle and rejected engaging with any ideas rooted in non-Islamic theologies or secular ideologies. However, according to Esack, not only interfaith solidarity was possible as demonstrated by the Qur’anic paradigm of the Exodus, but also the “acceptance of the righteous and just Other,” he contended, was “intrinsic to the Qur’an.”²⁴² He thus attempted to revive the

²³⁹ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 197.

²⁴⁰ It should be noted here that the theologies informing the madrasas in Pakistan, in which Esack received religious education, as well as the South African ulama organizations mostly run by the Deobandi tradition, which Esack and his friends fought with, were very rigid in the question of the religious Other. In that respect, we can assume that Esack was essentially addressing those traditions rather than generalizing the various responses given to the question of the religious Other by Muslim theologians for hundreds of years.

²⁴¹ One of the few contemporary Muslim theologians Esack referenced positively concerning the issue of non-Muslim Other was Mahmoud Taleghani. See Esack, *But Musa Went to Firaun*, 70-71.

²⁴² Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 13.

pluralist nature of the Qur'an by revisiting the qur'anic categories of belief/believer and disbelief/disbeliever.

Esack's main argument was that, despite their dynamic and changing nature, the categories of belief/believer and disbelief/disbeliever had become "reified" and "rigid" in the traditional accounts of the Qur'an.²⁴³ This led people to consider the believer and the disbeliever as having mutually exclusive and fixed identities. It also resulted in the use of these categories incorrectly as "the entrenched qualities of groups, bordering on ethnic characteristics."²⁴⁴ As a result, Muslims considered communities of non-Muslims, in many cases, as the social other or the political enemy with which there was no way to cooperate. However, Esack maintained, belief and disbelief are essentially personal attributes and, except a particular kind of disbelief that is openly and actively hostile to Muslims, there is no obstacle to having dialogue, cooperating and struggling together with non-Muslims.²⁴⁵ On the contrary, the Qur'an puts emphasis on the unity of humankind (*tawhid*) and encourages believers to be caring and attentive to the needs of others, regardless of religious, ethnic or any other sort of identity.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, it acknowledges the good deeds of non-believers and does not exclude the possibility that the truth could be felt, discovered and lived out by people who do not believe in Islam. In this

²⁴³ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 114.

²⁴⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 115.

²⁴⁵ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 115. See also Palombo, "Interfaith Praxis in the South African Struggle for Liberation," 9-10.

²⁴⁶ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 193.

regard, Esack pointed out, Islam is not only open to theological pluralism as well as social and political pluralism.²⁴⁷

After having situated on what terms, against what, and with whom a struggle for justice and liberation should be waged in Esack's religiopolitical thought, it is necessary to answer the question of what one should fight for. It is no doubt that Esack's conception of Islamic liberation theology was radical in the sense that it aimed at the elimination of established structures of injustice and oppression. Just like Christian liberation theologians who rejected "reformist capitalist development" and called for an end to the exploitative economic system, South African progressive Islamists had never welcomed any reformist attempt by the apartheid state and persistently struggled to eradicate the racist regime.²⁴⁸ In both theologies of liberation, the main goal was to get rid of all "systemic evils" and "structural sins" so that human beings would be free from any chains. Esack's opinion that "you cannot truly submit to God when you are under the yoke of hunger" pointed out the same concern that the leading liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez had addressed: "How to proclaim God as Father in an inhuman world? How do we tell the 'non-persons' that they are the sons and daughters of God?"²⁴⁹ While Gutiérrez was underscoring that the liberation of Latin America "also means seeing that humanity is marching toward a society in which man will be free of every servitude and master of his own destiny," Esack was stressing Prophet Muhammad's struggle "for the creation of a world wherein it is safe

²⁴⁷ In that regard, Esack has been critical of missionary Islam and open to see truth in the words and deeds of non-Muslims as well. Pluralism "was not only strategic," argued Esack, "it brings the acceptance of the theological legitimacy of other faiths" as well: Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 38.

²⁴⁸ Smith, *Emergence of Liberation Theology*, 52; Jacobs, *Story of the Call of Islam*.

²⁴⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 12; Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," trans. Judith Condor, in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 28.

to be human and where people are freed from enslavement to man in order to worship God freely.”²⁵⁰ In a word, their theologies were not only critical, but also revolutionary.

In apartheid South Africa, the goal of the revolutionaries was clear: “the creation of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and just South Africa.”²⁵¹ Esack had agreed to that ideal since what he had struggled for was a political system that would ensure a pluralist society defined by freedom for everybody.²⁵² Esack was quite critical of the idea of an Islamic state, on the other hand, since he thought that it would harm the idea of pluralism. Being a member of a religious minority was certainly an advantage in that regard, according to Esack: ““Minorities,” often privileged to be free from Muslim governments, have a particularly significant contribution to make the discourse of cultural pluralism and diversity.”²⁵³ But what about after the revolution? When the transition to post-apartheid regime started in the early 1990s and, finally, a democratic regime was established in 1994, Esack had come to understand better that the struggle for justice would never come to an end. Losing many of his friends to the realpolitik and witnessing the erosion of the ideals by the very hands of the people who had fought for a few years earlier, Esack’s major emphasis would be on “process” from then on. After almost two decades and a half he wrote his dissertation on Islamic liberation theology, the most explicit conclusion he has

²⁵⁰ Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 180; Gustavo Gutierrez, “Notes for a Theology of Liberation,” *Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (1970): 250.

²⁵¹ Esack, “Three Islamic Strands,” 492. These principles defended by the UDF during the anti-apartheid struggle has been embedded in the South African Constitution of 1994.

²⁵² In an interview in 2017, he said that he has thought himself “a bit of an anarchist,” and not favored a particular idea of state though he was against theocracy. Marije van Beek, interview with Farid Esack, “Een Alternatief voor de Islam aan de Macht [An Alternative to Islam in Power],” *Trouw*, DPG Media, November 24, 2017, <https://www.trouw.nl/religie-filosofie/een-alternatief-voor-de-islam-aan-de-macht~b3b41204/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

²⁵³ Esack, “Religio-Cultural Diversity.”

arrived at was as follows: “I do not think that there is ever a point that we say “we have arrived.”
I think liberation theology is about the process. It is about the permanent process.”²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Noah Black, interview with Farid Esack, “On Liberation Theology and Esack’s Scholarship,” *The Maydan*, September 26, 2019, <https://themaydan.com/2019/09/an-interview-with-farid-esack-by-noah-black-on-liberation-theology-and-esacks-scholarship-the-maydan-podcast/>.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: LIBERATION THEOLOGY BEYOND APARTHEID

In his 1986 speech, which is mentioned in the Introduction, Esack had drawn attention to the “ghettoized” political perceptions of anti-apartheid organizations and urged them “to proclaim the oneness of humankind and to focus on universal concerns” such as global capitalism, the oppression of women, and the challenges of interfaith dialogue.²⁵⁵ Esack’s emphasis on “universality” may come as surprise at first glance given his persistent search for a “South African” Islamism in the face of the rising influence of transnational Islamist trends since the late 1970s. However, when examined closely, it becomes clear that both his critique of transnational Islamism and his call for universal awareness were informed by the very same idea: the oneness of humankind. While he was encouraging his fellow Muslims to acknowledge the humanity of the non-Muslim other during the anti-apartheid struggle, he was equally concerned about his non-Muslim comrades who had overlooked the injustices other than the oppression of those termed “non-white” in South Africa.

Esack himself devoted most of his academic studies to interfaith solidarity in the first half of the 1990s and made pluralism (both in political and theological sense) the backbone of his conception of Islamic liberation theology. Gender injustices also would be one of the fundamental issues that preoccupied Esack’s post-apartheid theology and activism. Esack played a crucial role in bringing in the issue of gender inequality to the attention of the South African Muslim community during the 1980s and 1990s. Islamic feminism had emerged under the

²⁵⁵ Esack, “Our Liberation Struggle.”

leadership of Muslim women's rights activists such as Shamima Sheikh (1960-1998) as the debates around gender equality became intensified among South African progressive Muslims in the early 1990s.²⁵⁶ Esack closely cooperated with Sheikh and others in challenging the patriarchal culture dominating both the religious hierarchy and the everyday life.²⁵⁷

One single event that was of great symbolic significance for the South African "gender jihad" was the controversial Friday *khutbah*, sermon, given by the eminent American scholar Amina Wadud in Cape Town in 1994.²⁵⁸ Wadud's *khutbah* sparked a lot of controversies among Muslims in and outside South Africa for women had been traditionally not "allowed" to address mixed congregations. Esack, who had supported the organization of the *khutbah*, was considering "women officiating in all worship ceremonies in mosques as an intrinsic part of human rights and gender equality."²⁵⁹ Soon after he came back from Europe, in 1997, Esack was

²⁵⁶ For a detailed analysis of the emergence of Islamic feminism in South Africa, see Na'eem Jeenah, "The national liberation struggle and Islamic feminisms in South Africa," *Women's Studies International Forum* 29, (2006): 27-41; for a recent collection of essays on Shaikh, who was a leading figure in progressive Muslim circles and the first National Coordinator of the Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk, see Vanessa Rivera and Na'eem Jeenah, *If this be Madness: An Anthology to Honour the Life and Courage of Shamima Shaikh* (independently published, 2019). According to Na'eem Jeenah, the term "gender jihad" was originated in South African before it was popularized by Amina Wadud: Jeenah, "Jihad as a Form of Struggle in the Resistance to Apartheid in South Africa," *The Chimurenga Chronic*, June 2015, <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/jihad-as-a-form-of-struggle-in-the-resistance-to-apartheid-in-south-africa>.

²⁵⁷ Shamima Shaikh passed away due to cancer in 1996. In his eulogy for Shaikh, Esack said "the day of her death and burial was a day of relentless pushing of the religio-cultural limits" since Shaikh's funeral was led by one of her female friends upon Shaikh's request. See Farid Esack, "If This Be Madness..." *Website in Memory of Shamima Salahuddin Shaikh*, 1998, <https://shams.za.org/index.php/about-shamima/if-this-be-madness>.

²⁵⁸ The *khutbah* was organized by the progressive Imam Rashied Omar with the intention of breaking the monopoly of Muslim men over the public religious leadership. The fact that such a rare event had taken place in a local South African mosque was actually demonstrating the dynamism of the progressive Muslim circles there. The event led to many protests and threats that lasted for months. See Leon Muller, *Muslim woman address congregation in Mosque, Cape Town*, photograph, August 1994, UCT Libraries Digital Collections: Islandora Repository, Western Cape, SA, <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/islandora/object/islandora%3A15500> and Benny Gool, *Muslim women protest, Cape Town*, photograph, August 1994, UCT Libraries Digital Collections: Islandora Repository, Western Cape, SA, <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/islandora/object/islandora%3A15497>.

²⁵⁹ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 248. Still, Amina Wadud was very critical of the organizers including Esack since she had not been consulted properly before the event and the content of what she said had been overshadowed by the "radical" form of the event: the planners were thinking and acting like men in exclusion of women's full humanity, while yet pretending to employ a woman as an agent of gender transformation. They were

appointed by the then president Nelson Mandela as a Commissioner for Gender Equality.²⁶⁰ He was now a bureaucrat working for the government, cornered by the realpolitik he had been complaining about for the last couple of years.²⁶¹ In June 2000, he co-founded Positive Muslims, a South African organization supporting HIV-positive Muslims and raising awareness about HIV/AIDS among Muslims.²⁶² In the following two decades, he also wrote extensively on issues such as gender, feminism, and sexual diversity and ethics, with reference to Qur'anic hermeneutics and contemporary political discussions.²⁶³

Since the 1990s, Esack also started to be involved in transnational networks of Muslim scholars and activists such as the Network of Progressive Muslims (NPM).²⁶⁴ In the post-9/11 context, he became much more preoccupied with inequalities in global politics caused by imperialism and neocolonialism. Esack was particularly critical of the popularized dialectic of the “good Muslim” who was moderate and peaceful and the “bad Muslim” who was radical and

thinking for the woman, rendering her a mere object of their privileged agency.” Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 172. For another perspective on the importance of the event, see Sa'diyya Shaikh, “Engaging Surrender: The Intimacy and Power of the Gender Jihad,” in *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud*, eds. Kecia Ali, Juliane Hammer and Laury Silvers (Akron, OH: 48 Hr Books, 2012), 213-216.

²⁶⁰ He served in the Commission between 1997-2000.

²⁶¹ For a self-critical account of his bureaucratic position, see Farid Esack, “Snakes and Ladders: Personal Reflections on the other CST,” Farid Esack’s Personal Website (Outdated), circa late 1990s, <https://www.oocities.org/faridesack/fesnakes.html>.

²⁶² See Farid Esack, *HIV, AIDS, and Islam* (South Africa: Positive Muslims, 2004). See also Farid Esack and Sarah Chiddy, *Islam and AIDS* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

²⁶³ See, for example, Farid Esack, “Islam and Gender Justice: Beyond Simplistic Apologia,” in *What Men Owe to Women: Men’s Voices from World Religions*, eds. John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 187-210; Farid Esack and Nadeem Mahomed, “Sexual Diversity, Islamic Jurisprudence and Sociality,” *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 17, no. 2 (2011): 41-57; Farid Esack, “History and Politics of Islamic Feminism: A Comparison of the Works on Islam and Gender by Amina Wadud and Kecia Ali,” *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 18, no. 2 (December 2012): 98-107.

²⁶⁴ NPM had emerged as an online platform for progressive Muslims all over the world who were committed to justice and socioeconomic transformation in solidarity with the marginalized.

violent. Denouncing that dialectic, which, he argued, had been internalized by most liberal progressive Muslims, Esack had positioned himself in the anti-imperialist progressive camp who opposed the US-led Islamic reform project and criticized the discourse of peace that did not challenge the unjust world order.²⁶⁵ In line with that, beginning from the early 2010s, Esack has incorporated some elements of decolonial thinking into his conceptualization of Islamic liberation theology.²⁶⁶ In the same period, alongside his continuous intellectual efforts and academic posts in different universities, he maintained his activism, this time by partaking in a global solidarity movement of Palestinian rights inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle: Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS).²⁶⁷

Farid Esack's life story shows all the intellectual entanglements and political contexts that led to him formulating an original and influential form of Islamic liberation theology. From his early politicization within the Black Consciousness Movement in the early 1970s to his years of BDS activism during the 2010s, he prioritized a struggle that sided with the marginalized. Beginning in his Pakistan years, he strove for a harmony between his religious faith and political thinking and for a balance between his practice and theology. His involvement in South African anti-apartheid Islamism of the 1980s paved the way for him to construct a comprehensive theology that was liberative and pluralist during his academic research in Europe in the 1990s. Esack's experiences combined anti-racist currents of thought not only in the context of anti-

²⁶⁵ According to Esack, there had emerged a sharpened disagreement among progressive Muslims about the definition of the term "Progressive Islam." See Farid Esack, "Progressive Islam – A Rose by Any Name? American Soft Power in the War for the Hearts and Minds of Muslims," *ReOrient* 4, no. 1 (Autumn, 2018): 78-106. For an earlier discussion of the term, see Farid Esack, "In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003); 78-97.

²⁶⁶ See, for example, Farid Esack and Ashraf Kunnummal, "Malala Yousafzai and the Post-9/11 Politics of Gender and Governmentality," *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 21, no. 1 (July 2015): 49-70.

²⁶⁷ He is currently Chairman of BDS South Africa and Professor in the Study of Islam at the University of Johannesburg.

apartheid ideologies such as African humanism and socialism but also from the context of South Asian and South East Asian struggles against colonial forms of racialization towards Muslims and Hindus.²⁶⁸

His deep engagement with Islamist thought was also crucial in the formation of his religiopolitical ideas. Esack inherited both the imperial era Pan-Islamic currents of thought and the cold war era Islamism, while critically and creatively reflecting on them in conversation with Christian liberation theology and anti-apartheid movement. More importantly, he prioritized praxis and activism for emancipation and equality, and solidarity with the oppressed in his hermeneutic engagement with Muslim religious texts. “Questions of privileges and marginalities and how the Qur’an speaks to it,” in Esack’s own words, were always at the heart of his theological thinking. He also paid attention to race, class and gender equality in intersectional methodology. Last but not least, Esack kept engagement with non-Western intellectual circles and spheres from South Asia to the Middle East, while being active in publication and lecture circuits of progressive European and North American academia.

Esack’s positionality in South African anti-apartheid struggle as a member of the Muslim minority helped him counter the state-centered and nationalism-focused conservative turn in global Muslim thought that took place in the late cold war era. In other words, Islamic liberation theology, as conceptualized by Esack, had gone against the tide of the rising identity-based and

²⁶⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of a late 19th-century transnational network of Indian, Australian and South African Muslims, see Eric Germain, “Southern Hemisphere Diasporic Communities in the Building of an International Muslim Public Opinion at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 1 (2007): 126-138. It is also important to note here that the answer to the question of why a social justice-oriented and pluralist Muslim theology emerged in South Africa may lie in the fact that the transnational networks of South African anti-colonial, anti-racist, leftist, and Christian liberationist intellectuals and activists were very powerful and, therefore, there was a quite dynamic and vibrant atmosphere shaped around the anti-apartheid movement. See, for example, Susan Pennybacker, ““Fire by Night, Cloud by Day”: Exile and Refuge in Postwar London,” *Journal of British Studies* 59, no. 1 (January 2020): 1-31 and Ryan M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

parochial Muslim politics of the late 1970s onward. Esack's liberative theology thus helps to uncover the often-ignored diversity of Muslim political thought of the period. As one of the many forms that the relationship between Islam and politics could take, Islamic liberation theology was centered on the belief in the oneness of humankind, the idea of liberation and pluralism, social justice and interfaith solidarity. More importantly, it developed out of a liberation struggle of the oppressed and was shaped around practice more than theory.

Yet, Islamic liberation theology was not completely detached from the mainstream currents, particularly transnational Islamism of the time. From the notion of Islam as a comprehensive way of life to the search for social and political principles in the Qur'an, Esack incorporated some basic Islamist teachings and principles into his concept of liberation theology. More importantly, with the focus on racial equality and solidarity with the marginalized, it becomes clear that Esack's major ideas are in harmony with anti-colonial pan-Islamic thinkers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Barkatullah and Third Worldist Muslim intellectuals such as Ali Shariati. In other words, despite the arguments that attempt to picture Islamism and liberation theology as incompatible modes of thinking, there are significant continuities between the emancipatory Muslim thought of the pre-1980s and Islamic liberation theology. I believe this connection is particularly important towards the effort of unearthing the traces and the historical stages of an emancipatory and social justice-based tradition within contemporary Muslim political thought, starting from the pan-Islamism of the late 19th century and continuing with ups and downs up to the present.

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