ARTICLE

Qur'ānic imaginations in the making: New religious movements in Mughal-era Islam

William E. B. Sherman ⓘ

Department of Religious Studies, University
of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte,
North Carolina, USA

Correspondence
William E. B. Sherman, Department of
Religious Studies, University of North
Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North
Carolina, USA.
Email: will.sherman@uncc.edu

Abstract

In the study of premodern Islam, is it possible to draw fruitfully upon the theories and methods that characterize the study of new religious movements? This article examines three approaches to the Qur'ān in the sixteenth-century Mughal Empire: the Qur'ānic imitation of Bāyazīd Anṣārī, the lipogramatic exegesis of Fayżī, and the moral commentary of Badā'ūnī. These works reveal the innovation, contingency, and "newness" of Islamic Qur'ānic traditions in the Mughal domain. Though they disagreed vehemently, Bāyazīd, Fayżī, and Badā'ūnī all approached the Qur'ān as a revelation that is emergent and ongoing rather than fixed in the historical past. This article argues that the study of premodern Mughal religion – and the history of Islam more generally – benefits from heuristically understanding Islamic texts as part of ever-emergent "new religious movements" rather than as examples of a single transhistorical religion.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the year 999 of the *hijrī* calendar (1590/1591 of the Gregorian calendar), a Mughal courtier, theologian, and historian by the name of ʿAbd al-Qādir Badā'ūnī completed *The Salvation of the Rightly Guided* ("Najāt al-Rashīd"). The title operates as a prayer, for Badā'ūnī's work reads as a big book of the bad. On the cusp of the first Islamic millennium, Badā'ūnī categorizes the myriad sins, heresies, schisms, and degradations that he perceived in the imperial domain. Ruled by Jalāl al-Dīn Akbar (r. 1556–1605) over much of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, Badā'ūnī witnessed anything but "Islam" in this ostensibly Islamic Mughal Empire. A palpable anxiety bleeds into Badā'ūnī's encyclopedic approach to the sins of contemporary Muslims, and there is a paradoxical creativity in the excessive cataloguing of transgressions, real or imagined. Among hundreds of misdeeds, his readers find lamentations of murder, lying, and stealing, but Badā'ūnī also condemns frivolous speech, eating at night, wearing

saffron, funky haircuts, wearing only one shoe, spitting into a well, giving a child an inauspicious name, thinking too much about reincarnation, urinating in the direction of Mecca, and "imitating the Qur'ān" (Badā'ūnī, 1972, p. 35). The criteria for transgressions are some common moral and religious fears: too much personal choice and rejection of tradition, too much combination across religious boundaries, and too many new beliefs and practices. In a period of intense millenarian and apocalyptic anticipation, Badā'ūnī analyzed the individualism, bricolage, and innovation of religion. We must consider Badā'ūnī an early voice in the study of new religious movements (hereafter, NRM) – even if his castigating approach and mournful tone no longer characterize the field.[1]

I do not aim for irony by connecting Badā'ūnī and NRM; rather, this connection reveals a pressing conundrum for scholars of religion in the Mughal world and Islamic studies more generally. In many ways, the Mughal world was a space of seething religio-cultural innovation, adaptation, and a steady tension between acts of religious localization and universalization (Kinra, 2011). Even if we confine ourselves to something that is putatively "traditional" in Islam – how self-identified Muslims read and understand the Qur'ān – we find change, contradiction, innovation, and diversity in settings across the empire, from its political edges to multiple sides of the religious debates in its courtly centers. As Badā'ūnī's book of sins suggests, the terms "new" and "innovation" (bid'a) – let alone combinatory and syncretic – are not innocent terms but are fraught with ethical, political, and social consequence. "New" was repulsive for Badā'ūnī, and "new" remains dangerous today as Islamophobic discourses represent the religion as a "new" and invasive presence in the United States and India (e.g., Eaton, 2000; Green, 2019; Truschke, 2018). An unexamined use of "new" smuggles a host of assumptions on temporality, religion, and progress that reflects a contemporary secularist metaphysics of history rather than emic conceptions of the past and one's relationship to it (Mahmood, 2015, Chapter 5). We are caught between examples of varied and dynamic Qur'ānic imaginations in the Mughal world and the need to avoid inscribing our own temporal understandings onto them. So how else might we think the "new"? What do we gain by heuristically casting aside the notion of a transhistorical "Islam" and approaching the Qur'ānic engagements of Muslims in Mughal South Asia as experiments of radical contingency?

This article considers the works of three Muslim scholars of the late sixteenth century – Bāyazīd Anṣārī, Fayẓī, and the aforementioned Badā'ūnī – who approached the Qur'ān with imaginations that far outstrip many common narratives of Islamic history. As will be shown, Bāyazīd, Fayẓī, and Badā'ūnī understood the Qur'ān not as something to be *read or recited* but rather as something more like a dare or a recipe – something to be *participated* in through imitation, rhetorical contest, esoteric interpretation, expansion, embodiment, and more. Though these three particular figures all lived and wrote during the reign of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), their works are illustrative of a larger culture of diverse approaches to the Qur'ān in Mughal India and throughout the Persianate world in which Mughal and Persianate conceptions of the Qur'ān exceeded Western notions of a "scripture."[2] Whether we look at "heretics" on the edges of the empire, poet laureates at its heart, or Sunni critics of the emperor's pretensions, we find Qur'āns that anchor not a transhistorical Islam but a conception of Islam as something to be produced and renewed. Could we not join Badā'ūnī in finding something in these efforts that resemble what scholars mean by "NRM"?

The advantage of "NRM-ing" the Qur'ānic engagements of Bāyazīd, Fayẓī, and Badā'ūnī lies not in recasting them as marginal or syncretic; rather, I propose that the advantage for us who study religion in the Mughal world – and Islam and the Qur'an more broadly – rests in letting the field of NRM Studies crack open some rarely examined assumptions on the temporality of scholarship on Islam. As Shahzad Bashir, Saba Mahmood, and Kathryn Gin Lum have argued, our histories of religion often rely upon timescales and temporal schemes that are presented as natural or realist, but instead reflect particular sectarian positions and ideological commitments (Bashir, 2018; Lum, 2018; Mahmood, 2015). Badā'ūnī's fear of the "new" is not a "new" that is measured against a linear chronology in which time passes in one direction as sand through an hourglass. As the three Qur'ānic approaches examined in this article suggest, there are other temporalities that may be written into the world; the revelatory moment may be repeated, rhymed, and re-presented through creative literary efforts. We find a path to these other temporalities by letting NRM Studies destabilize our approach to premodern Islam.

NRM Studies and Islamic Studies are not and should not be thought of as separate fields. Questions of temporality, tradition, and innovation are unavoidable in Islamic Studies; conversely, the study of "new" and minority religious traditions has included and been shaped by studies concerning self-identified Muslim communities, at least since Arthur Huff Fauset's work in the 1940s (Fauset, 2014). Nevertheless, I argue that there is a benefit in more explicitly connecting the language of NRM Studies to the historical study of premodern Islamic traditions. NRM Studies, with its generative reflection on the politics and metaphysics of "new" in Religious Studies, guides us in encountering the ludic temporalities of Mughal Qur'āns.

2 | GOD SPEAKS IN PASHTO: A NEW QUR'AN OF IMITATION AND VERNACULAR LANGUAGE

As a way of exploring the generative possibilities of finding *NRM* in the premodern Mughal world, this article does not consider the porous "edges" of Islam but rather looks edge-wise at an ostensible center: the Qur'ān. Before turning to the first example, however, it is worth noting that an alternative approach to "NRMing premodern Islam" would be to focus upon the *combinatory* religious gestures in Mughal India that resulted in the type of religious bricolage that lies central to many works in the field of NRM Studies. Audrey Truschke and Shankar Nair have each discussed the efforts of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to translate and encounter the texts, traditions of knowledge, and mythologies of the ostensible "other" (Nair, 2020; Truschke, 2016). We cannot but gesture to the bricolage of Sufi poetry, Bhakti songs, and Sikh scriptures (Burchett, 2019; Fenech, 2013; Gill, 2017), of the overlap in Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions of esoteric lettrism (Sheffield, 2014), and of the constant processes of recycling and combining the physical materials of the temple, mosque, or royal court into ever more palimpsestic places (Flood, 2009). The processes of written vernacularization – loosely: the turn to non-Sanskrit and non-Arabic literatures – in the late medieval and early modern periods resulted in combinatory adaptations and innovative traditions, as Ronit Ricci has described with such persuasion (Ricci, 2011). In the development of Tamil literature, for example, Vasudha Narayanan has shown us descriptions of Muḥammad as an *avatar* and the Qur'ān as a *veda* (Narayanan, 2003). Even more strikingly, Torsten Tschacher has analyzed a Tamil interpretation of Sūra al-Fātiḥa (the first sūra of the Qur'ān) in which the concluding line is not a prayer to God to spare us from "the path of those who go astray" but rather from "the path of those who miss your way without perceiving the lights inside the *om*" (Tschacher, 2014, p. 201). All of these examples collectively chip away at any notion of a reified *Islam* in Mughal India and present instead an exceedingly porous and dynamic tangle of practices and forms.

The focus of this article, however, is in the seething temporalities of Qur'ānic imaginations in the Mughal world. Contrary to any assumptions that the Qur'ān is a bounded and stable text, Mughal approaches suggest Qur'ān considerably more porous and in flux. Our first example of just such a *new* Qur'ānic imagination is a dramatic one: the Qur'ān as *imitated* in a late-sixteenth-century text known as *The Best Explanation* ("Khayr al-bayān") (Bāyazīd Anṣārī & Qāsimī, 1988). In the Afghan highlands between the cities of Peshawar, Kabul, Kandahar, and Kaniguram, a messianic leader named Bāyazīd Anṣārī led his followers in pursuit of his vision of divine unity (tawḥīd) and divine language (Arlinghaus, 1989; Sherman, 2018). Their central text, *The Best Explanation*, was a dialogue between Bāyazīd and God in which God delivered the letters of the Pashto alphabet to Bāyazīd along with teachings on the nature of monotheism and proper devotion – all in a rhetoric that is self-consciously an imitation of the Qur'ān despite the commonly held Islamic theological doctrine of Qur'ānic inimitability.

The Best Explanation is a startlingly multilingual composition in which Arabic, Persian, and Pashto words are entangled, often in a single sentence. According to scholars of Pashto literature, this text may be the very first use of Pashto as a written language – and thus the moment of Pashto vernacularization is attributed to the voice of God. As God instructs Bāyazīd, moreover, *The Best Explanation* should be spoken according to "the melodies" (alḥān) of the Qur'ān and made to rhyme with the 55th sūra (p. 143). The Qur'ān endures as a model for the very language that imitates it and strips beyond it. Here is but one example:

(*In Pashto*) If the number of seas were equal to the number of creatures, and if all the seas were ink, or even if there were more, and if there were seventy-thousand writers, or even if there were more, and if each writer had seventy-thousands pens, yet would the words of praise for You not be written or spent, even if all pens should be broken and all ink exhausted in writing.

(*In Arabic*) Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea ink, with seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. God is All-mighty, All-wise (pp. 141–142).

The section in Arabic is the 27th āya from the 61st sūra of the Qur'ān, but what of the parts in Pashto? In *The Best Explanation*, the Pashto section is presented as the revelation of God to Bāyazīd, but this is revelation through mimesis. The Pashto image of tree pens and sea inks numerically reaches past the Qur'ānic verse even as the content of this imitation repeats the original. This is neither parody nor erasure of the Qur'ān; rather, it is the relationship linguistically struck the two revelations that seems so potently saturated with something innovative and yet repetitive.

In short, we find in *The Best Explanation* an approach to the Qur'ān that imagines the Qur'ān as a melody to follow, a mold to form new language, or a song to be looped and remixed.[3] This "imitable Qur'ān" was also the means for fashioning a liberated religio-racial sense of belonging and peoplehood.[4] For Bāyazīd's followers, to participate in the Qur'ān through imitating it was part of a project of becoming blessed *people of light* (the Roshaniyya) rather than "Afghans" – a term used by Mughals of this period to denote a racial category of the unruly wild ones on the frontier (Aquil, 2007, pp. 29–31; Vogelsang, 2002).

Rebelling against their Mughal governors, the followers of Bāyazīd met their doom at the hands of the imperial forces of Akbar who then condemned them as heretical innovators and sought to confine the seething linguistic experimentation of *The Best Explanation* as merely an "Afghan" phenomenon with no bearing on Mughal Islam.[5] As for scholarship on *The Best Explanation*, it has occurred almost entirely in studies of Afghan history and linguistics, the "religious" side of Bāyazīd's movement left outside the borders of Islamic Studies.

3 | OVERWHELMED BY FORM: FAYŻĪ's VIRTUOSIC INTERPRETATION

A few years after Bāyazīd and the people of light pursued their Qur'ān at the frontiers of the empire and just as Badā'ūnī was penning his big book of the bad, another experiment of Qur'ānic language was occurring in the heart of the Mughal court. A poet commonly known as Fayżī was writing a massive Arabic commentary (*tafsīr*) on the Qur'ān known as *Illuminations of Inspiration* ("Sawāṭiʿ al-Ilhām") (Fayżī, 1996). Fayżī was no obscure courtier; he was the "poet laureate" of the Mughal court for much of Emperor Akbar's rule (Grobbel, 2001). Composed between 1590 and 1594 CE, his *Illuminations* is a remarkable demonstration of linguistic virtuosity. Opting for a lipogramatic style, Fayżī wrote his entire multivolume commentary without using a single Arabic letter that has a dot unless he was quoting the Qur'ān directly, and he thus limited himself to less than half of the Arabic alphabet when writing his own words. The result is a marvelous but exceedingly difficult text to read as Fayżī relied upon obscure terms and meandering sentence constructions to avoid dotted letters.

Like standard Qur'ānic commentary, Fayżī introduces a sūra from the Qur'ān and then analyzes individual words etymologically and contextually. In translating this, I avoid the letter "e" and any "dropping letters" (lower case g, j, p, q, and y) in order to partially replicate Fayżī's lipogramatic endeavor. The following are from Fayżī's initial commentary on Sūra al-Fātiḥa (the first sura of the Qur'ān) and his etymology of the phrase "In the name of God the Most Merciful and Compassionate":

Sūra al-Fātiḥa, the Chapter of the Opening: It is our first sura … and, with abundant honorific words, scholars also call this sura a *sura of invocation* for Muslims chant this sura so as to solicit aid. It is

known also as a *sura of roots* for it is a root and basis of God's Word. It is also known as *mama sura* for it is a sura of blossoms for all aid so found in God's Word, and it is a sura of buds for all that is so known with God's word. Thus, it is as a mum with an infant child. ...

Bism (In the name): *Ism*, "**name**," is a noun with a word origin in *simw*, "to last aloft," akin in its form to nouns such as *'ilm* "to know." *Sumuw*, "loft," is similar to *'uluw*, "find high" and "acclaim" (pp. 1.46–49).

His interpretative content in this example is unremarkable, but the dotted Qur'ānic words afloat in a sea of apuntal commentary is visually striking (and this contrast is marked by the bold and non-bold words above). Though scholarship on Fayżī's commentary has tended to focus on the question of Shi'i influence on Fayżī's writing (Shubbar, 1996), there is a different thematic axis that bears upon our questions of religious innovation: the imagery of light and its connection to Fayżī's patron, the emperor Akbar. Before he begins the work of Qur'ānic interpretation, Fayżī introduces his text with extensive praise for both God and Akbar. Fayżī's work, however, is marked by the continuous evocation of light imagery and the ontological power of names and classifications to bring the entirety of the cosmos into submission. For example:

Manifold adorations for God, who stirs intuitions and occasions illuminations that flash. ... God distills souls and God fashions forms in wombs, and God transitions hour to hour. God turns our annual rotations. On account of God, clouds stir and billow. God adorns sambar and chital blood with its aroma. Both lizard and boa bow to God's fair dominion. Both a human of sooths and a human of Islam hallow His honor. And God did instruct Adam of all names so as to laud and so as to acclaim (p. 1.3).

In extensive detail shortly after this, Fayżī celebrates Akbar in similar language. The "flash" that inspired Fayżī's *Illumination* is credited to Akbar who "cracked open the truth" because he is not just a fair king but a "perfected ruler," a "pilgrim," a "raiser of the flashing lights of Islam" and a "shining beacon for the scholars of revelation" (p. 1.8).[6] These are decidedly Sufi terms, and, more specifically, they are *illuminationist* terms that celebrate Akbar as the "perfect" human who serves as a channeling prism of reality's light; he is the king that encompasses the breadth of the macrocosmos in his body, the microcosm (Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2001; Moin, 2012). Sure enough, Fayżī's next passages detail the various aspects of Akbar's domain; his is a kingdom of armies, stars, forests, coinage, grateful subjects, beasts, and on and on. In Fayżī's understanding of Sufi illuminationism, the *light* that serves as both ontological stuff and epistemological insight is concentrated in the sacred presence of the emperor. Praise of God as creator echoes praise of Akbar as sovereign.

The virtuosic lipogramatic Arabic of Fayżī's Qur'ānic commentary cannot be separated from Fayżī's overall esthetic – and metaphysical – commitment to language as the means for renewal. In the Mughal world, Arabic would have been irrevocably bound up with Islamic religious discourses (Qutbuddin, 2007), but Fayżī's rhetoric reflects the vibrant Persian literary currents in which he was an active participant. Fayżī wrote near the beginning of a literary movement remembered for its pursuit of *tāza-gū'ī*: "fresh speech." Emboldened by the thriving literary networks between Iran and India, poets of *tāza-gū'ī* sought – as Fayżī declared – to use "old words" to generate "new meanings" (Kinra, 2007, p. 126). The results were intensely intertextual poems that reassembled verses, themes, and images from the poetic past into self-conscious pursuits of newness (*tāzagī*) (Dudney, 2016; Kinra, 2007; Losensky, 1998). Fayżī's Persian works thus explicitly celebrated the renewing power of rhetoric and form to incorporate and transform the past into a present *rendered fresh*.

To return to the Arabic *Illuminations of Inspirations*, its remarkable and even excessive virtuosity in language aligns with the competitive pursuit of newness we find in Fayżī's Persian poetry – and thus *Illuminations* seems a boastful attempt to *outdo* the language of God in order to demonstrate the emperor's revelatory, luminous sovereignty. The formal innovation overwhelms any theological content, and Fayżī intertextually incorporates the Arabic voice of God as the poets of *tāza-gū'ī* regularly incorporated their poetic predecessors to demonstrate their

innovative brilliance. Though Fayżī avoids any explicit heresies, it is significant that Fayżī repeatedly uses the term *sāṭiʿ* ("flash") to name acts of divine revelation, poetic inspiration, and the illuminating patronage given by the emperor to those who sing and chronicle his deeds. Could Fayżī's lipogram be a response to the "challenge verses" of the Qur'ān such as 2.23: "And if you doubt what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a single sūra like it"? Other scholars – such as the author of the aforementioned encyclopedia of sin, Badā'ūnī– considered Fayżī's undotted commentary with skepticism and dismay. Reportedly, when accused of heretically producing a rival and aesthetic challenge to the Qur'ān through his strange lipogramatic style, Fayżī is said to have responded, "There is no god but God and Muḥammad is His messenger" (Sheffield, 2014, p. 172). This central declaration of Islamic faith has no dots in Arabic.

4 | BADĀ'ŪNĪ's MESSIAH: ORTHODOXY AND THE MAHDAWĪS

If Bāyazīd's *Best Explanation* imagined a Qur'ān that anchored a counterhegemonic movement of resistance against Mughal imperial control in the Afghan highlands, Fayżī's *Illuminations* emerges from a hyperhegemonic Qur'ānic imagination in which the luminosity of the Qur'ān can only be concentrated around the emperor, the prism of ontological light. In both cases, we find a ludic experimentation with Qur'ānic language and a shared approach to the Qur'ān as something *other* than as a bounded repository of religious truth or a stable heteronomy whose transmission has concluded. We might object, though, that these figures – the condemned heretic on the imperial frontier and the fresh poet backed by the emperor's power – are not representative of "Islam" in the Mughal era. Could not a figure such as Badā'ūnī offer something more "normal"?

As much as Badā'ūnī strove to detail the transgressions that mark the boundary of Islam from its others, the differences are often fragile and thin. In the Mughal courts, Badā'ūnī's position was an ambiguous one. By most accounts, he failed to win the favor of the emperor and faced a stunted career as a courtier, and any initial sympathies he held to the emperor's religiosity gave way to tones of shock and disapproval at the scandalous eclecticism in Emperor Akbar's court. His unofficial "secret history" of the Mughal court, *Muntakhab al-Tāwārīkh*, contains some of the few extant descriptions of Akbar's religious experimentation outside of those sponsored by Akbar. Badā'ūnī, moreover, condemned both Bāyazīd and Fayżī. He thus offers an intriguing third position that contrasts with our previous examples: less influential than Fayżī, less rebellious than Bāyazīd, and more concerned with presenting himself as a continuation of orthodox traditions than either of them. Despite his common description as "a strict and conservative Sunni" (Abbas, 1987, pp. 14 and 161; Ansari, n.d.), however, we find again an imagination of the Qur'ān and revelation as ongoing and in the make.

Badā'ūnī was deeply sympathetic toward certain messianic figures, most notably Sayyid Muḥammad Jawnpūrī (d. 1505 CE) who claimed the eschatological title of the *mahdī* (and whose devotees through Mughal India became known as the *Mahdawīs*).[7] Sayyid Muḥammad taught his Mahdawī followers to practice the perpetual recollection of God (*dhikr*), to flee from the corruptions of the worldly life and form idealistic commune "circles" (*dā'ira*) outside the city, and to seek the direct, embodied vision of God (*dīdār*). From his practice of *dhikr* and his abundant experience of the *dīdār*, Sayyid Muḥammad became celebrated as the "master of the meaning of the Qur'ān" (*ṣāḥib-i taʿwīl-i qur'ān*) who delivered revelatory speeches (*bayān*) that revealed previously unknown aspects and truths of the Qur'ān. As Darryl MacLean and David Singh have argued, these *bayān*s of the Qur'ān occasionally radically differed from common appreciations of the Qur'ān (Maclean, 2000; Singh, 2019). Sayyid Muḥammad, for instance, rejected the importance of "following" (*taqlīd*) traditional exegesis and denied the principal of "abrogation" (*naskh*), a common exegetical explanation for how later Qur'ānic verses "update" and clarify earlier verses. Against these media of tradition, the Mahdawīs emphasized direct, immanent, sensory, and embodied encounters with God and God's revelation as made possible through the practice of the *dhikr* and the presence of the *mahdī* and his *bayān* utterances. Moreover, Sayyid Muḥammad taught that these experiences – the *dīdar* visions, the *bayān* revelations – could be learned and developed by any true devotee to the path.

While later generations of the Mahdawīs composed hagiographies of Sayyid Muḥammad, the most famous narrator of his life was none other than Badā'ūnī. As Badā'ūnī writes, "Everyone who joined [Sayyid Muḥammad] left behind their disobedience and practiced the divine *dhikr*. His power to transform people was so great that even famous brigands with blood-dripping swords became adherents. When they heard the explanation (*bayān*) of the Qur'an, they elected to stay in his companionship" (Badā'ūnī, 1972, p. 77). Badā'ūnī also admired a prominent Mahdawī apologist, Shaykh Muṣṭafá Gujarātī, who was tortured and died in 1576 CE after defending his millenarian vision and insisting that Sayyid Muḥammad was indeed the *mahdī* (Maclean, 2000, p. 209). While Badā'ūnī was too elusive a religious mind to be simply labeled a Mahdawī adherent, it is clear that he admired Mahdawī teachers. Thus, we are left with the paradox that Badā'ūnī – the most famed defender of "orthodox Islam" against the religious experimentations of Akbar's court – supported a suppressed millenarian leader committed to the ongoing process of Qur'ānic revelation through its realization and renewal. In Badā'ūnī's imagination of the true Islam that had been corrupted by the emperor's pretensions, there was still space for a radical reinterpretation of the Qur'ān when that reinterpretation emerges from the *mahdī*, a figure who embodies immanently in his age the blessedness and revelations of previous prophetic moments. Like Bāyazīd and Fayżī, we find that Badā'ūnī's Qur'ān was one to be *realized* and one in which ongoing participatory revelation was possible, and one that spills over the borders that we usually set in Religious Studies as we speak of texts and scriptures.[8]

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Badā'ūnī was correct, at least in one regard: sorting religious practices between the "new" and the "old" is not a matter of historical detachment but a deeply motivated one dependent upon our metaphysics and our notions of temporality and truth. Even as the field of Islamic Studies has moved beyond a constrained notion of Islam as matter of legalistic orthopraxis, Shahzad Bashir has nevertheless argued that the very scales of time that undergird our historical work in Religious Studies reflect the convergence of modern secularity with a particular, sectarian understanding of modern Sunni Islam (Bashir, 2018). It is these scales of time – understood to unfold year by year in linear and calendrical regularity – that fail utterly to capture the looping, refracting, and repeating temporalities that shape Bāyazīd's Qur'ānic imitation, Fayżī's illuminationist lipograms, and Badā'ūnī's millenarian "orthodoxy." Or, in the words of Kathryn Gin Lum arguing in the context of American religious historiography, "history" is not a native category: it is part of the tangle of Western imperial techniques to organize and tame the world (Lum, 2018).

It is here that we find the value of casting these iterations of Islam in the Mughal world as *NRM*: the field of NRM Studies has long turned "new" into an aspect of our analysis and pursued ways of *not* imposing the unexamined temporal architecture of our scholarship upon the innovative, combinatory, and temporally playful NRMs. Rather, we find models in NRM Studies such as Judith Weisenfeld's *New World A-Coming* (2018) in which she first situates her analysis in the temporal imaginations of groups such as Moorish Science Temple. Or we can look to Benjamin Zeller's work in which he argues the "pastiche" quality of the Heaven's Gate group was representative of the combinatory and ever-changing quality of American religion (2014). In these examples – and many others – scholars of NRMs let an encounter with these ostensibly "new" movements reflect back upon both scholarly practice and the narratives we tell of majoritarian traditions. As we heuristically approach Islam as a new religious movement always in the process of emerging and being made, we may find an Islam that countervails the gravitational pull of that transhistorical Islam that previously dominated much scholarship in Religious Studies. Far from any agreed upon idea of what the Qur'ān implies for a Muslim society, the Qur'ān in the Mughal world was not even the same kind of *thing* for Muslims in this period. The work of authorizing one's own Qur'ānic imagination was precisely that: work ever in need of doing. In that regard, we might see all these various actors – Badā'ūnī, Bāyazīd, Fayżī, and others – as engaged in the temporally complex work of combinatory innovation presented as tradition, as renewal, as return, as rhymed repetition, and the cyclical reiteration of the past. In these examples, even though the Qur'ān had been delivered in the past, that *past* was not an unreachable one but rather something to find anew.

"NRMing Islam" asks us to see the utter contingency of Islam as made new in each historical moment: it is to decolonize the sense of "new" and not collapse Badā'ūnī's concern for *bid'a* ("innovation") together with the etic historian's measures of time. The point is not that these three examples were *new* against a consensus orthodoxy of Mughal Islam; rather, these three examples suggest the absence of that consensus. The invisibility of the immense internal diversity of Islam – this tangle of languages, practices, imaginations, and contradictions – is not reflective of historical reality but of the collusion of our historical and disciplinary habits with the modern development of "religion" as category to organize colonial conquest, postcolonial reform projects, and ongoing state efforts of governance. It is against *our* unexamined presumptions and *our* conceptions of tradition that Bāyazīd, Fayżī, and Badā'ūnī emerge as *new*.

ORCID

William E. B. Sherman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5764-9471

ENDNOTE

[1] There are many works that attest to the analytical abundance that arises from thinking *religion* through the lives of religious people at the edges and margins of a field still deeply marked by a "major traditions" model of approaching religion. The ones that have shaped my thinking for this article include: Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (2018); Diana Walsh Pasulka, *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology* (2019); Benjamin E. Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* (2014); David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (1991); Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* (2014); Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (2004); and Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (2018).

[2] For a classic work that considers how Euro-American Christian religious commitments are universalized in the "objective" language of comparative religions, see (Masuzawa, 2005)

[3] For the rich theoretical possibilities of thinking Islam as "looped," consider Khabeer (2016), Chapter 1.

[4] This is a theme that I develop in my forthcoming work on the Roshaniyya called *Singing with the Mountains*. For a representative example in the hagiography of Bāyazīd and his followers in which they disavow their "Afghan" names in order to adopt new, sacred names, consider (Shīnvārī et al., 2009, p. 226).

[5] Badā'ūnī's comments on the Roshaniyya, for instance, denigrates them as heretical Afghans, and nearly identical comments are found in Khwāja Niẓām al-Dīn's *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī* (Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Muqīm, 2006, pp. 284–285; Badā'ūnī, 1976, p. 362).

[6] For the sake of accuracy, I have dropped my attempts to match Fayżī's lipogramatic technique with these phrases (Fayżī, p. 1.8).

[7] Badā'ūnī also admired Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh, another messianic figure who taught the doctrine of *burūz* ("projection"). Badā'ūnī strains in *The Salvation of the Rightly Guided* to clarify the distinction between *burūz*—which involves the projection one soul into another body—and the "heresy" that is reincarnation (*tanāsukh*). The need to clarify between the two doctrines is suggestive (Moin, 2009).

[8] Connecting all three of these otherwise distinctive religious visions is the shared legacy of Islamic Neoplatonism, emanationist metaphysics as informed by thinkers such as Suhrawardī, and Ibn 'Arabī, and the pursuit of what Matthew Melvin-Koushki has called *taḥqīq* as against *taqlid* (i.e., the "realizing" of knowledge rather than the "following" of past traditions). Consider his recent comparative article on the intellectual history of early modern Europe and Asia (Melvin-Koushki, 2018).

REFERENCES

Abbas, F.Z. (1987) *Abdul Qadir Badauni, as a man and historiographer*. Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli.

Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Muqīm, N.A.D., Elliot, H.M., & Dowson, J. (2006). *Tabakat-i-Akbari of Nizam-ud-din Ahmad Bakhshi*. Sang-e-Meel Publications.

Alam, M., & Subrahmanyam, S. (2001) A place in the Sun: Travels with Faizî in the Deccan, 1591–93. In F. Grimal (Ed.) *Les sources et le temps/sources and time: A colloquium*. (pp. 265–307). Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient.

Altglas, V. (2014) *From yoga to kabbalah: Religious exoticism and the logics of bricolage*. Oxford University Press.

Ansari, A.S.B. (n.d.) Badā'ūnī, Abd-Al-Qāder. In: *Encyclopædia Iranica*. Vol. III/4, pp. 364–365. Available from http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/badauni-abd-al-qader-b [Accessed 3rd July 2020].

Aquil, R. (2007) *Sufism, culture, and politics: Afghans and Islam in medieval North India*. Oxford University Press.

Arlinghaus, J.T. (1989). *The transformation of Afghan tribal society: tribal expansion, Mughal imperialism and the Roshaniyya insurrection*, 1450–1600 [Doctoral dissertation, Duke University]. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

Badā'ūnī, 'A.M.S. (1972) *Najāt al-Rashīd*. Danishgah-i Panjab: Idarah-i Tahqiqat-i Pakistan.

Badā'ūnī, 'A.M.S., Ranking, G.S.A., Lowe, W.H., & Haig, W. (1976) *Muntaḵẖab ut-tawārīḵẖ*, 1st edition in Pakistan. Karimsons.

Bashir, S. (2018) Everlasting doubt: uncertainty in Islamic representations of the past. *Archiv Für Religionsgeschichte*, *20*(1), 25–44.

Bāyazīd Anṣārī, P.R., & Qāsimīa-Quddūs, M.'Abd (1988) *Khayr al-bayān*. Peṣhawar Yūnīwarsiṭī: Puṣhto Akeḍemī.

Burchett, P.E. (2019) *A genealogy of devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India* Columbia University Press.

Chan-Malik, S. (2018) *Being Muslim: A cultural history of women of color in American Islam*. NYU Press.

Chidester, D. (1991) *Salvation and suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Indiana University Press.

Dudney, A. (2016) Sabk-e Hendi and the crisis of authority in eighteenth-century Indo-Persian poetics. *Journal of Persianate Studies*, *9*(1), 60–82.

Eaton, R.M. (2000) Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 11, 283–319.

Fauset, A.H. (2014) *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro religious cults of the urban North*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fayẓī, A.M. (1996) *Sawāṭi' al-ilhām fī tafsīr kalām al-malik al-'allām*. Als. M. Shirazi.

Fenech, L.E. (2013) *The Sikh Zafar-namah of Guru Gobind Singh: A discursive blade in the heart of the Mughal Empire*. Oxford University Press.

Flood, F.B. (2009) *Objects of translation: Material culture and medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter*. Princeton University Press.

Gill, R.S. (2017) *Drinking from Love's Cup: Surrender and sacrifice in the vars of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla*. Oxford University Press.

Green, T.H. (2019) *The fear of Islam: An introduction to Islamophobia in the west*. Fortress press.

Grobbel, G. (2001) *Der Dichter Faiḍī und die Religion Akbars*. Berlin: Schwarz.

Shīnvārī, K., Mukhliṣ 'A.M., & Bāyazīd Anṣārī, P.R. (2009). *Afghanistan, & Vizārat-i Iṭṭilā'āt va Kultūr Ḥālnāmah-'i Myā Rūṣhān*. Vizārat-i Iṭṭilā'āt va Farhang.

Khabeer, S.A. (2016) *Muslim Cool: Race, religion and hip hop in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.

Kinra, R. (2007) Fresh words for a fresh world: Tāza-Gū'ī and the poetics of newness in early modern Indo-Persian poetry. *Sikh Formations*, *3*(2), 125–149.

Kinra, R. (2011) Make it fresh: Time, tradition, and newness in early modern Indo-Persian literary culture. In: Murphy, A. (Ed.) *Time, history and the religious imaginary in South Asia*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp. 12–39.

Losensky, P.E. (1998). *Welcoming Fighānī: Imitation and poetic individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*. Mazda Publishers.

Lum, K.G. (2018) The historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as non-native category? *Religion and American Culture*, *28*(1), 52–91.

Maclean, D.N. (2000) Real men and false men at the court of Akbar: The Majâlis of Shaykh Mustafa Gujarati. In: *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking religious identities in Islamicate South Asia*. pp. 199–215.

Mahmood, S. (2015) *Religious difference in a secular age: A minority report*. Princeton University Press.

Masuzawa, T. (2005) *The Invention of world religions*. The University of Chicago Press.

Melvin-Koushki, M. (2018) Taḥqīq vs. Taqlīd in the renaissances of western early modernity. *Philological Encounters*, *3*(1–2), 193–249.

Moin, A. Azfar (2012) *The millennial sovereign: Sacred kingship and sainthood in Islam*. Columbia University Press.

Moin, Ahmed Azfar (2009) Challenging the Mughal empire: the Islamic millennium according to 'Abd al-Qadir Badayuni. In: B.D. Metcalf (Ed.) *Islam in South Asia in practice*. Princeton University Press, pp. 390–402.

Nair, S. (2020) *Translating wisdom: Hindu-Muslim intellectual Interactions in Early modern South Asia*. University of California Press.

Narayanan, V. (2003) Religious vocabulary and regional identity: A study of the Tamil cīrāppurāṇam ('Life of the Prophet'). In Eaton, R. (Ed.) *India's Islamic traditions: 711–1750*. Oxford University Press. pp. 393–410.

Pasulka, D.W. (2019) *American cosmic: UFOs, religion, technology*. Oxford University Press.

Pike, S.M. (2004) *New age and neopagan religions in America*. Columbia University Press.

Qutbuddin, T. (2007) Arabic in India: A survey and classification of its uses, compared with Persian. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, *127*(3), 315–338.

Ricci, R. (2011) *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. University of Chicago Press.

Sheffield, D. (2014) The Language of Paradise in Safavid Iran: Speech and cosmology in the thought of Āẕar Kayvān and his followers. In: Korangy, A. & Sheffield, D. (Eds.) *There's no tapping around philology*. Harrassowitz Verlag, pp. 161–183.

Sherman, W.E.B. (2018) Apocalypse, again: Language, temporality, and repetition in an Afghan Apocalypse. *CrossCurrents*, *68*(2), 260–282.

Shubbar, 'A.A. (1996) Muqaddimah. In: Shubbar, 'A.A. (Ed.) *Sawāṭi' al-ilhām fī tafsīr kalām al-malik al-'allām*. M. al-Shirazi.

Singh, D.E. (2019) 'Saint-Making'in a South asian tradition of Islam. *Transformation*, *36*(3), 184–195.

Truschke, A. (2016) *Culture of encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal court*. Columbia University Press.

Truschke, A. (2018) The power of the Islamic sword in narrating the death of Indian Buddhism. *History of Religions*, *57*(4), 406–435.

Vogelsang, W. (2002) The ethnogenesis of the Pashtuns. In: W. Ball, & L. Harrow (Eds.) *Cairo to Kabul: Afghan and Islamic studies presented to Ralph pinder-Wilson*. Melisende pp. 228–235.

Weisenfeld, J. (2018) *New world A-Coming: Black religion and racial identity during the Great Migration*. New York University Press.

Zeller, B.E. (2014) *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO religion*. New York University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

William E. B. Sherman teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC-Charlotte. His work has explored the debates and controversies in the early modern Persianate world over the nature of divine language and its connections to vernacular language, messianic movements, proselytization, and more. He is also working on a collaborative community project aimed at preserving the oral histories of members of Charlotte's Muslim communities. When the schedule allows, he enjoys reading and translating the poetry of Farid al-Din 'Attar.