Dreaming the Ummah:

Science Fiction and the Possibility of Islamofuturism

AHMED ELBENNI

Introduction

Sara Hussein had just stepped off her flight, fresh from a London conference, when she was arrested. She had committed no crime, as far as she knew; she had neither the opportunity nor the interest, as a museum archivist working in Los Angeles. By the time she is shipped off to the detention facility euphemistically called Safe-X, Sara understands—she had been flagged by a federal agency and detained for a crime she is predicted to commit, based on the algorithmic analysis of her dreams.[1] This is the premise of Laila Lalami's novel *The Dream Hotel (2023)*, set in a future in which the panopticon of technological surveillance encompasses even our dreams. It is a premise which, with disconcerting precision, captures the close proximity of dreams and politics. The dreams we dream, or are allowed to dream, are no trivial matter. Dream-management is one of the constitutive responsibilities of any serious political order, for dreamscapes are where a people decide, through the selective claiming and disclaiming of terrain, their location in history. The oneiric and the political, each at the root of the other, come together most formidably in the literary genre which takes the future as its object, the genre to which *The Dream Hotel* belongs: science fiction.

The Dream Hotel is easily read as not just a science fiction novel about the empire's fear of science fiction, but a science fiction novel about the empire's fear of *Islamic* science fiction. It is about the institutionalized suppression of Islamic dreamscapes and the hegemonic (Western) techno-authoritarian apparatus mobilized for exactly that purpose. This techno-authoritarian apparatus is not without a cultural arm— art, literature, film, television, or, in a word, propaganda. The critical Muslim theorist Salman Sayyid argues that the science fiction that has

1. This premise bears similarities to Isaac Asimov's classic 1956 novel *The Minority Report* (adapted to a 2002 film by Steven Spielberg) and the Japanese anime series *Psycho Pass*.

long emanated from what is called "the West" has repeatedly revealed that "'we' [the West] are resolutely unwilling to live in the dreamscapes of 'others,' while continuing to expect that 'others' will only find well-being in playing extras in 'our' dreams."

2. Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and World Order* (Hurst, 2014), 90.

3. Ibid, 93.

It is the figure of the Mahdi, drawn from a non-Western lexicon of power, that makes it possible "not only to think of Islam as part of a history of the future, but more importantly, to think of it as History itself"—that is, to think of Islam as a, or even *the,* force that drives world history.

For Sayyid, the paradigmatic example is Frank Herbert's *Dune,* as canonical a text of Western science fiction as there has ever been. He observes that the "quasi-Muslims" at its heart are "still in the past of the future."[2] That is, despite their existence twenty millennia after our present, they remain backward, primitive, stuck in the past. We find them stranded on the inhospitable planet of Arrakis, tribal barbarians at the edge of empire: there is the West, and far below it, in the desert dunes, the Rest. *Dune* seems to repeat the gesture at the foundation of Western science fiction: the colonization of time itself, such that the story of the future can only ever be that of colonial modernity writ cosmic, *ad infinitum.* From *Star Trek* to *Star Wars,* we are taught the same Fukuyaman lesson: history did, in fact, end sometime in the 20th century, and with it, politics—all conflict from that point forward was familial, the squabble of siblings, the digressions of destiny.

What distinguishes *Dune* from its brethren is the return of the Mahdi. Even bearing the name of Paul Atreides, he interrupts the teleology of secular modernity. It is the figure of the Mahdi, drawn from a non-Western lexicon of power, that makes it possible "not only to think of Islam as part of a history of the future, but more importantly, to think of it as History itself"— that is, to think of Islam as a, or even *the,* force that drives world history.[3] In its willingness to imagine and inhabit a Muslim future, *Dune* is an oasis. Surrounding it on all sides are forecasts of an intergalactic expansion of humanity in which Islam is not merely subjugated or subverted, but simply submerged in the deeps of time. *Dune,* to its credit, does not expect Islam to fade as a historical force, nor does it mind attributing to Muslims the capacity for world-making agency, even twenty millennia hence.

Yet this existential transgression cannot ultimately stand. *Dune*'s Fremen, those distant descendants of today's Muslims, are again tribal nomads in the desert, condemned to rehearsing their wars against greater political powers, whether Roman or Italian, imperial or colonial. They do defeat their European-coded oppressors—but once they break out of their sand cage, they swarm the cosmos, an interstellar cloud of locusts blotting out the stars and devouring the space in between. In the *long durée*, they just replace one empire with another, their weapons soaked in the blood of galaxies, fanatical hordes led and manipulated by a prince of the old imperial order chasing his own agenda. There's an ambivalence to *Dune* when it comes to the Islamicate, a genuine admiration laced with fascination and fear. *Dune*, finally, does not celebrate the return of history; it warns against it.

I think that literary projections like those of *Dune* are more accurately labeled "Islamic futurology" or "Islamic science fiction" than "Islamo-futurism," and that this is a distinction worth making. In the context of science fiction, I use the modifier "Islamic" not in a moral or normative sense, but simply to indicate the presence of Islam—as a practiced religion and living culture—in any given text's futurological imaginary. Put more simply, a work of Islamic science fiction is one which projects Islam into the future, whatever form that projection might take. "Islamic science fiction" is thus a purely descriptive term. It does not denote a text authored by a Muslim or a text that affirms an "Islamic worldview"; it marks, simply, a text that either imagines a future in which Muslims prominently feature, or a text which draws heavily on Islamic tradition, history, culture, and aesthetics in envisioning the future of humanity (rarely does a text do the latter without including the former). If "Islamic science fiction" is a descriptive term, then "Islamofuturism" is a normative one. Islamic science fiction merely finds Muslims in the future; Islamofuturism tries to imagine a future which, in its social, political, and moral arrangement, is normatively "Islamic."[4]

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4. A reader may ask, quite fairly, why I do not trade "Islamic" science fiction for "Islamicate," given that Marshall Hodgson's influential coinage would seem to achieve my goal of conveying Islam as a social and civilizational phenomenon, rather than a doctrinal or legal one. One reason is that I share Shahab Ahmed's critique of "Islamicate" as reinscribing a Protestant-like "fundamentalism of piety" that reduces Islam proper to scripture and casts its cultural and civilizational emanations as somehow less "Islamic," or at best "Islam-ish." The other obvious alternative, which is "Muslim," runs into the same conceptual hurdles. "Muslim" sci-fi would seem to indicate a text that is either authored by a Muslim or features explicitly Muslim characters, neither of which is a relevant distinction for my purposes. Likewise, to speak of "Muslim futurism" would too literally shift the focus to what Muslims do and think, in an anthropological sense, rather than the reinterpretation of "Islam" itself, even by non-Muslims, as an aesthetic and political project of the future—its translation into a narrative frame, politico-technological imaginary, and societal order. To be fair, one can also read "Muslim" as "Muslimness," a term which has been used to describe the presence of Muslim ideas in art which otherwise neither centers Islam nor comes from Muslim minds. Haris Durrani, for instance, has quite convincingly argued for the profound "Muslimness" of *Dune*, owing to its "serious engagement" with Muslim ideas, histories, and practices on the level of plotting, theming, and worldbuilding; indeed, "it is through, and not apart from, the engagement with Islam and Muslims that the *Dune* novels explore their central themes about the relationship between religion, ecology, technology, capitalism, and anti/colonialism." I agree with Durrani, but I do not perceive a significant difference between "Muslimness" and "Islamicate"— both are deliberately "squishy" terms that perform the same function of abstracting Islam as an aesthetic or culture from Islam as a bounded scriptural tradition of dogmas, laws, and rituals. It is the same move made by art historians who distinguish between art by Muslims (Muslim art) and explicitly devotional art (Islamic art), for instance. I want to cut against the grain by insisting on the hard-edged and ever-so-scary "Islamic," without the cushioning of additional suffixes. My deliberate repetition of "Islamic" in two opposing senses— one descriptive and anthropological,

For my purposes, then, the meanings indicated by the phrase "Islamic science fiction" are synonymous with those indicated by "Islamicate literature" or "Muslimness." To say that *Dune* is a work of Islamic science fiction is to say that it is deeply inspired by and engages with Islam in its construction of the future—it is to say, in other words, that *Dune* is a work of Islamicate futurology marked by a thoroughgoing Muslimness.[5] This, however, remains distinct from saying that *Dune* is Islamofuturist. Much of this article will aim to show why even a sci-fi work as sophisticated and generous as *Dune* in its treatment of Islam is not necessarily Islamofuturist.

My insistence on the distinction between Islamic science fiction and Islamofuturism recognizes that so many works we might recognize as belonging to the former category—insofar as they, like *Dune*, discover Muslims in the future—in fact write Islam out of the history of the future and thereby depoliticize it. As Sayyid observes, "writing the history of the future is not only the province of science fiction but... one of the possibilities of the political."[6] An Islam without history is an Islam that can neither dream nor be dreamed. Historians tend towards prophecy; to announce the patterns of yesterday is to claim the precognition of tomorrow.[7] This is the shared terrain of history and science fiction. Insofar as the discipline of history makes implicit prognostications by claiming to uncover the social, economic, demographic, geographic, and even psychological determinants of human development, it is the flipside of futurology: a science of divination. No less than Ibn Khaldun belongs to that class of historians who believe themselves to have discovered the central principle of all temporal movement (ʿaṣabiyya, Geist, etc.). Ibn Khaldun was thus an Islamic futurologist long before anyone could conceive him as such; what he was not, if read as an unremitting pessimist, is an Islamofuturist.

Islamic futurology (or Islamic science fiction) is the study of potential Muslim futures; Islamofuturism is the Muslim embrace of the future. Islamic futurology feigns academic indifference; Islamofuturism is always already political. Islamic futurology predicts; Islamofuturism dreams. It is the difference between imagining a Muslim future, and a future that is Muslim. Thus, Islamofuturism as I define it belongs to the literary genre of Utopia. If we follow Darko Suvin in classifying Utopia as the "socio-economic sub-genre" of science fiction, by analogy, we could consider Islamofuturism a subgenre of Islamic science fiction. Put differently, all Islamofuturism is Islamic science fiction (a projection of Islam into the future), but not all Islamic science fiction is Islamofuturist. Islamofuturism is definitionally optimistic about the place of Islam in the future, and is confident that Islam has

the other normative and prescriptive—introduces a certain conceptual instability, a perpetual risk of slippage, that I find useful. The "Islamic" is above all defined by its undefinability, and our attempted stabilizations of the term are never final. My use of "Islamic" in contradictory registers makes this instability conspicuous. It partially defamiliarizes the term and so, much like science fiction itself, helps us see it more clearly. Faced with the impossibility of resolving the ambiguities of the "Islamic," I prefer to use it in a way that has a definite meaning in the context of my argument and simultaneously signals its own fluidity.

5. Haris Durrani, "The Muslimness of Dune: A Close Reading of 'Appendix II: The Religion of Dune,'" *Reactor*, February 26, 2024, https://reactormag.com/the-muslimness-of-dune-a-close-reading-of-appendix-ii-the-religion-of-dune/.

6. Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 83.

7. The final form of history as a discipline is psychohistory, the science-turned-oracle-turned-religion of Isaac Asimov's science fiction series *Foundation*.

resources for building a better world than that which currently exists. Islamic science fiction, on the other hand, need not be optimistic about Islam, and indeed can adopt a highly critical attitude towards it.

By now it should be clear that I speak of the "future" in a secular rather than eschatological sense. Islamofuturism takes as its object not the End Times or Judgment Day, but historical and geological time. This is not to say that history has nothing to do with eschatology—in fact, precisely because of its aforementioned prophetic character, historical thinking is often eschatological. Herbert himself recognized this by making the Mahdi central to his story of politics and revolution. In *Dune*, the promise of the Mahdi is what restores the possibility of the Islamic future, just as it did for Muslims in the real-world past. However, for many Muslims today, the future signified by the Mahdi is in fact the post-future. The Mahdi represents not the return of History but its resolution. Within such a frame, the "Islamic future" can only ever be apocalyptic. This anti-historical futurism—or more simply, this anti-futurism—amounts to an illegitimate bifurcation of time into *dunyā* now and *ākhira* later, when they are necessarily concurrent and intertwined. There is no salvation later without salvation now. The yet-to-be utopias of Islamofuturism are not paradise on Earth, for there can be no such thing; they are, at best, approximations of the *rawḍa*, gardens cultivated in anticipation of the Garden, to which they are the gateway.[8]

The central argument of this two-part article is that the genre of literature and art that I am calling Islamofuturism does not yet exist, but it should. The difficult task of this first installment is to clear conceptual ground for the theorization of Islamofuturism that will be proffered in the second. I will do this by first establishing a definition, history, and canon of Islamic science fiction, via a survey of the Muslim futures envisioned by both Western and non-Western literary works across more than a century. This survey will illustrate, quite clearly, the difference between science fiction that merely projects Islam into the future and science fiction that places Islam at the center of future possibility. It will thus show why the Islamic science fiction that currently exists should not, for the most part, be considered Islamo-futurist. This will raise the question as to whether Islamofuturism as such is possible, even theoretically—that is, whether there is something about Islam itself which stymies futurism as a politico-cultural project. Some scholars have posited precisely this thesis. I will show that such a notion is without foundation, and that in fact our present historical moment has birthed an unprecedented appetite for Islamo-futurism and the first attempts to systematically will it into existence.

8. Ahmed Elbenni, "Paradise Is Monotonous," *Yale Daily News*, May 20, 2019, https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2019/05/19/paradise-is-monotonous/.

Given the return of utopian thinking in recent years, for better or ill, the need to consciously theorize an Islamofuturism for the twenty-first century is more urgent than ever.

Estranging Islam

Darko Suvin famously theorized science fiction as first and foremost a literature of "cognitive estrangement." It is a genre which, uniquely, enables the reader to critically reassess the present by defamiliarizing it—that is, by *estranging* the reader from it, such that they are able to see the familiar as new, and thus truly *see* it. This estrangement is achieved by the "novum," a disruptive scientific innovation—from time travel to artificial intelligence—which differentiates any given sci-fi world from our own. This world is typically in our future, though not always. For the purposes of this article, however, I consider as science fiction only those works which take place in the future. I therefore firmly distinguish science fiction from "speculative fiction," which is sometimes used interchangeably with science fiction but which in fact encompasses everything from superhero adventures to supernatural horror. Similarly, I maintain a firm distinction between science fiction and fantasy, despite their oft-discussed generic permeability. As such, great Islamic speculative fiction, blending sci-fi and fantasy in contemporaneous settings, is beyond my purview. The omission of works like G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012) or Harris Durrani's *Technologies of the Self* (2016) is not any judgment of their quality.

Matt Ruff's **The Mirage** (2012) is a recent (and unusually obvious) example of what estrangement looks like when it is applied to—or rather, through—Islam. The "alternative history" explored by the novel is built around a simple series of inversions: in the year 2009, the United Arab States is dealing with terrorist threats from the World Christian Alliance. On November 9, 2001, the WCA hijacked two planes and crashed them into the Tigris and Euphrates World Trade Center Towers in Baghdad. Halal, a UAS agency, is on the trail of the Christian terrorists. The target of estrangement here is obviously the Islamophobic Westerner. By flipping the familiar roles of empire and terrorist, the text invites said Westerner to reexamine their web of assumptions and associations.

This defining feature of science fiction—its technique of cognitive estrangement via the novum—has circumscribed the genre's representation of the Islamic future, insofar as Islam itself has often been used as or assimilated into the novum. Frequently, it has been the

foreignness of Islam, its strangeness and literal otherworldiness, which Western sci-fi writers have regarded as its most salient and useful aspect. *The Mirage*'s inverted approach is nothing new. Islam—that distant, exotic, ever-unknowable thing—has been used to achieve such an estranging effect from its earliest appearances in Anglo-American science fiction. As far back as 1889, just as science fiction was emerging in the West, John Ames Mitchell's **The Last American** told the story of a Persian expedition of Muslim archeologists which crosses the Atlantic in 2951 to study the ancient "Mehrikan nation," extinct since 1990.[9] The expedition explores the ruins of Nhu-Yok and gathers items to display in the museum of the Imperial College in Isfahan. At some point, while wandering through the rubble of Washington D.C., the expedition encounters the last living American, a primitive savage who is accidentally killed during a scuffle. The novella is a critique of contemporary American society's liberal and industrial excesses, and it underlines the horror of its projected future by placing the Oriental Musulman in the position of imperial and epistemic power currently occupied by the Westerner. How terrifying would it be, Mitchell asks, if it were *Muslims* who were scavenging the remains of our defunct civilization, instead of the other way around? Is that not reason enough to change course?

Recall, again, that I define "Islamic science fiction" as including any work that centers Islam or Muslims in its projection of the future. Under this definition, both *The Mirage* and *The Last American* are works of Islamic sci-fi. However, the paradigmatic text of Islamic sci-fi in the West, even sixty years after its publication, remains *Dune*. This is not to deny *Dune*'s many non-Islamic, non-Arab influences—besides the nineteenth-century Caucasian Muslim resistance to Russian imperialism in Central Asia,[10] Herbert drew on Indigenous cultures worldwide, including the Navajo in the American Southwest, the Arawak in Brazil, and the Kalahari in southern Africa, not to mention his interest in Zen Buddhism.[11] Still, as noted above, Islam remains the primary prism through which *Dune* refracts its world and themes. Frank Herbert's masterpiece combines the two primary representations of the Muslim future in Anglo-American sci-fi—what I'm going to call "Islam as memory" (ancient, Arab, abandoned) and "Islam as nightmare" (dominant, dark, despotic); Islam as future backwater, and Islam as hegemonic caliphate.

After Herbert, it is the Hugo Award-winning author Dan Simmons whose work most visibly incorporates both registers. His novels mark a departure from the post-*Dune* cultural norm, in which Islam as an Orientalized aesthetic features prominently in Anglo-American

9. I owe this reference to my friend and colleague Mathias Ghyoot.

10. Will Collins, "The Secret History of Dune," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 16, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-secret-history-of-dune/.

11. "Haris Durrani on Muslimness, Orientalism, and Imperialism in Dune," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 24 (1) 2023, 78-85.

futures, most notably in *Star Wars*, but Muslims themselves are absent.[12] Simmons' remarkable **Hyperion Cantos (1988–1992)** is set about 800 years in the future, long after the destruction of the Earth in 2038 and "the Hegira" (to use the novel's term) of its former inhabitants to about 300 planets. Most of these planets have joined an intergalactic formation known as the Hegemony, which is essentially the post-World War II liberal international order, but in space. Palestinians are still a diaspora, but so are the Jews: Israel and the Third Temple (yes, third) have been destroyed, and the closest replacement is a desert planet named Hebron.[13]

One of the novels' protagonists is a heroic and perfectly secular Palestinian soldier named Fedmahn Kassad, and one of his key achievements is putting down a Shi'i rebellion on the planet of Qom-Riyadh, in which a "New Prophet" leads 30 million "New Order Shi'ites" in a campaign of mass slaughter against two continents of Sunnis.[14] Kassad condemns the revolution on religious grounds and issues an ultimatum. The New Prophet declares him an infidel. He and his "revolutionary mullahs," though they rail against "the Great Satan of Hegemony Science," connect their "personal comlogs" to "the global data net" and thereby render themselves vulnerable to remote detonation. The revolution concludes with the New Prophet literally exploding in the middle of a televised address, in a denouement about as subtle as the overall allegory.[15]

Though *Hyperion* is set nearly a millennium in our future, its Muslims are, like those of *Dune*, once again stuck in the past of the future. Qom-Riyadh is a "technically primitive world" by location and by choice. It is also a desert planet. The only other Muslim-majority planet is New Mecca. Both are backwaters left behind by history and irrelevant to the political machinations of the Hegemony; neither appear to have representation at the All-Thing, the interplanetary Senate (though, interestingly, Hebron does). When the Hegemony eventually falls due to a complex succession of events involving the outbreak of war against AI, New Mecca lurches "into spasms of martyrdom."[16] What rises from the ashes of the Hegemony is a revived Catholic Church and new Christian hegemony (Simmons makes clear that this is very bad).[17]

With Simmons, we observe what would become the default in Western science fiction: a bipolar view of Islam as either irrelevant or too relevant, a fetishization of sectarianism as at once arbitrary and absolute, and the fixing of Islam in and outside of history (it's a remixed caricature of postrevolutionary Iran and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, forever). Such is the Martian Emirate of Donald Moffitt's duopoly **The Mechanical Sky (1989/90)**, published just a year after

12. For an overview of the Orientalist aesthetics of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983), from the Tusken Raiders to Jabba the Hutt, see Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 245-247. Beyond *Star Wars*, the American science-fiction television series, *Babylon 5* (1994), features a few alien species, namely the Minbari and the Narn, which in some respects evoke Islam and Muslims.

13. Hebron is an autonomous political entity, maintaining relations with the Hegemony but operating outside its jurisdiction.

14. We are told that "firing squads had been busy day and night settling ancient theological disputes and it was estimated that at least a quarter of a million Sunnis had been slaughtered in the first two days of the New Prophet's occupation."

15. Dan Simmons, *Hyperion* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 136-137.

16. Dan Simmons, *The Fall of Hyperion* (London: Doubleday, 1990), 481-483.

17. See Dan Simmons, *Endymion* (Headline Book Publishing, 1996) and *The Rise of Endymion* (Bantam Books, 1997)

Hyperion. The register is firmly Islam as nightmare. It's 3030, and Muslims rule the cosmos. The Emir of Mars and the Sultan of Alpha Centauri are preparing for the Caliphate Congress, where each hopes to be elected. The Martian Emirate is space Saudi Arabia—we learn that the "Islamic Nahda" began a thousand years ago, in the 20th century, when the Arabs discovered oil just as the Western world fell into decline. The resulting economic strength, paired with zealous faith, eventually translated to soft power, and then political power. The Arabs proceeded to monopolize space travel.

No real religious, social, or cultural change has transpired in the intervening millennium. Technological advancements only entrench the status quo—for instance, the corrupt and infantile Emir has indefinitely extended his rule by growing new bodies from his cells, to which he stitches his head (this becomes a political problem when he realizes, as the Caliphate Congress approaches, that legally speaking only his head has made the Hajj, and so he must repeat the pilgrimage to legitimate his candidacy before the elections). Advances in genetic engineering have had generally grim consequences for the Emir's Martian subjects—since, for example, body parts can be regrown, the *ḥudūd* punishments are applied much more liberally. Religious police wander the streets, media is heavily censored, and women are veiled and cloistered in the home. The Emirate's enemies include the Bedouins roaming the Martian deserts, the Christian Jihad, and the Israeli Liberation Force (there's that *Mirage*-style estrangement again).[18]

By now we might wonder why, exactly, the space Muslims of the far future always seem to live in the desert. Maybe they simply have a natural affinity for it? This is the answer suggested by Kim Stanley Robinson in his canonical **Mars Trilogy (1992–1996)**, which follows the terraforming of Mars from 2026 to 2212. Arab Muslims play a major role in shaping the new Martian culture, supposedly because the Red Planet is reminiscent of their native homes: the desert. As one of the first Martian colonists observes early in the novel, "Arabic words were slipping quickly into English, because Arabic had a larger vocabulary for this landscape: *akaba* for the steep final slopes around volcanoes, *badia* for the great world dunes, *nefuds* for deep sand, *seyl* for the billion-year-old dry river beds...people were saying they might as well switch over to Arabic and have done with it."[19]

Clearly, then, the securitized post-9/11 imaginaries of the War on Terror, so unable to imagine future Muslim existence beyond desert fundamentalisms, are but an extension of a centuries-long poverty of imagination in the Anglosphere.[20] Even before the towers fell,

18. We also learn that Terran diplomats and sheikhs from the Islamic Confederation of Quebec, Kingdom of Iowa, and Texas Dependency maintain friendly relations with the Martian Emirate.

19. Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (Bentam Spectra, 1992). Mars is at one point described as "the pan-Arab dream come alive," given the contribution of financial and human capital by "all the Arab nations," including "Syrians and Iraqis, Egyptians and Saudis, Gulf Staters and Palestinians, Libyans and Bedouins." Regardless of national or class background, "here among the foreigners they were all cousins." This solidarity is reinforced by the suspicion that the colonists' Western leaders, while preaching the formation of "an indigenous Martian culture," in fact only intend to promote some "Terran cultures" at the expense of others, in "a form of Ataturkism."

20. Somewhat surprisingly, the main innovation of post-9/11 sci-fi is the expansion of the Muslim future beyond the Arab world, arguably for the first time since Persian Muslims visited Nhu York. Pitch Black / The Chronicles of Riddick (2000 / 2004) gives us Black Muslims five hundred years in the future, when New Mecca is the capital of the planet Helion Prime. Orson Scott Card's Shadow Puppets and Shadow of the Giant (2002/2005) moves Muslims further east, as years after Ender's Game, Ender's friend Alai is elected caliph of the "Muslim nations" and successfully takes India, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia back from China. However, external and internal challenges to his rule eventually force Alai to flee Earth. Kim Stanley Robinson, too, revisited the Muslim future, in a manner of speaking, almost immediately after 9/11, with The Years of Rice and Salt (2002). What would have happened if the Black Death had not killed a third of Europe's population in the fourteenth century, but all of it, effectively eliminating Christianity from the world stage? A Muslim repopulation of Europe, according to Robinson. By 1915, the eve of the "Long War," the world has split into four blocs: the Chinese Empire, the Tranvancori League (southern India and southern Africa), and the Hodenosaunee League (most of North America). Dar al-Islam now includes the American East Coast, most of South America, most of Africa, Arabia, all of Europe, central Asia, and Russia (in this timeline, neither Malaysia nor Indonesia are Muslim). The Muslim world unites in a war against the other three blocs. After 67 years of fighting, the Muslim bloc loses the war. This leads to the founding of the League of All Nations and the end of the imperial age. Going into the 21st century,

Sarah Zettel's **Fool's War (1997)** followed a *niqabi* starship captain and engineer from Dubai named Katmer Al Shei as she faces bigotry stemming from a nuclear holocaust of Earth by Muslim extremists. Yet even Zettel's effort proves radically more imaginative than most of her peers, given the seriousness with which Al Shei treats her religious faith.[21] So rarely is the protagonist, our point-of-view character, a Muslim; if she is, she isn't a very practicing one, and is accordingly alienated from her society.[22] This common narrative choice assumes a non-Muslim reader in need of a protagonist with which to identify. The non-Muslim hero in a Muslim world inhabits the liminal space of the anthropologist—at once insider and outsider, and thus a relatable guide to an alien world and alien people.[23] Jasmine "Jazz" Bashara, from Andy Weir's **Artemis (2017)**, is a typical case: she is a Saudi Arabian woman from the late 2080s residing in humanity's first-ever lunar colony, Artemis. Jasmine is not a practicing Muslim, though her father is, and at one point she directly addresses the reader: "You can stop pretending you know what a niqab is." The Muslim reader is unimagined and unimaginable.

Frequently, it has been the *foreignness* of Islam, its strangeness and literal other-worldiness, which Western sci-fi writers have regarded as its most salient and useful aspect.

By far the most interesting Anglo-American work of Islamic sci-fi produced since 9/11 is Kameron Hurley's **Bel Dame Apocrypha** trilogy (2010-2012).[24] Thousands of years in our future but thousands of years in the novel's past, Muslim refugees "from different moons" settled the planet they named Umayma, "united in their belief of God and the Prophet." For a millennium peace prevailed between the Nasheen and Chenja,[25] before politico-theological differences vaguely reminiscent of the Second Fitna precipitated a forever war.[26] We observe, immediately, the default location of Islam in a desolate, war-torn wasteland, no matter the time or place. We observe, also, the usual fascination with sectarian conflict. What Hurley does differently is try and explore this sectarianism from the inside.[27]

Where she strays into more familiar territory is with the alien diplomats from a planet called New Kinaan, who visit Nasheen as fellow "people

the main geopolitical tensions in the world continue to be between Dar al-Islam and China, with a split between more liberal-Sufi and conservative Muslim nations.

21. Her cousin Resit is the starship's lawyer and a devout Muslim as well, except that she does not veil her face. The two pray their five daily prayers together.

22. One noteworthy exception to this norm is the protagonist of Ted Chiang's classic novelette, *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* (2007), which follows a fabric merchant in Baghdad named Fuwaad ibn Abbas. He is essentially a Muslim everyman, and the narrative takes his faith for granted. The novelette itself is a time-travel tale set in the medieval past and narrated as a frame story evocative of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

23. Recall that the protagonist of *The Mechanical Sky*, Abdul-Hamid Jones, is a *mawla*, a half-Arab, estranged from the purely Arab Martians, and only when the Emir's Grand Vizier, Rubenstein, introduces Jones to the pleasures of Beethoven does he remember his lost Western "heritage."

24. Its three installments are *God's War*, *Infidel*, and *Rapture*.

25. Though it no longer does, Umayma also used to accept alien refugees so long as they were from among the "People of the Book." This accounts for minority communities with their own marginal religious beliefs and practices: "The Mhorians had been the last allowed refuge on Umayma, nearly a thousand years before. They had brought with them dangerous idols and belief in a foreign prophet, but they claimed to be people of the Book, and custom required that they be given sanctuary."

26. As Hurley writes, "Words, even the words of the prayer language, were open to interpretation, and when Nasheen had disbanded the Caliphate and instituted a monarchy, existing divisions in those interpretations had reached a violent head... Chenjans would submit only to God, not His Prophet, let alone any monarch who wanted to sever God and government. That final insult had resulted in an explosion of all the rest, and the world had split in two." See God's War (Night Shade Publishing, 2011), 78.

27. Hurley's narrative follows dual protagonists typifying the sensibilities of their societies. Rhys, the Chenjan, is a pious man, always reading "the Kitab," reciting

of the Book."[28] One of these diplomats, it turns out, is a Christian extremist intent on weaponizing the genetic mutations of Umayma to breed an army, and to that end, aims to prolong the war between Nasheen and Chenja until they wipe each other out. We're back with *The Mirage*, critiquing post-9/11 discourse by casting Christians as terrorists and suggesting that it is Western intervention, not Muslim dysfunction, which is responsible for the war-torn misery of the Middle East.

Whether operating in the register of Islam as memory or nightmare, Western sci-fi largely does not believe in the Muslim future, because it does not believe in the Muslim past either.

If Hurley's contemporary political critique is superficial, her commitment to inhabiting the subjectivity of Muslims in conflict with other Muslims on a Muslim-majority planet at least yields a Muslim future far more textured and alive than is usually mustered by Western speculative fiction. Hurley only partially breaks with the Anglo-American tradition of the native informant, the barely-Muslim in a Muslim world, given that her main protagonist is the hardboiled atheist Nyx. It is the "balancing" of Nyx with the devout Rhys, in whose mind we spend large stretches of the trilogy, which is comparatively unusual.

Even more subversive than Hurley's religious protagonist is her historicization of Islam. Whether operating in the register of Islam as memory or nightmare, Western sci-fi largely does not believe in the Muslim future, because it does not believe in the Muslim past either. Islam simply does not enter history; its beliefs, practices, and divisions are static, frozen, even after the passage of millennia. Hurley joins Herbert in speculating about how Muslim religious practice and self-understanding might change with dramatic temporal and spatial shifts— or, in the case of Arrakis and Umayma, with isolation and syncretism. For instance, Chenjan Muslims practice an unorthodox interpretation of "the Kitab," such as a sixth daily prayer at midnight.[29]

Still, even Herbert and Hurley, the most creative and generous of our sci-fi authors, color within narrow lines. Certain tropes persist. Muslim political rule is inevitably despotic. Muslims are always fighting wars, against others or against themselves. Muslims always return to the desert, no matter how much time passes or how far

the ninety-nine names of God, objecting to mixed-gender prayer, and refusing drinking or premarital sex.# Nyx, the Nasheenian, is about as liberal as her people, but unlike most, she is an atheist, a hardboiled assassin who believes in nothing beyond self-interest. Much of what's interesting about *The Bel Dame Apocrypha* comes from its delight in pairing dissonant cultural and political signifiers, delinking them from their conventional associations and keeping the reader from too easily mapping the Chenja-Nasheen allegory onto the Sunni-Shi'i split, or any other intra-Muslim divide. Nasheen is a matriarchal society (all men are sent to the warfront) ruled by "God's Imam," Queen Zaynab, who also happens to be a despot who holds sham elections. Unlike Chenja, Nasheen does not forbid images, and many public spaces display mosaics of the Nasheenian female rulers meeting and receiving guidance from the Prophet (his face is kept veiled).

28. It is they who reveal the survival of Muslims on other planets.

29. Another example of Hurley's historicist approach is her treatment of Arabic. The language of Chenja's public life is not the vernacular but the "prayer language" i.e. Arabic—never once referenced by name, as its original name has been forgotten. Most Chenjans (and some Nasheenians) can read the script of the prayer language, but very few outside the mullahs know how to speak it (for this reason, it's restricted to ritual and liturgical purposes). This all makes for an interesting contrast with Zettel's approach in *Fool's War*, where no indication is given of Arabic changing as a language centuries into a space-faring future.

away from Earth they travel. The caliphate, when it exists, operates as a homogenous political entity, with little internal differentiation. The implicit question ventured is whether there can exist in the future a domesticated Islam—liberal, secular, democratic, defanged. Kim Stanley Robinson and Doris Lessing locate this more palatable Islam in some variety of "Sufism"; the rest locate it nowhere.[30] The questions asked and the answers given always follow from the axiom that the Islam of the future can only be a memory, or a nightmare.

The figure of Rubenstein, from Moffitt's *The Mechanical Sky*, articulates this omnipresent anxiety best. He is a highly educated man who left Israel for the Martian Emirate, given the limited rights the former afforded its Jewish minority, and whom for all his formidable intelligence can aspire to no higher and thankless a station than the Martian Emir's vizier. Abdul Hamid Jones comes to a similar realization. When he first visits Alpha Centauri, it seems to him a paradise compared to the Martian Emirate: a cosmopolitan and liberal empire ruled by a benevolent sultan, a refuge for the many religious minorities of space, and so apparently a testament to the possibility of a humane Islamic order. Yet, Jones soon learns that the Sultan intends to overcome the main hurdle to his caliphal aspirations—the ten-year round-trip to Mecca, even at light-speed travel—by marshalling black hole physics to literally shrink the distance between the stars. This would enable an actual, rather than merely symbolic, unification of the various Muslim moons and planets, otherwise too far apart to govern effectively. In other words, the Sultan aims to irrevocably rend the very fabric of reality to bring about a true interstellar caliphate. However pleasant and tolerant life may be for the religious minorities of Alpha Centauri, Jones realizes, it will never be truly free—and so he resolves to find them and himself an escape from the growing shadow of the Sultan's interstellar hand.

Never is the possibility of a multipolar or networked galactic order considered. This is Islam as the photo negative of the imperial imaginary. It is a zero-sum game. Either the West wins, or *they* do. So long as this is the formal premise of Western sci-fi, it will not and cannot permit of an Islamofuturism.[31]

30. In *Red Mars*, Robinson includes a *tariqa* of Sufi scientists less interested in pan-Arabism than their Muslim brethren. One of the major European characters, Frank, registers the Sufis' singular hospitality and ecumenical open-mindedness, as compared to the other Arabs. Robinson returns to Sufism again in *The Years of Salt and Rice*, where it is suggested as a more moderate and tolerant strain of Islam compared to its more extremist wing.

Doris Lessing, too, finds ethical and spiritual comfort in Sufism. It features most prominently in her *Canopus in Argos* series as the "Substance-Of-We-Feeling" (SOWF), a primordial life energy. For a scholarly study of the Sufi themes in Lessing's work, see Shadia S. Fahim, *Doris Lessing and the Sufi Equilibrium: The Evolving Form of the Novel* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

31. From the preceding survey of Anglo-American Islamic science-fiction, I have omitted at least one major work: British author Garry Kilworth's *The Night of Kadar* (1978). This is an obscure but significant text, and it will receive a detailed treatment in the second part of this article as a striking dramatization of the challenges facing any Islamofuturist project.

The Impossible Futurism?

Until very recently, science fiction was an almost entirely Anglo-American affair.[32] Now, no doubt facilitated by American cultural hegemony, it has taken root in Muslim-majority societies, most notably Iraq, Turkey, Malaysia, and Egypt (the Egyptian Society for Egyptian Science Fiction was established in 2012 and speculative authors like Ahmed Khalid Tawfik have achieved international renown).[33] So, the "Muslim world" has science fiction, some of it even Islamic. The question is whether it has, or even *can have*, Islamofuturism.

Let's take Arabic science fiction, known as *al-khayāl al-ʿilmī*, as a case study. Ian Campbell argues that since colonialism and social Darwinism are baked into the inception of Western sci-fi as a genre, informing the evolutionary and anthropological theories that undergird its understanding of time and humanity, the Arabo-Muslim world has historically had a complicated relationship with it. Arabic sci-fi is defined by an ambivalence—attraction and revulsion in equal measure—towards science and technology, as is typical of postcolonial literature. As compared to Western sci-fi, Campbell argues, Arabic sci-fi is more likely to authenticate itself by reference to religious and literary tradition—the *Thousand and One Nights*, travelogues, *mirabilia*, philosophical treatises,[34] and so forth—and therefore observes "less separation between the cognitive and the mystical."[35]

This contention, we must challenge. Campbell is certainly correct that Arabic sci-fi tends to less "hard," technically rigorous world-building than its Western counterpart—there is no Arabic Greg Egan or Adrian Tchaikovsky—and is less concerned than even technically un-rigorous Western sci-fi (which is to say most of it) to mimic the appearance of scientific plausibility. Thematically and conceptually, however, science fiction is the most metaphysical of all literary genres, whether in its Western or Arabic varieties. How could a literary form premised on the technological transformation of humanity not find itself asking the biggest and most basic questions about life, morality, being, and destiny? The cosmic scope of science fiction directs it towards the ontological and eschatological concerns historically claimed by the realm we've roughly termed "religion." We should not think it a coincidence that so many of the genre's pioneers—Olaf Stapledon, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, Phillip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Vernor Vinge—were some species of mystic or another, even and especially when avowedly secular.[36] This is to say nothing of the profoundly gnostic vein that has run through science fiction for its entire history, manifest in its problematization of the

32. Of course, truly great sci-fi authors have also come from beyond the Anglosphere—Stanislaw Lem was Polish, while Arkady and Boris Strugatsky were Russian (and just two authors in a rich Russian and Soviet tradition of science fiction).

33. See Jörg Matthias Determann, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (I.B. Tauris, 2021), as well as Hosam A. Ibrahim Elzembely and Emad El-Din Aysha, *Arab and Muslim Science Fiction: Critical Essays* (McFarland & Company, 2022). The latter is an edited volume of interviews and critical essays which provides a useful overview of the genre's growth in various Muslim countries, including Algeria, Syria, Morocco, Kuwait, Yemen, India, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Bosnia, and Indonesia.

34. Al-Farābī's *al-Madīna al-Fadīla* is the paradigmatic example.

35. Ian Campbell, *Arabic Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018), 8.

36. Just as it is no coincidence that the most ardent believers in the science fictions of our day, from UFOs to AGI to the Singularity, tend to be atheist or agnostic.

human body but deification of the human soul in narratives of disembodied transcendence so central to classics like *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[37] "Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter," pronounces Yoda in the most popular film of the most popular science fiction franchise of all time.[38]

Some degree of mysticism in science fiction is probably a formal inevitability. Insofar as science fiction takes as its object the unknown and the unknowable, it is above all else a literature of wonder.[39] The audacious act of imagining the unimaginable Other, whether an alien species in a faraway galaxy or humanity itself in a faraway century, is simply a dress rehearsal for imagining the Absolute Other, the Final Different i.e., God. The representation of the unrepresentable (God) is the secret *telos* of science fiction and the root of its numinous structure of feeling. The final success of science fiction's elaborate cognitive apparatus is the supersession of cognition; its scientific reason culminates in a surrender to the unreasonable, the ungraspable, the sublime. Science fiction, emotionally and intellectually, attends the same congregation as religion. It just prays a little differently.[40]

Science fiction, emotionally and intellectually, attends the same congregation as religion. It just prays a little differently.

This aesthetic of wonder suggests science fiction as a literary form singularly at home in the Arabo-Islamic tradition. Classical Arabo-Islamic literary critics theorized the production of wonder as the central purpose of poetics. Wonder was understood as an emotional experience produced by the cognitive discovery of the strange and unusual. As Lara Harb observes, "the aesthetics of wonder with the layers of deduction it entails fits well with the kind of cognitive rapture that mystical poetry seeks to achieve."[41] The premium placed on wonder in classical Arabo-Islamic poetics reflects a broader civilizational interest in the Other and otherworldly. The genre of ʿajāʾib al-makhlūqāt (marvels of creation) "blossom[ed] into a field of inquiry across Islamicate societies," and often took the form of comprehensive cosmographical encyclopedias aiming to "cultivate a sense of astonishment and awe in the face of uncanny reality."[42] Citing Qur'an 50:6, Zakariyya al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283) casts his genre-defining ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharāʾib al-mawjūdāt as an epistemological procedure, through which one develops higher, inner

37. See Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Harmony Books, 1998); see also Frank McConnell, *The Science of Fiction and the Fiction of Science: Collected Essays on Storytelling and the Gnostic Imagination* (McFarland & Company, 2009).

38. See *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).

39. Or, in the affectionate parody of genre fans, that *sensawunda*.

40. Ahmed Elbenni, "Christopher Nolan's Haunted Humanism," *Marginalia Review of Books*, Dec. 17, 2021, https://www.marginaliareviewofbooks.com/post/christopher-nolan-s-haunted-humanism.

41. Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 262.

42. Al-Qazwini cites Q50:6 as part of his formulation of *nazar* (looking) as a speculative act. His definition of ʿajab draws on Aristotelian epistemology and is part of a broader Islamic philosophical (*falsafa*) and theological (*kalam*) tradition of following Aristotle in identifying wonder (as a state of astonished ignorance) with the beginning of philosophy. "This tradition of linking ʿajab and ta'ajjub with the search for the reason behind a given phenomenon continues well past al-Qazwini with such later writers as al-Jurjani (d. 816/ 1413) and al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505)." See Travis Zadeh, "The Wiles of Creation: Philosophy, Fiction, and the ʿAjāʾib Tradition." *Middle Eastern Literatures* 13, no. 1 (2010): 21–48.

sight through the rational contemplation of wonders. It is not too farfetched to suggest, then, that the aesthetic of wonder at the heart of science fiction was, if not *the* aesthetic of the premodern Islamicate, at the very least one of its core sensibilities.[43] The wonder-producing process of cognitive defamiliarization at the center of Arabo-Islamic poetics anticipates that of the twentieth-century Russian Formalists, the techniques of which inspired Suvin's theorization of cognitive estrangement. Framed in this way, Islamic science fiction is not just possible, but in fact a necessary revival of a rich literary heritage.

Campbell's more provocative contention, even though he doesn't say it in so many words, is that there can be no Islamofuturism. Campbell argues that Arabic science fiction locates utopia in the past, and specifically the religious past (the Prophet's community in Medina), rather than in the future. This past-oriented utopianism dovetails with the discourse of decline in the Arab world, itself tied to the trauma of Western colonialism. Campbell's thesis seems corroborated by Michael Cooperson's observation that in Arabic time-travel fiction (a subgenre of Arabic sci-fi), characters don't travel to the future; rather, figures from the past travel to the present.[44] Campbell proposes that Islam's association of Time with the Divine ultimately makes the former blasphemous to master or exceed, especially given the location of the "divinely inspired model community" in the past. In the "Muslim world," then, there can be no imagining of an open-ended future.

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Campbell's contention is unconvincing. First, the "divinely inspired model community" of Medina does not and cannot provide a detailed sociopolitical blueprint for all subsequent Muslim societies and arguably never has; it stands as the ultimate ethico-political benchmark, not as the literal goal of any modern project of societal reform. Second, the seal of prophethood has historically not stopped Muslims from envisioning post-Prophetic moral and sociopolitical order. The death of the Medinan moment is a million births; like every utopian *paideia*, the "imagined instant of unified meaning" that is the Prophet's

43. We should also note that the fascination with the uncanny, fantastic, and marvelous Other was historically the province of romances (in the classical sense) in both the Arabo-Islamic and European literary traditions, and that the romance is widely recognized as a progenitor of science fiction.

44. Michael Cooperson, "Remembering the Future: Arabic Time-Travel Literature," *Edebiyat* (1998).

Medina—where Islam knew no divisions and Muslims stood as one—is never more than a memory. This memory, however, is "the template for a thousand real integrations of corpus, discourse, and commitment." The memory of Medina is the "genetic code" that births, organizes, and reproduces what we call "tradition." Every mutation in this genetic code rearranges creed and ritual in fresh constellations of meaning built around "the primordial, imaginary, true unity that occurred in a vanished instant of long ago."[45] In other words, the utopian moment of the past is never actually past—it sits outside history and thereby causes history, which is another way of saying that it echoes forward from the past and backwards from the future. The same is true of religion and its secular translations (Marxism, etc), which always remember a promised land, worldly or otherwise, at the end of time.

If there is a tension between the memory of Medina and the promised land of the eschaton, it is the tension between past and future that is constitutive of any intellectual tradition. It is the tension constitutive of Utopia, which always attempts to build the unimaginable future with the tools of the quite imaginable present. Our visions of the future inevitably look a bit like our experienced past, and they must if we are to find them legible. This is a generative and necessary tension, not a debilitating or avoidable one. It is the tension with which Aḥmad Rāʾif grappled when, in the 1960s, he scribbled *Al-buʿd al-khāmis* (*The Fifth Dimension*) on cigarette packs in an Egyptian prison, relating the story of an expedition of capitalists and communists that discovers a Medina on Mars. An elected monarch, bound by oath to obey "the laws of God," rules an egalitarian society where piety and technology facilitate one another. The expedition eventually converts to Martian Islam. Comparing themselves to the occupants of Noah's ark, they return to an Earth decimated by nuclear warfare to start humanity anew. As we always must, Rāʾif looked back to look ahead, imagining a Martian Medina enabling and enabled by the ethical application of future technology.

The utopian moment of the past is never actually past—it sits outside history and thereby causes history, which is another way of saying that it echoes forward from the past and backwards from the future.

45. Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 Term," *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 1 (1983): 4-69, https://doi.org/10.2307/1340787.

In principle, then, there need not be a contradiction between Islam and Islamofuturism. As a prescriptive statement, Campbell's argument against Islamofuturism is hardly decisive. As a description of the current state of the literary scene, however, his thesis is admittedly difficult to contest. Egypt's first sci-fi television series, *El-Nehaya* (2020), depicts the Arab world of the twenty-second century as a Muslim but bleak dystopia,[46] while even hopeful science fiction anthologies like **Iraq+100**, set a century after the Iraq invasion of 2003, write Islam as nightmare. Few titles in the small pool of Islamicate science fiction seem interested in contemplating specifically Islamic futures.[47] Hosam Elzembely, the founder of the Egyptian Society for Egyptian Science Fiction (ESESF), is representative—while Islam features in his own futures, it is not on the official agenda of the ESESF.[48]

Islamic science fiction has not fared much better beyond the Arab world. Malaysia has produced Muslim-themed sci-fi for decades, without breaking into the global mainstream. Its novels often seem derivative of Hollywood—not inherently a problem, but rather less compelling when they read as simple revenge fantasies. For example, Mohd Faizal Musa's **1511 Hijri**, set in the late twenty-first century, follows a war between the Muslim world and America-Israel.[49] An attempted American invasion of Mecca is pushed back by an army of cyborgs, biobots, and robots led by the pious general Syarifah Nusaybah, and the Muslim army eventually takes the White House. A more compelling approach is found in the Turkish novelist Ali Nar's **Space Farmers (1988)**. Set fifty years in the future, the astronaut Hasan II is selected for a mission by the Aleppo-based Space Commission of the Islamic Union. The Islamic Union reigns supreme, and Islamic republics stretch from Azerbaijan to the Philippines. The space program, created by the religious scholar and scientist Müsebbih, aims to explore other planets for their agricultural potential. Hasan II is joined by twenty-four other Muslim "space farmers" from Afghanistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Turkey and beyond. Their official language of communication is Arabic, with simultaneous translations into others, and they wear watches that track their prayer times.[50] The mission itself is explicitly compared to the *miʿrāj* of the Prophet—a modern-day ascent to heaven. *Space Farmers* is a fascinating experiment, recasting space exploration in the idiom of traditional Sufi concepts and vice versa, but it is not representative of the Turkish sci-fi scene. There, the reflexive association of secularism with science fiction remains alive and well, as it does in most Muslim-majority countries.

Given that science fiction has been predominantly an Anglo-American form (emphasis on American, then on British),[51] there have been attempts by Muslims to cultivate a specifically Islamic variant in the

46. Jamil Khader, "'The End': Anti-normalisation, Islamofuturism and the Erasure of Palestine," *Middle East Monitor*, May 15, 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200515-the-end-anti-normalisation-islamofuturism-and-the-erasure-of-palestine/.

47. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, for example, was a literary heavyweight and a pioneer of sci-fi in the Arab-Muslim world, but he had little interest in foregrounding specifically Muslim or ummatic futures.

48. In Elzembely's *The Planet of the Viruses: The First Dialogue with a Microscopic Civilization* (2001), for example, viruses from the planet S 60 arrive as refugees on Earth. After establishing contact with the scientist Salah al-Din, they convince the Union of Muslim States to send the starship al-Qadisiyah to liberate their planet from its oppressors.

49. His pen name is Faisal Tehrani.

50. Their main spaceship has ninety-nine sections, corresponding to the number of God's names.

51. The science fiction novels typically recognized as the very first are American: either Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895). One of the oldest, if not the oldest, sci-fi television series of all time is British (*Doctor Who*). George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, both British men, wrote some of the most famous science fiction novels of all time.

Anglosphere. Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, editor of the website *Islam and Science Fiction* and co-editor of *A Mosque Among the Stars* and *Islamicates Volume I: Anthology of Science Fiction Short Stories Inspired from Muslim Cultures*, launched the quarterly magazine *Takwin* in 2018 with a call for "original works of Sci-Fi in English with great characters, inspired by Islamic history, Islamic theology and Islamic cultures." Ahmad's efforts have met with only modest success. The two sci-fi anthologies he has edited are available online; their quality is uneven, which highlights the extent to which the problem is one of supply. The stories of the second anthology, for instance, were selected from a submission pool of just seventy-eight. Perhaps the only other notable example of Muslim-authored Islamic sci-fi in the Anglosphere comes from Ian Dallas, a Scottish convert to Islam who later became Abdulqadir al-Sufi and founder of the Murabitun movement. His first book and novel, ***The Book of Strangers* (1972)**, is technically a sci-fi novel, given that it is set in the near-future, and it delivers an acerbic satire of the secular Western university that doubles as a fundamental critique of modern knowledge. Ultimately, however, *The Book of Strangers* is more a Sufi initiation manual in fictional form (and a thinly-veiled autobiography) than a work of science fiction.

The total absence of Muslim authors from Anglo-American science fiction contrasts rather starkly with their rapidly expanding presence elsewhere. The vast majority, typically Arab and South Asian diaspora, write either contemporary romance and mystery[52] or fantasy,[53] with still others of a more (magical) realist bent.[54] Putting aside the usual disclaimers about the porousness of genre, the common thematic threads tying together these otherwise disparate works are the struggles of immigrant identity, the War on Terror, and Islamophobia. These authors write, one way or another, about their experiences as assimilated subjects of a dying empire (though few recognize the dying part, or the assimilated one). Occasional literary brilliance notwithstanding, their commitment to contemporary narrative places the terminus point of Islamic history in the twenty-first century, if not sooner. The many Muslim forays into historical fantasy have not helped, given the vaguely self-Orientalizing insistence on the aesthetics of *Aladdin* and the *Arabian Nights*.

When Muḥammad Quṭb wrote his preface to *The Fifth Dimension* in 1967, he described it not as a piece of utopian literature, but as a *ḥulm mujassam* (a concrete dream) that asks the reader to act for a better future. To cultivate dreams, he wrote, is one of the tasks of art. This, too, is how Mustafa Nazim framed his Ottoman utopian work, titled *Envisioning Progress and Islamic Civilization in a Dream* (1915).[55] These

52. See Ausma Zehanat Khan, Uzma Jalaluddin, S.K. Ali, Samira Ahmed, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Sara Jafari, and Soniah Kamal.

53. See S.A. Chakraborty, Saladin Ahmed, Hafsah Faizal, Karuna Riazi, and though not apparently Muslim himself, P. Djèlí Clark.

54. See Mohsin Hamid, Leila Aboulela, and G. Willow Wilson. Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012) merits special mention as a novel that straddles the line between sci-fi and fantasy, smashing together contemporary politics, quantum computing, and medieval mythology.

55. Nazim's story is set in a futuristic Istanbul during the twenty-third century, complete with skyscrapers and electric tramways. In his now-alternate history, a union of African and Asian states forms after the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan Wars.

dreams are now a scarcer resource than they should be. *Sahmad's Tale* (2009), an obscure sci-fi serial, describes a desert tribe that slowly loses the ability to dream. This seems a trivial plague at first, but with time the inability to inhabit anything but the forever now triggers a mass psychosis that culminates in a collective suicide-homicide. Unable to leave the desert, in any sense, the tribe ends there. Only its sole surviving member, Sahmad, would ever learn that his people had died for nothing more than the voracious appetite of a Lovecraftian horror that, sight unseen, fed on their dreams for sustenance.

This isn't an especially subtle allegory. Muslims have caught the Dream Plague, and the psychosis has gone viral. The question of Islamofuturism, then, is this: Why have Muslims stopped dreaming, and how can—and how should—they dream again?

Returning Utopia

If Muslims everywhere seem unable to dream the future, we must recognize that they don't suffer this dreamless condition alone. Anglo-American science fiction still floods the market today and is more mainstream than ever, but its golden age is well past. The occasional cultural juggernaut or bestseller aside,[56] the most influential sci-fi is now either adapted from the giants of yesteryear (see *Alien*, *Dune*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek*, even *Star Wars*),[57] imported from Japanese animanga,[58] or translated from the genre's new capital: China. Few science fiction titles of recent vintage match the originality or impact of Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, which received an English-language Netflix adaptation last year, never mind the work of lesser-known authors like Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia, and Hao Jinfang. The largest science fiction magazine in the world, measured by sheer readership, is China's *Science Fiction World*.

We can identify many reasons for the apparent decline of Anglo-American sci-fi, but the key one is probably loss of faith in the modern project. Science fiction initially emerged as the literary form of futurism, articulating a utopian optimism in technological salvation. Science fiction was, in other words, the literature of the religion of technology.[59] Its futures were extensions of the Industrial Revolution—skyscrapers, spaceships, space stations, robots. The secular religion of technology, after the horrors of the Second World War and the anxieties of the Atomic Age, itself secularized. Science fiction followed suit. Futurist fiction proceeded to lose its spiritual potency and social capital in much the same way as Christian literature before it. What replaced

56. Authors like Ted Chiang and Andy Weir have achieved widespread name recognition, and several of their works have received film adaptations. Sci-fi television since the 1990s has scored several classics: *The X-Files* (1993), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993), *Babylon 5* (1994), *Farscape* (1999), *Firefly* (2002), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), *LOST* (2004), *Black Mirror* (2011), *Rick & Morty* (2013), *The Expanse* (2015), *Westworld* (2016), *Dark* (2017), and most recently, *Severance* (2021), the crowning jewel of Apple's sustained investment in science fiction—certainly more than any other major player in the American culture industry. Other notable sci-fi series produced by Apple include *Foundation* (very loosely adapted from Isaac Asimov's monumental work of the same name), *Silo*, *Dark Matter*, and *For All Mankind* (an alternative history in which the space race against the Soviet Union didn't end, and continued through to the human settlement of Mars). In Hollywood, meanwhile, only superstar auteur directors have managed to produce sci-fi films with real box office success and mainstream cultural cache. I'm thinking especially of Christopher Nolan (*Inception, Interstellar, Tenet*), Denis Villeneuve (*Arrival, Blade Runner 2049, Dune*), James Cameron (*Terminator, Avatar*), and Alex Garland (*Ex Machina, Annihilation*).

57. The 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049* is a sequel to the 1982 *Blade Runner*, itself adapted from Isaac Asimov's 1986 classic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

58. Think mecha anime especially, such as the *Gundam* and *Evangelion* franchises. Rather tellingly, even mecha anime has been on a steep decline for decades, far from its late twentieth century peak. Meanwhile, nothing comparable to the prescient insight of *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) or *Paranoia Agent* (2004) has aired in recent times, nor even quality old-school sci-fi like *Planetes* (2003).

59. The term was coined by David Noble. He did not mean it as a metaphor—his argument is that for a time the "religion of technology" was as real and influential a religion as Christianity or Islam. See L. M. Sacasas, "Secularization Comes for the Religion of Technology: Or, How to Make Sense of Techno-optimist Manifestos, the Open Ai/Altman Affair, EA/E-acc Movements, and the General Sense of Cultural Stagnation," *The Convivial Society* (blog), February 23, 2024, https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/secularization-comes-for-the-religion.

it was a secularized science fiction better suited to a post-futurist age: cyberpunk.

The collapse of futurism into cyberpunk over the course of the twentieth century indexes a profound historical transition from industrial Fordism to postindustrial, post-Fordist neoliberal globalization. This shift corresponds to a shift from analog to virtual reality, modernity to postmodernity, and techno-optimism to technopessimism.[60] Cyberpunk, formally inaugurated as a genre by William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984, reckons with the "electronic redefinitions of time and space, genetic transformations of life and death," as already observed by Hal Foster in 1987; it is the science fiction of cybernetics and finance capitalism, defined by "the interface of biotechnologically enhanced human bodies [and] interactive information technology."[61] Think *RoboCop* (1987), *Akira* (1988), or *Snow Crash* (1992). Cyberpunk is the aesthetic articulation of the postmodern condition, where history has ended, corporations have won, and everything has dissolved into flows of information and iterations of image—and that's before considering the Anthropocene.

Though only one subgenre of science fiction, cyberpunk has in the past half-century nearly swallowed the genre whole. By the turn of the millennium, Anglo-American science fiction had already thrice considered even cyberpunk Muslim futures: George Alec Effinger's **The Budayeen Cycle (1986-1991)**,[62] John Courtenay Grimwood's **The Arabesk Trilogy (2001-2003)**,[63] and, to a lesser extent, Richard K. Morgan's **Altered Carbon (2002)**.[64] In the last of these, for example, mention is made of a predominantly Muslim planet called Sharya, where a fundamentalist group leads a *jihad* against the United States Interstellar Protectorate by using genetically enhanced bodies they call the "The Hand of God." In this future, Muslims (unlike Catholics) do not object to genetic engineering or virtual reality, although they do recode their "cortical stacks" (biologically transportable receptacles of consciousness) so as to prohibit religiously impermissible procedures, such as revival after death.

Fredric Jameson once suggested that cyberpunk be understood as science fiction's doomed counteroffensive against fantasy.[65] The latter has come to dominate genre fiction precisely because it preserves the premodern integrity of nature and organism, dreaming an escape from the real horror of the cyborg and posthuman, the organic computer and the mechanical man, the abolition of man and nature as such. Retro-futuristic sci-fi in the style of *Dune* and *Star Wars*—the former premised on a "Butlerian Jihad" that eliminates AI, the latter a galactic

60. For a fascinating account of this shift and radical right-wing attempts to reverse it, see Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Political Aesthetics of ISIS and Italian Futurism* (Lexington Books, 2018). Botz-Bornstein contends that groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda are the heirs of the Italian Futurists, and that indeed this may be true to a lesser extent of all the major Islamist movements of the 20th century. I will address some of these ideas in the sequel to this essay.

61. David Tomas, "The technophilic body: On technicity in William Gibson's cyborg culture," *New Formations* 8 (1989): 113-129.

62. Effinger's trilogy is set near the end of the 22nd century, when the West has fractured into feuding states and is in terminal decline, while the Arabo-Muslim world is on the rise. Our protagonist is a Maghrebi man named Audran, the son of an Algerian prostitute and Frenchman. He operates in a seedy and crime-infested Levantine ghetto called Budayeen. He is in a relationship with a trans woman and prostitute. Unlike most people, Audran refuses to surgically alter his body, take mind-altering drugs, or electronically rewire his brain.

63. Grimwood's trilogy explores an alternative history in which the First World War never escaped the Balkans. Now, in the twenty-first century, a liberalized Ottoman Empire still rules. Raf, a genetically enhanced detective, lives in Ottoman Alexandria. Across the trilogy, he investigates an escalating series of murders, all involving important political personalities.

64. *Altered Carbon* was adapted to a Netflix live-action series in 2018, which featured a Muslim character as a Bay City (future San Francisco) detective in the twenty-fourth century.

65. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (Verso Books, 2005), 68.

order of cleanly delineated robots and humans, pristine landscapes and industrial machinery—are as fantastic as the worlds of G.R.R Martin and Brandon Sanderson, and offer the same metaphysical comforts. It is small wonder that the only science fictions in which we still believe are either far future fantasies (as opposed to fantasies of the far future) or near-future dystopias.[66] *The Matrix* confirms our incarceration in a simulacrum of infinity; *Black Mirror* assures us that our technology will kill us, or worse; *2012* invites us to enjoy the spectacle of our collective annihilation.

It's not just that we've apostatized from the religion of technology that initially birthed the futurological imaginary, such that we now see birth itself an unconscionable evil in a futureless world; we also struggle to represent to ourselves a hyperreal world that has become nothing but representation.[67] If Chinese science fiction is currently more vital than its Western counterpart, it may be because China has bypassed postmodernity and its dead-end imaginary. Perhaps Chinese science fiction is simply the literature of Sinofuturism—an index of the geopolitical and industrial ascent of China,[68] one whose rapidity and intensity is re-igniting the space race that died with the fall of the Berlin Wall.[69] For the rest of us temporal stragglers, though, the techno-pessimism and imaginative stagnation of postmodernity remain. The Muslim inability to dream is not an isolated phenomenon, but a symptom of this broader malaise, this loss of dreamscape as life itself becomes surreal and dreamlike, a hallucination of the digital.

The good news for Islamofuturism is that after decades of withdrawal, withered by the comfortable venom of irony and apathy endemic to postmodern empire, the desire called Utopia is returning to the West.[70] More and more we hear of metamodernism, of solarpunk and hopepunk, and the New Sincerity.[71] It is this resuscitated appetite for utopian imagination which explains the rise of Islamic futurism as an explicit object of theorization this decade, in blogs and pet projects and academic journals,[72] a trend of which this very article is a part.[73] The capitalist realism of Mark Fisher, which in despair worshipped late capitalism as a god empowered by any and all resistance, loses more believers by the day, and with them the collective sense of "reflexive impotence" which secured the future of the neoliberal status quo grows ever less collective.[74] The bad news for Islamofuturism is that utopia cannot outrun its shadow. Wherever is utopia, so there is dystopia; they appear inseparably. Many dangerous men will mistake their dystopias for utopias.[75] In a world of dreamers, some will inevitably have nightmares.

66. A "far future fantasy" is a story that would typically belong to the fantasy genre simply relocated in time to the future—something like *Star Wars*. A "fantasy of the far future" is a genuine attempt to extrapolate the future from the present, in all its radical alterity.

67. Ahmed Elbenni, "Pixar, Nietzsche, and the End of LARP," *Muftah Magazine*, July 17, 2025, https://www.muftah.org/p/pixar-nietzsche-and-the-end-of-larp.

68. Kyle Chan, "In the Future China Will Be Dominant. The U.S. Will Be Irrelevant," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/19/opinion/china-us-trade-tariffs.html

69. Oberon Dixon-Luinenburg, "The New Space Race With China," *Palladium Magazine*, April 2, 2025, https://www.palladiummag.com/2025/03/28/the-new-space-race-with-china/.

70. Tasha Robinson, "Kim Stanley Robinson Interview: Can Science Fiction Save Us?," *Polygon*, October 20, 2020, https://www.polygon.com/2020/10/20/21525509/kim-stanley-robinson-interview-science-fiction-utopias/.

71. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, "Prospects of the Metamodern," *Muftah Magazine*, May 16, 2024, https://www.muftah.org/p/prospects-of-the-metamodern.

72. Hijabi Mentat, *Muslim Futurism* (blog), July 5, 2022. https://muslimfuturism450264352.wordpress.com/. See also "Home," *Islamic Futurism* (blog). n.d. https://islamicfuturism.com/. For scholarship on increasing Muslim interest in futurism, see Sara Bolghiran, and Maurits Berger. "Muslim(s), Future(s), Europe: A Cautious Exploration", *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 13, 3 (2024): 257-272, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-bja10112.

73. Of course, the British-Pakistani scholar Ziauddin Sardar has been writing about Islamic futurology for decades, and just this year was appointed director of the newly-founded International Institute of Futures Studies (IIFS) at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). I will engage Sardar's ideas in the sequel to this article.

74. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

75. Qur'an, 2:11-12.

> The bad news for Islamofuturism is that utopia cannot outrun its shadow. Wherever is utopia, so there is dystopia; they appear inseparably.

Kim Stanley Robinson is correct: "Science fiction is the realism of our time."[76] So-called realist fiction, with its fetish for psychological interiority and the domestic everyday, has never been more unrealistic.[77] It is unable to remotely reflect the reality of life in a world of human-chatbot romances and AI-powered genocide.[78] We already live in the "future," and the war of our time is between the science fictions of our tech overlords—between the transhuman gnosticism of Sam Altman,[79] the Nietzschean accelerationism of Marc Andreesen,[80] the spacefaring fascism of Peter Thiel and Elon Musk,[81] and so on. So tight has become the feedback loop between reality and science fiction that they are scarcely differentiable. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888) inspired early twentieth-century progressivism; the American libertarian movement sprung from the pages of Robert Heinlein and Ayn Rand;[82] Jeff Bezos first saw Amazon Alexa in *Star Trek*;[83] Elon Musk models himself on the works of Ian M. Banks;[84] and Mark Zuckerberg's meta-verse was born in the mind of Neal Stephenson (also the original location of Google Earth).[85] This is the memetic phenomenon that the cyberphilosopher-turned-reactionary Nick Land named "hyperstition," in which the mere dissemination of an idea brings about its existence.[86] Science fiction has always been hyperstitional, especially its utopian wing, and the simple reality is that the war of science fictions between Silicon Valley religionists will decide our collective destiny.[87] Islamo-futurism is simply the insistence that Muslims join the fight.

Towards Islamofuturism

For all the limitations of Anglo-American science fiction, it has for nearly a half-century been more willing to imagine the Islam of the future than Muslims themselves. *Dune* is the best and most famous example of sci-fi that takes Islam seriously as an evolving historical phenomenon and intellectual tradition, but it is not the only one. *Artemis*, for instance, is intrigued by the problem of Muslim prayer beyond Earth. Yasmine's devout father is an accomplished engineer, and unlike the other Muslim residents of Artemis, who simply face west when praying, he devises a contraption that allows him to more precisely approximate the *qibla*. The spatial and temporal demands

76. Richard Lea, "Science Fiction: The Realism of the 21st Century," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/07/science-fiction-realism-kim-stanley-robinson-alistair-reynolds-ann-leckie-interview. See also John Plotz, "The Realism of Our Times: Kim Stanley Robinson on How Science Fiction Works," Public Books, September 23, 2020, https://www.publicbooks.org/the-realism-of-our-times-kim-stanley-robinson-on-how-science-fiction-works/.

77. Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* is yet another vindication of the superior realism of science fiction; it captures the reality of our moment far better than the reams of contemporary Muslim romances saturating the market.

78. Josh Taylor, "AI Chatbots Are Becoming Popular Alternatives to Therapy. But They May Worsen Mental Health Crises, Experts Warn," *The Guardian*, August 3, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/aug/03/ai-chatbot-as-therapy-alternative-mental-health-crises-ntwnfb. See also Jaron Lanier, "Your A.I. Lover Will Change You," *The New Yorker*, March 22, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/your-ai-lover-will-change-you; and Michael Kwet, "How US Big Tech Supports Israel's AI-powered Genocide and Apartheid," *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/12/how-us-big-tech-supports-israels-ai-powered-genocide-and-apartheid

79. Alexander Beiner, "Get Ready for AI Religions: Sam Altman, Transhumanism and the Merge," *Kainos* (blog), October 2, 2024, https://beiner.substack.com/p/get-ready-for-ai-religions-sam-altman.

80. William Banks, "Marc Andreessen's 'Techno-Optimist Manifesto' Is Just Old-School Reactionary Elitism," *Jacobin*, January 9, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/01/marc-andreessen-techno-optimist-manifesto-reactionary-elitism-nietzsche-hayek-ideology.

81. Kyle Chayka, "Elon Musk, and How Techno-Fascism Has Come to America," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/techno-fascism-comes-to-america-elon-musk.

82. For Robert Heinlein, see *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*; for Ayn Rand, see *Atlas Shrugged*

of prayer are typically how the problem of extraterrestrial Islamic practice is framed in Anglo-American literary futures. Where is the *qibla* on the moon? How would Muslims deep in space make the pilgrimage to Mecca? How would a caliph rule an interstellar caliphate, given the astronomical distances and relativistic temporalities of space travel? These are the questions which power the entire plot of *The Mechanical Sky*.[88]

Still, these works typically treat the problem of off-world Islamic worship as more a world-building puzzle than a gateway to a history of the Muslim future. They limit the challenges to Islam—and the challenges in which Muslims themselves would be interested—to ones of morality and ritual. A truly Islamofuturist work would not only contemplate the future trajectory of Islam, but the trajectory of the future given the presence of Islam. The ambition of Islamofuturism should be the dreaming of worlds charismatic to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, that is, to humanity.

To do this, the Islamofuturist must have a deep understanding of how the modern world works. Properly utopian writing is not the flight of fantasy; it is immanent and contextual, grounded in a granular social, cultural, political, and economic understanding of the present historical situation. Only with insight into, say, the dynamics of demographic change or the ecologies of energy management—that is, only with an understanding of how complex systems emerge, evolve, and endure—can the Islamofuturist architect a fiction that at once reflects the present (by allegory) and transcends it. Elsewhere, I have described science fiction as working by a quantum temporality—a superposition in which it is at once shaped to the present and the not-yet-future, without ever collapsing the two.[89] Put in more precisely Islamic terms, it is the temporality of the *barzakh*: a liminal space between here and there, now and then, apart from and a part of both.

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(adapted into a trilogy of films between 2011 and 2014). Libertarianism is distinctive as a political movement for self-consciously locating its origins in science fiction. To the extent that "libertarian fiction" is a discrete literary genre, it is almost entirely science fiction; every year, the Libertarian Futurist Society honors the best libertarian science fiction with the Prometheus Award. The award's creator, Lester Neil Smith, is both a science fiction author and member of the Libertarian Party.

83. Travis M. Andrews and Roxanne Roberts, "The Love Affair Between Jeff Bezos and 'Star Trek,'" October 13, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2021/10/13/jeff-bezos-star-trek-william-shatner/.

84. Tobias Carroll, "Elon Musk Just Doesn't Understand the Sci-Fi Visions of Iain M. Banks," *Literary Hub*, May 19, 2025, https://lithub.com/elon-musk-just-doesnt-understand-the-sci-fi-visions-of-iain-m-banks/. Elon Musk's sci-fi inspirations don't stop there—his Neurolink is inspired by William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and the Grok feature on X.com takes its name from Martian slang in Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

85. Kara Swisher, "Sway Interview: He Conceived of the Metaverse in the '90s. He's Unimpressed with Mark Zuckerberg's," *The New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/opinion/sway-kara-swisher-neal-stephenson.html

86. Delphi Carstens, "'Hyperstition: An Introduction," *Orphan Drift Archive*. January 25, 2020. https://www.orphandriftarchive.com/articles/hyperstition-an-introduction/.

87. Charles Stross, "Tech Billionaires Need to Stop Trying to Make the Science Fiction They Grew up on Real," *Scientific American*, March 10, 2025, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/tech-billionaires-need-to-stop-trying-to-make-the-science-fiction-they-grew-up-on-real/.

88. These questions are also explored in *Fool's War*, *Pitch Black*, and the *Ender's Game* series.

89. Ahmed Elbenni, "Who Believes in Gulf Futurism?" *E-International Relations*, April 29, 2025. https://www.e-ir.info/2025/04/29/who-believes-in-gulf-futurism/.

Frank Herbert wrote of the ʿālam al-mithāl. Like so much else in *Dune*, this is a concept reworked from the Islamic intellectual tradition, where it is sometimes called ʿālam al-khayāl. Elaborated by Muslim mystics from Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) to Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762), this "imaginal realm" is not imaginary, but rather is a bridge—a *barzakh*—between the material world of bodies and the immaterial world of spirits. It is this intermediate realm which translates intangible truths from the higher spiritual and Divine planes into the dreams and visions received by the human soul (and indeed, the likes of Walī Allāh held that prophecy begins as a dream). One need not believe in the literal existence of ʿālam al-khayāl to recognize it is where al-khayāl al-ʿilmī operates. The dreams of science fiction originate in the *barzakh*, trickling down from on high and bubbling up from below. They emerge from the nexus of otherworldly directive and empirical experience.

The futures imagined by Islamofuturism, then, are both sober and radical. Sober, because they are futures rooted in an appreciation for the constraints of history; radical, because they insist on the vertigo of historical rupture. Forget the false difference of so much Anglo-American sci-fi, which simply populates the postwar liberal order with aliens and calls it the future. An inversion of the present, such that there is simply a Muslim rather than European Union or an Islamic rather than American empire, would not be nearly strange enough.[90] A future in which Muslims are simply "free" to "be themselves," in which social relations are simply more "moral," would not be strange enough either. What is needed is an imaginative leap that is as difficult for us today as conceiving of subatomic physics would have been for the Vikings. To believe that such an imaginative leap is not only possible, but plannable—this is the sober radicalism of the Islamofuturist. It is optimism, but not one powered by delusional hope or misplaced certainty. It is an optimism that stems, rather, from the confidence that one has honestly reckoned with the world. The best planners are those who expect failure, just as the most certain observers are those most comfortable with uncertainty. The Islamofuturist is nothing if not uncertain.[91] The camel is tied, and the path set.[92]

Optimism endangers less than its inverse. Dan Simmons, whom we've already met, is a case in point. The fate he enjoined upon the Muslims of the future in *Hyperion* was grim, but even it proved much kinder than those he would go on to conjure in his post-9/11 fiction, when his register shifted decisively from Islam as memory to Islam as nightmare. In *Flashback* (2011), set in 2032, the New Global Islamic Caliphate builds a mosque at Ground Zero, turns September 11 into a holiday, and drops

90. In Hosam Elzembely's *The Half-Humans* (2001), for example, the Union of Muslim States (modeled on the European Union) has helped terraform Mars and Venus, and is now leading the first manned mission to Saturn's moon Titan, where hybrid, half-human creatures are discovered.

91. Ahmed Elbenni, "The Islamic Uncertainty Principle," *Thinkbites*. February 7, 2021. https://thinkbites.org/2021/02/07/the-islamic-uncertainty-principle/.

92. Anas ibn Mālik reported: A man said, "O Messenger of Allah, should I tie my camel and trust in Allah, or should I leave her untied and trust in Allah?" The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Tie her and trust in Allah." See *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2517.

11 nuclear bombs on Israel in a "Second Holocaust." The survivors hide in a defunct Six Flags in Texas, awaiting their imminent extermination. The U.S. government is unwilling to protect them from fear of the Caliphate. It's all very Houellebecq, before Houellebecq (*Submission* was published in 2015).[93] Even before *Flashback*, though, in *Olympos* (2005), we learn that in the far future, a millennium from now, a global Islamic Caliphate lets loose an army of Jew-killing robots on Jerusalem. Simmons believes his recurrent fantasies of Jewish genocide are simple historical realism: "What eternal human verity—other than sex or intrigue—will survive the erosive winds of a full millenium?...The one constant thread between today and a thousand years from now will be that someone, somewhere, will be planning to kill the Jews."[94] Simmons is not alone in raising antisemitism to an ontology, a fact, a restless bloodlust seeded in the DNA of humanity. Shaul Magid has appropriately described this faith in antisemitic posterity as "Judeopessimism."[95] Pessimism is always another word for victimhood, and no one is at once more mawkish and more monstrous than the ontological victim, the forever victim, the only-victim. The future wrought by this victim is Gaza, again and always.

Islamofuturism is not merely utopian; it is anti-anti-utopian. ... Anti-anti-utopia is the direct rebuke of anti-future politics; it is the insistence on the value, even necessity, of dreaming tomorrows.

There must be no Islamopessimism. It is anti-Islamofuturism by another name. There isn't much Islamofuturism today, but anti-Islamofuturism there is aplenty. Recall *The Dream Hotel*. Is there a better depiction of the anti-Islamofuturism of our moment? Are we not all Sara, preemptively censoring our dreams lest we be accused of thoughtcrime and arrested, tried, imprisoned, executed, genocided for the threat of our futures? Are we not Sara, professional archivists afraid to risk a glance beyond the glass boxes of our civilizational museums? Is this not why we seek refuge in various impossibles? The idea of the impossible, in all its varieties—this is anti-Islamofuturism. The anti-Islamofuturists refuse to plant the sapling in the face of apocalypse, when the face of apocalypse is why they must.[96] Utopia is returning, but it is only returning against the inertia of institutionalized anti-utopianism. Islamofuturism is necessarily opposed to anti-Islamofuturism.

93. Houellebecq and Simmons are both predated by Thomas Kratman. I refer the reader to the following summary of *Caliphate* (2008), found on the book jacket, and proceed without further comment: "In the 22nd century European deathbed demographics have turned the continent over to the more fertile Moslems....Such Christians as remain are relegated to *dhimmitude*, a form of second class citizen-ship. They are denied arms, denied civil rights, denied a voice, and specially taxed via the Koranic yizya. Their sons are taken as conscripted soldiers while their daughters are subject to the depredations of the continent's new masters. In that world, Petra, a German girl sold into prostitution as a slave at the age of nine to pay her family's yizya, dreams of escape. Unlike most girls of the day, Petra can read. And in her only real possession, her grandmother's diary, a diary detailing the fall of European civilization, Petra has learned of a magic place across the sea: America. But it will take more than magic to free Petra and Europe from their bonds; it will take guns, superior technology, and a reborn spirit of freedom."

94. Dan Simmons, *Worlds Enough and Time: Five Tales of Speculative Fiction* (EOS, 2002), 133. A short story in this collection, titled "The Ninth of Av" in reference to the Jewish day of mourning Tisha B'Av, follows the 9,114 "old-style" humans remaining on Earth post-apocalypse (as opposed to the millions of posthumans, all female, which inhabit floating orbital rings in Earth's skies). All old-style humans are descended from Jews. The rare gene that protected their Jewish ancestors from "rubicon," the virus that devastated humanity, also rendered them sterile. In other words, the old-style humans are the last Jews ever, already without a future even before the story's final twist. "What was the name of the Jews' enemy?" one character asks at one point. "Their enemies were legion," replies another, but Arabs and Nazis are singled out for special mention. "Ninth of Av" concludes in Jerusalem (where the Dome of the Rock and Masjid al-Aqsa have long been rubble), with the implied slaughter of all the old-style humans: "The sound, when it came, was not an actual noise—certainly not speech or sound as Pinchas or Petra had ever encountered it—but more a modulated rumble that moved through their bodies and echoed in their skulls via some terrible bone con-duction...the noise struck Petra and Pinchas to their knees, their hands covering their ears in a useless attempt to block out the roaring words, on their knees and

In other words, Islamofuturism is not merely utopian; it is anti-anti-utopian. Per Jameson, the opposite of utopia is not dystopia, which simply considers futures gone wrong; the opposite of utopia is anti-utopia, which argues that any attempt to make things better will make things worse. George Orwell's *1984* is dystopia; Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is anti-utopia.[97] Anti-anti-utopia is the direct rebuke of anti-future politics; it is the insistence on the value, even necessity, of dreaming tomorrows. It is this anti-anti-utopianism that is the basis of Islamofuturism as an ethical practice—a means of expanding and sustaining the moral and social imagination. Paradoxically, anti-anti-utopianism is by necessity sometimes anti-utopian, as can only be the case when faced with the nightmares dreamed by an Altman or Thiel.

Optimism, then, but not of the facile kind. Unearned optimism is cruel and deadly, but so is unearned pessimism. Dystopia as an aesthetic mode is invalidated only by its hegemony. The first half of Sūrat al-ʿAṣr is the dystopian prerequisite for the utopian second half, and it models the ideal relationship between the two. Islamofuturism has room for both. Nor, again, should utopia itself be a post-historical non-place, total and complete, without mud or hurt or danger. Indeed, the utopian qualities of a utopia are clearest in the kind of problems that beset it and the kind of solutions it is able to deliver in response. Utopia may be a city or a planet or an island, or it may be a set of relations and conditions. Utopia is not paradise; it is a radical other, with better problems and better solutions.

The value of science fiction lies not in the future it envisions, but in the act of envisioning the future. It keeps us from forgetting how to dream, which means it keeps us from depoliticizing ourselves.

Islamofuturism is the ideal ideational laboratory, a safe place for troubleshooting problems and experimenting with solutions. After enough iterations, this laboratory might synthesize something genuinely new. When Malaysia sent its first astronaut to space in 2007, it assembled a council of 150 legal scholars and scientists to address the challenges of offworld Islamic practice. The resulting *fatwa*, designed to anticipate the needs of future Muslim astronauts, is arguably a work of Islamofuturism.[98] It was an inherently optimistic endeavor—expectant of a spacefaring Islam in need of a

screaming in pain…. 'Itbah al-Yahud!'" (This is supposed to be Arabic for "Kill the Jews!"). It is a quintessential work of Judeopessimism. The duopoly of *Ilium/Olympos* grew out of this short story.

95. Shaul Magid, "Judeopessimism: Anti-semitism, History, and Critical Race Theory," *Harvard Theological Review* 117, no. 2 (2024): 368–90. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816024000130.

96. I am referencing a well-known Prophetic hadith with a special resonance in the era of the Anthropocene: "Even if the Resurrection were established upon one of you while he has in his hand a sapling, let him plant it." See *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 12902.

97. How challenging, no, that the latter has proven more prescient than the former? We today inhabit the era of what Eric Davis calls the "pharmacological self." The dominant metaphor of online life, which is to say life, is the pill. We're Neo in *The Matrix*, except that we're not simply choosing between the white and red pill; the pharmacological buffet grows by the day, such that we now have our choice of blue pills, red pills, black pills, white pills, and whatever other versions of soma are still to make their debut in the marketplace of ideologies.

98. From this angle, we can also identify ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī's *Umm al-Qura* (1900), a fictionalized proposal for an annual ummatic convention in Mecca, as a very early work of Islamic science fiction.

spacefaring *fiqh*, and in its consideration of hypotheticals and counterfactuals, almost a work of fiction. This is but a starting point, for a fully-realized Islamofuturism would go well beyond the realm of the jurisprudential.

Per Ian Campbell, the Arab critic ʿIṣām Bahā once contended that "science fiction engages in *nubuʾa* [divination] which not only has a mystical dimension but is also pronounced almost exactly like *nubuwa*, divine prophethood—and the time for this sort of prophecy is long in the past."[99] Such a view confuses projection with prediction. Science fiction does not claim to predict the future—indeed, no artistic enterprise ages worse precisely because its futures are so historically and culturally situated. The past is a graveyard of defunct futures. No, the value of science fiction lies not in the future it envisions, but *in the act of envisioning the future*. It keeps us from forgetting how to dream, which means it keeps us from depoliticizing ourselves. The dreaming subject is the liminal medium by which other worlds are translated to this one. The dreaming subject alone maintains humanity's link with *ʿālam al-mithāl*, and thereby ensures the renewal of revelation. The end of prophethood is not the end of the prophetic, any more than it was the end of the oneiric.

This essay has made the case for Islamofuturism as a more specific kind of Islamic science fiction. If, again, Utopia is the subversively political wing of science fiction, then Islamofuturism is the subversively political wing of Islamic science fiction. What this essay has not done is more rigorously theorize what Islamofuturism would or should look like. What does it mean, precisely, to place Islam at "the center of future possibility"? Is Islamofuturism an aesthetic, a poetics, a genre, an orientation, a social movement, or a political project? (It's all of the above). I have spoken of Islamofuturism primarily in terms of the novel and, to a lesser extent, the film— but does it take other forms, beyond the literary and cinematic? Can Islamofuturism be articulated via the so-called classical arts of Islamic civilization (poetry, music, epics, calligraphy, architecture, fashion, ceramics, rugs, miniature paintings, etc), or the more contemporary artforms birthed by the postmodern and digital age? What relationship, if any, does Islamofuturism have with other futurisms, from Italian Futurism to Afrofuturism? Does there exist, say, a Christian futurism upon (or even against) which Islamofuturism could be modeled, from the Space Trilogy of C.S. Lewis to the sci-fi subgenre of "Jesuits in Space"?[100] Does an already-existing phenomenon in the Muslim world—like Gulf futurism—offer any lessons or warnings for Islamofuturism?[101] Perhaps one can even critique as

99. Campbell, *Arabic Science Fiction*, 86-87.

100. Grayson Clary, "Why Are There so Many Catholics in Science Fiction?," *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/why-are-there-so-many-catholics-in-science-fiction/414990/.

101. Ahmed Elbenni, "Who Believes in Gulf Futurism?" *E-International Relations*, April 29, 2025, https://www.e-ir.info/2025/04/29/who-believes-in-gulf-futurism/.

reductively materialistic my conception of Islamofuturism as a species of science fiction rather than speculative fiction, insofar as the latter arguably offers more resources for imagining alternative modernities and representing metaphysical realities than the austere "realism" of the former (as suggested, for example, by the experiments of Anglophone Pakistani speculative fiction).[102] Where are the generic boundaries of Islamofuturism, really? Can a book of poetry like Muhammad Iqbal's *Javid Nama*, a mystical ascent of the soul recast in terms of the modern cosmological imaginary and addressed to future generations, be considered a work of Islamofuturism?

All of this, and we haven't yet begun contemplating the interminable challenges that attend any intersection of art and politics. How would an Islamofuturist project manage the tension between what sings and what works—between poetry and program? What would an Islamofuturist movement, rather than an Islamofuturist work, look like? Is there one Islamofuturism, or many—per "country," per "culture," per person? How would its expression negotiate local cultures, histories, and sensibilities, on one hand, and the ideal of a unified global *umma* on the other? What role would Islamic ways of knowing, from *fiqh* to *tafsīr* to *taṣṣawuf*, play in such a project, and how would their differences and disagreements be navigated?

These questions, and still others, will be the toil of a future essay. Here, in this first installment, I have simply sought to present Islamo-futurism as a necessary mood—whimsical, empirical, prophetic—and, of course, as a dream. To dream a world order radically like and unlike our own: this is the political meaning of the Alien, the Other, the ʿajīb, the gharīb, towards which science fiction as a form is always tending. Islamofuturism is the utopian realization of science fiction as a literature of estrangement, that is, a literature of *istighrāb*. Islamo-futurism is the art of the *ghurabāʾ*, for whom this world is always a strange and unfamiliar becoming, and who to this world are always strange and unfamiliar becomings.[103]

102. See Aroosa Kanwal and Asma Mansoor, "Pakistani Speculative Fiction: Origins, Contestations, Horizons." *International Review of Social Sciences* 9 no. 3 (2021): 244-251.

103. As recorded in a well-known Prophetic tradition: "Islam began as something strange and will go back to being strange—so glad tidings to the strangers [*ghurabāʾ*]." See *Sunan Ibn Majah* 3986.