

Islamic traditions in film have been portrayed in various ways and used to show the diversity of the Islamic faith. Muslims in the contemporary world are engaged with a variety of issues, and these issues are similar to what Muslims have dealt with in their history. Films can often build upon topics discussed in the Quran and Islamic intellectual history. This paper will analyze how different films have displayed various aspects of Islamic traditions and the intersection of these traditions in the contemporary world.

The Taqwacores

Michael Muhammad Knight's novel *The Taqwacores* (Eyad Zahra, US 2010) received a film adaptation that captured the novel's eccentric characters and the dilemmas the characters faced. The book is focused on a fictional set of characters. Still, the characters expressed several debates and dilemmas among Muslims today and how Islam is practiced in the contemporary world. The film focuses around a college student, Yusef, who wants to live with other Muslims after living in secular dorms for a year. Yusef comes from a more traditional Islamic background, and the film displays some of the conflicts that emerge from his more conventional view of Islam and that of his roommates.

Yusef meets Rabeya, a woman who wears a traditional full-body covering or *burka* but holds some views that wouldn't be considered "traditional" by many Islamic scholars. When they first meet, Yusef tells Rabeya he has to leave to go to class, to which she responds, "Oh right, right, every time a man and a woman are alone, Shaytan is the third present". This reflects a statement from the prophet Muhammad when he is reported to have said, "'Whenever a man is alone with a woman, the devil makes a third.'"¹

At one point in the film, Yusef engages in an argument with Rabeya due to her crossing out an *ayat* or verse of the Quran, Surah 4:34. The controversial *ayat* reads, "Husbands should take

¹ Robson 2024

good care of their wives, with bounties, God has given to some more than others, and with that, they spend out of their own money. Righteous wives are devout and guard what God would have them guard in their husband's absence. If you fear high-handedness from your wives, remind them of the teachings of God, then ignore them in bed and then hit them".² Rabeya explains that she has read many different commentaries on the verse along with progressive scholars like Asma Barlas, but in her own view, she feels better about the Quran if she disregards this verse. Barlas, when discussing this verse, has argued that "a restrictive and oppressive exegesis results from the failure to historicize the Quran's teachings and to read the Quran as a whole."³

This scene displays some of the debates in Islamic history on this *ayat* and the ethical dilemmas and questions it has created for Muslims. Yusef explained, "There's a wide variety of interpretations as to what that means" Despite the vast array of meanings and even progressive thinkers, Rabeya decided to take an idiosyncratic position and ignore that verse. Jehangir was another roommate who dressed as a traditional punk rocker, styled his hair in a red mohawk, and wore a spike-covered jacket. The film displays him as an avid musician who loves to play the guitar, smoke cigarettes, and drink alcohol. There have been various views on the status of smoking tobacco in Islam. The 17th-century Shafi'i scholar Al-Shaykh Ali ibn Yahya Al-Zayadi contended that smoking was permitted because it caused no damage to the mind.⁴ Likewise, the 17th-century Egyptian scholar Al-Ojhuri argued that since tobacco was not mind-altering, it was allowed to be consumed. Other 17th-century scholars, like Abdul-Rabi Sulayman Al-Orari, came to the conclusion that smoking tobacco should be unlawful and asked to pass a *fatwa* or ruling to support the stance, which was fulfilled by the grand jurist of Constantinople. Despite the prevalence of smoking in many Islamic countries, it is seen as *haram* or forbidden by many

² Haleem 2008, 54

³ Barlas 2019, 196

⁴ Batran 2003, 54

Islamic scholars.⁵ Jehangir's character also exemplifies many of the struggles that modern Muslims encounter. He describes kissing a sexually inexperienced girl and being distraught by being asked a strange question. He thus describes his struggle between him and maintaining proper sexual conduct as his "jihad". Despite *jihad* carrying a militant meaning in much of the classical exegetical literature, many modern Muslims understand jihad in a different sense.⁶

For Jehangir, the struggle for him was to control his sexual urges and live a good life, as he is portrayed as struggling with these desires in the film. Muslims in the contemporary world have used jihad in this sense to convey a spiritual or personal struggle. For example, Linda Sarsour is a political activist and women's rights leader. She made a speech in 2017 in which she said, "I hope that when we stand up to those who oppress our communities, Allah accepts from us that as a form of jihad".⁷ Sarsour was making these comments in response to the election of former President Donald Trump, who, because of his election, believed that there were "white supremacists and Islamophobes reigning in the White House".⁸ Sarsour interpreted *jihad* as a struggle against what she perceived as an unjust ruler in the United States. Fasiq, another character in the punk rock scene, leads a Friday prayer or *Salat al-Jumu'ah* on the topic of marijuana. He presents a talk to the house when he discusses Surah 15:19-20 which states, "As for the earth, We spread it out and placed upon it firm mountains, and caused everything to grow there in perfect balance. And we have provided sustenance for you and those of whom you are not the providers."⁹ He then argues, "things from nature are thus a blessing from Allah", and thus, for him, smoking marijuana was not seen as contradicting the tenets of Islam. The

⁵ Saber, 2024

⁶ Khadduri 1955, 56-61

⁷ Abrams, 2017

⁸ Abrams 2017

⁹ Haleem 2008, 162-163

14th-century scholars Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and his student Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti composed a work of Quranic exegesis called *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* and in their commentary on this *ayat*, they state, "And We have made for you therein means of livelihood such as fruits and grains and we have made this for you those for whom you do not provide such as servants crawling creatures and cattle; it is God Who provides for them".¹⁰For these scholars the means of livelihood referred to in this verse primarily relates to food to be consumed and not substances to be consumed for enjoyment. However they both seem to emphasize that things from nature are a blessing from Allah. The Sufi rockers' rationalization that marijuana was a blessing from Allah represents many of the struggles that contemporary Muslims are engaged with.

Khartoum

In Islamic intellectual history, there have been a range of views on a future messianic and political figure known as the *Mahdi*. The traditions form the basis for Islamic beliefs about the characteristics and traits of the future *Mahdi*. Early Sunni sources reveal that the *Mahdi* would be descended from the family of the prophet and would become the leader of an Islamic state in the future.¹¹There have been many who have claimed to be the *Mahdi* and others who have ascribed that title to others. Sulayman ibn 'Abd al-Malik was the *Mahdi* predicted by several priests and rabbis, according to the poet al-Farazdaq, and he praised him for leading the corrupt to faith in Islam. At the same time, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was the *Mahdi* who would fill the earth with justice and was believed to be predicted in the biblical book of Daniel according to several interpreters.¹²

The Shi'ite held two views of the *Mahdi*. One view was similar to the Sunni view, which contended that the *Mahdi* must be descended from the prophet and that he would be required to

¹⁰ Hamza 2021

¹¹ Zeki 2002, 654

¹² Crone 2004, 76

gain power and follow the prophet's *sunnah*. Another view claimed that the *Mahdi* was dead in hiding, and at the end of time, he would come back from the dead and deliver justice to the earth, inaugurating the end of times. ¹³The Sunnis and Shi'ites differ about whether belief in the *Mahdi* is an essential Islamic belief; the Shi'ites believe that it is, while the Sunnis do not. The Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi contends that the *Mahdi* would be more of a future spiritual leader. Arabi writes, "The Mahdi fills the world with justice and equity because, in our view, true spiritual knowledge necessarily and inevitably implies action". ¹⁴

In the 1880s, Sudan was under the control of an Egyptian administration. Thus, in 1881, the emergence of a leader known as Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah came to prominence. He proclaimed himself the *Mahdi*, and he believed it was his mission to bring justice and equity to a world full of oppression and evil. ¹⁵The *Mahdi* conquered several towns in Sudan and eventually conquered Khartoum in 1885. ¹⁶Abdallah died shortly after the conquest of Khartoum and was succeeded by Khalifa Abdallahi, who established a brief period known as the *Mahdiyya*, which was a state influenced by the ideas of the *Mahdi*. ¹⁷ The Mahdiyya's brief rule came to an end when the British general Lord Kitchener defeated them and established joint rule between Egypt and Britain over Sudan. ¹⁸The 1966 film *Khartoum* (Basil Dearden & Eliot Elisofon, EG & GB 1966) portrays the life and actions of the *Mahdi* and British general Charles Gordon. This film reflects some of the views of the *Mahdi* in Islamic intellectual history. Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah is played by Laurence Olivier, who is portrayed as a charismatic and influential leader in Sudan. At the start of the film, the forces of the *Mahdi* are victorious over a force of Egyptian

¹³ Zeki 2002, 656-657

¹⁴ Chittick & Morris 2002, 76

¹⁵ Holt & Daly, 76

¹⁶ Cook 2007, 93

¹⁷ Johnson 2003, 6

¹⁸ Zink 2018, 21

soldiers, and they defeat General William Hicks and capture the weapons of the Egyptian troops. After the soldiers' defeat, the *Mahdi* gave a speech inundated with Islamic eschatology. He declares, "I am the Mahdi, the expected one, and I am sprung from the forehead of the family of my lord Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him" to his followers after the first victory over General Hicks.

The British general Gordon, also known as "Gordon Pasha," is praised by the people of Sudan who oppose the Mahdi. He had previously served as the Governor General of Khartoum, working to quell local revolts and fight the slave trade before returning to Britain in 1880.¹⁹

Khartoum shows how Gordon was sent to Khartoum to evacuate civilians and soldiers without much support from the British. Gordon is seen discussing the Bible with one of his servants, Khaleel, and this scene shows an aspect of Islamic traditions regarding Jesus. When talking about the Bible, Khaleel says, "This Jesus Christ, I don't understand this man; he was clear almost like the great lord Muhummad that when a man is struck on one cheek, he must turn the other". Khaleel is thus seen to be taking this statement from Jesus literally, and he is seen hitting his cheek. The Quran does mention the previous scriptures in Surah 5:46, "Then in the footsteps of the prophets, We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah revealed before him. And We gave him the Gospel containing guidance and light and confirming what was revealed in the Torah—a guide and a lesson to the God-fearing".²⁰

A dominant theme in Islamic theology is that the New Testament's scriptures have been changed and corrupted, and the original scriptures given to Moses and Jesus were purely Islamic scriptures. In describing the gospels, the medieval Muslim theologian Abd al-Jabbar wrote, "Then in the footsteps of the prophets, We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah

¹⁹ Shepherd 2017

²⁰ Haleem 2008, 72

revealed before him. And We gave him the Gospel containing guidance and light and confirming what was revealed in the Torah—a guide and a lesson to the God-fearing".²¹ While Muslims revere Jesus, Islamic traditions about him differ from the Christian tradition, and Khaleel was not familiar with this story about Jesus's pacifistic message. This story appears in the famous “Sermon on the Mount”, and it is missing in the Quran. Thus, Khaleel's surprise at the different teachings of Jesus found in the Bible that he read recently is not surprising.

Gordon arranges to meet with the *Mahdi* alone with only Khaleel, and the *Mahdi* refers to Gordon as "the great one". In their meeting, Gordon offers to give the *Mahdi* a robe from China that he obtained years prior when he was the lead soldier for the emperor of China. The *Mahdi* refuses to accept the gift and exclaims, "When the emperor of China ceases to be an unbeliever and accepts me as the Mahdi, then I will be happy to receive such a gift". Additionally, how the *Mahdi* describes Gordon as an "infidel" in their meeting reflects some of the views of classical Islamic jurists related to times of war. As a religious leader, the *Mahdi* reflects how classical jurists held that war with religious purposes was a just war and secular wars were to be avoided.²² Despite his confrontational attitude with Gordon in their first meeting, their relationship shows a positive development towards the end of the film. The *Mahdi* asks Gordon to speak to him alone and offers him a hostage, who delivers a letter to Gordon. Gordon told the hostage, "If I'm not back by dawn, you will be shot".

In a scene with the *Mahdi*, he offers Gordon safe passage out of Khartoum. Additionally, he says he is instructed to attack Khartoum, a dream from the prophet Muhammad. The *Mahdi* tells Gordon that no British army will support him if he attacks Khartoum. Despite his apocalyptic visions, he describes himself as "a man of mercy" when he asks Gordon to leave, and

²¹ Reynolds 2023, 2752

²² Khadduri 1955, 68-71

he expresses disgust at the end of the film when Gordon's head is paraded on spikes. This is in contradiction to his order for Gordon's life to be spared.

The 13th Warrior

The film *The 13th Warrior* (John McTiernan, CA 1999) combines themes from Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* and a fictionalized version of the traveller Ibn Faḍlān. The historical Ibn Faḍlān recounted many of his travels and recounted his experiences with the travelling band of Vikings that he called the *ar-Rus*. Arab geographers and historians used the term *ar-Rus* to describe the Vikings they met in Russia and nearby regions.²³ His descriptions varied between admiration for their physique—"I had never seen bodies as perfect as theirs"—and disgust at "they do not even wash their hands after eating."²⁴ Arab geographers and historians in Spain and Europe employed the term *al-madjus*, and this was due to an erroneous brief stating that the Vikings were fire-worshippers. These writers were labelling them as Zoroastrians. The writer Ibn Sa'id al-Maghribi wrote, "nothing seems more important to them than fire for the cold in their lands is severe."²⁵ Likewise, the thirteenth-century historian al-Waṭwāṭ claimed that "their religion is of the magi".²⁶

Antonio Banderas, playing the role of Ibn Faḍlān, is banished from his home in medieval Baghdad at the start of the film. Faḍlān encounters a group of traveling Vikings who are having a festival to honor the life of their recently deceased king. The Vikings helped him and his close friend Melchisidek by repelling the Tatar invaders away from the travelers. At the festivals, the Vikings cremate their deceased king by setting the ship on fire and honoring an ode to the Viking afterlife of *Valhalla*. Ibn Faḍlān appears distressed when the ship and the king's wife are set on

²³ Ferguson 2010, 246

²⁴ Montgomery 2017, 32-33

²⁵ Ferguson 2010, 246

²⁶ *Ibid*, 246

fire as he is not familiar with the customs of the Vikings. Throughout the film, he addresses the Vikings as "Northmen". Faḍlān is randomly chosen as "The 13th Warrior" and departs from his father's friend to join the traveling Vikings. At first, he is out of place among the Vikings as there is a language barrier, and he can't understand them. Later, during a campfire scene, he learns the Vikings' language and almost engages in a fistfight with one of the warriors after an exchange of insults. Shortly after, he is asked by Bulliwylf, one of the warriors, if he can draw sounds and speak them. Ibn Faḍlān replies by writing, "There is only one God, and Muhammad is his prophet", and telling them in Arabic in the sand. Thus, he can translate different languages into Arabic and is displayed as an analytic and intelligent companion to the Viking warriors. The warriors continue to a village repeatedly attacked by a mysterious bear-like people known as the "Wendols".

Faḍlān is at first hesitant about his role as he exclaims "I'm not a warrior" before waiting for the attack of the Wendols. The Viking warrior, Herger, reassures him by saying "very soon you will be". Faḍlān becomes more accustomed to his role as a warrior as the film progresses, as he creates a shorter sword from his longer sword. This act causes one of the Vikings to say, "You give an Arab a sword, and he makes a knife". He later becomes an essential part of the group, as he devises a plan to hunt the bear-like Wendols as they intentionally strike the leader of the Wendols in a cave and kill the mother of the Wendols. After the Wendols's leader's death, the Vikings prepare for retaliation from the Wendols. The film displayed several villagers describing this as a "fire serpent" or a method the Wendol used to attack the villagers with fire torches so it resembled a serpent. Before the final attack, the Vikings recite a prayer, "Lo, there do I see my father. Lo, there do I see my mother, sisters, and brothers. Lo, there do I see the line of my people back to the beginning. Lo, they do call me. They bid me take my place among them in the

halls of Valhalla, where the brave may live forever". Faḍlān is seen reciting the Viking prayer with the Vikings and thus demonstrates a conundrum. Does Islam allow Muslims to respect and even recite rituals that are outside of the traditional faith, as in this case, the battle prayer of the Vikings? This traditional prayer speaks of *Valhalla*, the Viking concept of where the brave who die in battle will reside with the God Odin. ²⁷Faḍlān could be coming close to what is called a *murtadd* in Islamic law, or an apostate, by professing belief in a afterlife that is not *Jannah*. This scene is reminiscent of a saying of the prophet, who is recorded as saying, "He who imitates any people is considered to be one of them." ²⁸

The Wendols are eventually defeated, and Faḍlān is seen leaving for his homeland. The Vikings thus exclaim, "We shall make prayers for your safe passage", to which Faḍlān replies with "Prayers to who"? Faḍlān also concludes the film by narrating, "Praise be to Allah, the merciful and compassionate," so he retained his traditional Islamic faith despite uttering a non-Islamic prayer. He ends the film by writing, "May his blessing be on Pagan men who loved other gods". This ending quote is reminiscent of the various traditions of Islam and how it relates to other religions. While many Islamic jurists have proclaimed that Islam is the only path to salvation, others have argued that Allah will grant blessing and salvation even to unbelievers. Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya, despite being known for composing works sharply criticizing Jews and Christians, believed that punishment in hellfire was therapeutic and its purpose was purification and not punishment.²⁹ Some commentators still held the view that non-Muslims would not escape punishment, but their punishments would be less severe. The Quran commentator al-Baywadi noted that "perhaps the good deed of the unbeliever will bring

²⁷ Gaiman 2020, 292

²⁸ Robson, 2020

²⁹ Reynolds 2020, 148

about the lessening of punishment".³⁰ Additionally, the Quran states, "So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it".³¹ Ibn Kathir, in his *tafsir* of the Quran, commented on this verse by saying, "So whoever does good equal to the weight of a speck of dust shall see it, and whoever does evil equal to the weight of the speck of dust shall see it"³²

Robin Hood

The tale of Robin Hood has received various film and television adaptations in film history. The 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Kevin Reynolds, EN, FR 1991) contains a Moorish Muslim character that represents a civilized, intelligent and sophisticated character and also reflects many Islamic practices and how Muslims relate to non-Muslims. This characterization dramatically differs from how the jailors at the start of the film in Jerusalem are portrayed. The film begins with a man accused of stealing bread, being amputated and a jailor exclaiming, "Show them the courage of Allah". Kevin Costner, playing Robin Hood, claims to have stolen the bread and then can kill the jailor and then frees the Moor named Azeem, played by Morgan Freeman. Azeem thus offers a pledge to Robin Hood and tells him that he will stay with him because he saved his life. Robin Hood offers to free Azeem, but he replies, "no man controls my destiny". A deterministic view like this can be reflected in the Quran. Surah 9:51 says, "Say only what God has decreed will happen to us".³³ At a campfire scene, one of Robin Hood's fellow thieves describes Azeem as a "savage." Robin Hood responds, "He's a savage no more than you and I," and he is offered a drink. Azeem replies, " With great regret, I must decline. Allah forbids it," thus reflecting the traditional Islamic doctrine of alcohol being *haram*.

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³⁰ Reynolds 2020, 141

³¹ Haleem 2008, 431

³² Al-Muba 2000, 5633

³³ Haleem 2008, 121

³⁴ Siddiqui, 2023

Throughout the film, Azeem is called a "barbarian" at different times. However, he is shown to possess excellent scientific knowledge. He delivers a baby to a woman when she is about to give birth, and he can count when other of Robin Hood's thieves cannot do so. He also possesses a telescope to watch out for the sheriff's men, but Robin Hood cannot use the telescope. At one part of the film, a child asks him, "Did God paint you?" he responds, "Allah loves wondrous variety". Such a response is a possible reflection of Surah 30:22, which reads, "And one of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. Surely in this are signs for those of sound knowledge".³⁵The character Azeem is an example that the scholar Eric Martone has called an "integrated Muslim". Before this motif, in many Robin Hood films and novels, an image of a "treacherous Saracen" existed. This is the mysterious figure with a strange religion that no one can trust and is seen as an outsider. Joachim Stocqueler's literary work of the 1840s may contain the earliest references to this "treacherous Saracen"; however, it is hard to know due to some scholars' disputes on the literary identity of Muslim characters.³⁶The "integrated Muslim" motif is present in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and the film series *Robin of Sherwood*. (HTV, GB 1984-1986) In *Robin of Sherwood*, the "integrated Muslim" is a man named Nasir who, similar to Azeem, came from the holy land and was brought to England. Nasir is put in service of the Englishman Simon de Belleme and serves as his henchman before Robin can free him and break the mind control spell he was under. Nasir, similar to Azeem, thus decides to pledge his service to Robin and becomes a part of Robin's group of thieves. He is depicted in the film series as a skilled fighter who makes decisions along with the other thieves.

³⁵ Haleem 2008, 258

³⁶ Martone 2009, 54-55

Thus, Azeem and Nasir have integrated into a foreign society and are not seen as "the treacherous Saracen". For Azeem, his integration into Robin Hood's band of thieves is also a paradigmatic example of effective Christian-Muslim relations. Some critics of Islam alleged that Christians and Muslims can't be allowed to have fruitful friendships with one another due to the Quran. They base this assertion on Surah 5:51, which says, "You who believe do not take Jews and Christians as allies".³⁷The issue lies with some translations that have translated "allies" as "friends," but many scholars contend this verse was related to the nascent Islamic community. Seyyid Hossein Nasr explains, "political boundaries are established between these communities, as Muslims are warned not to take Jews and Christians as protectors to the exclusion of members of the Muslim religious community."³⁸Therefore, this verse was related to Christians and Jews who were enemies of the first Muslims. This same theme appears in Surah 60:9, which reads, "But God forbids you to take as allies those who have fought against you for your faith".³⁹Azeem regularly refers to Robin as "Christian," but he respects his faith and the faith of others throughout the film.

Films have thus displayed the various traditions of Islam in different historical periods. Despite the differences in periods, films can show the diverse traditions of Islam and how Islam has been practised by others from different cultures. Films thus allow for the rich diversity of the Islamic tradition to be demonstrated fully.

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³⁷ Vargo 2010

³⁸ Nasr 2017, 217

³⁹ Haleem 2008, 369

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