

1 The *poiesis* imperative

In my view, the need to promote a formative bond between ethos and poiesis has never been so dire as it is in contemporary iterations of Muslim thought. (Moosa, 2005, 270)

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the scholarship of Ebrahim Moosa, a major theoretician behind progressive Muslim thought, and employ it as a theoretical lens through which to describe an important feature of progressive Muslim thought here termed the '*poiesis* imperative'. In this regard, I characterize the main contours and general themes which underpin Moosa's scholarship, especially in relation to how they have contributed to the emergence and development of progressive Muslim thought. Because of Moosa's important contribution to theorizing many of the fundamental aspects of progressive Muslim thought, this chapter will, it is hoped, serve as an optimal introduction to most of the other major aspects of progressive Muslim thought expounded on in the rest of the chapters. Moosa is agnostic about the moniker 'progressive'. While he does not reject the appellation, he prefers to describe himself as a 'critical traditionalist' for reasons discussed below.

In the introductory part of this book, I have described progressive Muslim thought's *weltanschauung* and its major themes, values, and objectives. This chapter's heuristic centres around the concept of '*poiesis* imperative' which features prominently in contemporary progressive Muslim thought in general and in the thought of one of its main theoreticians, Ebrahim Moosa, in particular. For Moosa this imperative is a call or, better still, a demand for contemporary Muslims, and progressive Muslims in particular, to engage in a critical, creative, and imaginative thought, *poiesis*, when engaging with the Islamic tradition (*turath*). Moosa's '*poiesis* imperative' is, therefore, a process which he differently describes as "the act of poetic creation", "the creativity of an existential threshold position (*dihliz*) that enables one to engage in creative and critical thinking", "the craft of imagination and inventive making and creating", "discursive bricolage", "the art of doing and

reflecting”, “the creative and imaginative remaking/production of tradition”, etc. (Moosa, 2005, 32, 34, 39, 42, 265, 270). In short, *poiesis* for Moosa means to claim a certain agency and, in this context, this agency ought to be acknowledged and recognized in the construction and deployment of religious thought.

Being characteristic of progressive Muslim thought, the ‘*poiesis* imperative’ or the imperative of agency, is the lynchpin that anchors our discussion of the main themes discussed in the book in general and in relation to this chapter in particular. For the purposes of this chapter, this aims to be achieved through a discussion of the following themes pertaining to progressive Muslim thought: epistemological/methodological openness; the modernity-postmodernity divide; the nature of history, time, and progress; the concept of tradition and its content; the nature of Qur’an-Sunna hermeneutics; critique of a variety of contemporary Muslim thought currents; and, finally, Moosa’s scholarship on Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE) as paragon of *poiesis* in classical Islam and his relevance for contemporary progressive Muslim thought.

Epistemological/methodological openness/fluidity

One of the delineating features of progressive Muslim thought (in relation to other contemporary Muslim schools of thought) is its openness to and/or willingness to incorporate epistemological and methodological pluralism in conceptualizing and interpreting the *turath*. This openness is best exemplified by the willingness of the proponents of progressive Muslim thought, consistent with the spirit of *poiesis*, to critically and creatively incorporate theoretical insights from the contemporary humanities- and social sciences-based bodies of knowledge indigenous to the (late) modern episteme for the purposes of engaging and (re)interpreting the Islamic tradition (Duderija, 2011, 130–136).

Importantly, Moosa believes that in doing so progressive Muslims are reviving the best aspects of the *turath*. In other words, Moosa considers this epistemological and methodological openness to be emblematic of the most noteworthy aspects of what the *turath* had and still has to offer. In this context, Moosa (2005) writes:

When studying the ancients, I am struck by the epistemic openness and the liberty with which many thinkers and authors energetically engaged with a wide variety of knowledge traditions. They did so without allowing the provenance of knowledge to be a decisive veto factor. Hence, a good portion of early Muslim intellectuals were open to the spirit of knowledge, whether it came from Greek, Indian, Biblical, or other philosophical traditions.

(25–26)

Indeed, Moosa describes his acclaimed book on *Ghazali and Poetics of Imagination* as a “dialogical conversation that takes place in the heterogeneous disciplines that draw inspiration from non-secular and non-Western contexts as well as from knowledge traditions that are broadly conceived of as Western humanities” (Moosa, 2005, 35). In the same spirit, Moosa characterizes his own thinking (inspired by his long-time interlocutor Al-Ghazali as discussed below) as ‘dialogical’ in the Bakhtinian sense, a knowledge that knows no borders and is not constrained by any intellectual or cultural/civilizational genealogies (Moosa, 2005, 51).¹ Moosa’s epistemological and methodological fluidity is also exemplified in his statement that “[p]rudence requires that Muslims look at their own past while concurrently exploring experiences and resources of knowledge in other cultures and traditions” (Moosa, 2011, 113). Moreover, Moosa repeatedly emphasizes the need for contemporary Muslims to engage in a perpetual quest of seeking ‘emergent knowledges’ that would assist contemporary Muslims in finding creative solutions and new possibilities to their problems (Moosa in Safi, 2007). In another context, Moosa talks about a necessity to rethink or reconstruct Islam in the spirit of openness in terms of “transcendence of ideas, religious values and worldviews” (Moosa, 1999, 28).

However, Moosa’s argument for the need for epistemological and methodological fluidity and openness in contemporary Muslim thought is not framed in terms of a Panglossian, unreflective, and unproblematic view of the (late) modernity episteme that simply privileges the present over the past. On the contrary, epistemological and methodological openness has a certain purpose to serve. For Moosa, this purpose is ultimately “to advance an emancipatory and humane discursive tradition, one to which the Muslim intellectual legacy can make a meaningful contribution” (Moosa, 2005, 35). In this context, Moosa has talked about the need to develop Islamic humanism (Moosa, 2011).

The discussion on Moosa’s approach to the nature of and attitude to knowledge and the modern episteme brings us to the next point of characterizing his thought, namely in relation to the debates on the modernity-postmodernity divide in the study of religion that are representative of progressive Muslim thought in general.

Modernist-postmodernist divide in the study of religion

The discussions centring on the modernist-postmodernist divide in the study of religion are still in full force (Hendel, 2014). Progressive Muslim thought in many ways approximates a convergence between what Benhabib (1992) terms weak postmodernism and enlightened modernist thought as discussed by Hendel (2014).² Hendel (2014), in actual fact, forms the view that Benhabib’s concept of weak version of postmodernism is indistinguishable from what he terms ‘enlightened modernism’. Both accept the critique of reason leveled by the proponents of ‘strong postmodernism’ such as Foucault and

Derrida who argue that reason is impure, embedded in culture and society, vested in power and interest, embodied, historically variable, sensuous, fallible, and practically engaged. Importantly, however, for the proponents of the weak version of postmodernism, the epistemological consequences of this view are not as ‘grave’ as argued by the strong postmodernists. In this context, Hendel argues that despite being fallible, this corrigible reason is nevertheless not only sufficient but indispensable for the formation of ethical thought. The corrigible reason is also crucial in meeting the demands of everyday rationality humans require in order to perform their everyday practices, something that the embrace of the strong postmodernists’ view of reason is, in theory, incapable of doing (Hendel, 2014, 423–434).

Moosa’s thought also addresses this philosophical divide between modernism and postmodernism in relation to the study of religion. Upon a careful analysis of his writings, his views on reason and revelation can best be described as being in accordance with weak postmodernism/enlightened modernism described above. This is, for example, evident in the following passage in which we find Moosa’s (2001/2002) critique of the principles underpinning the Age of Enlightenment:

In the past, reason was seen as universal, held by all to articulate a set of rational truths in order to distinguish reason from tradition and emotion. . . . Now, reason is a contested terrain, no longer universally and uniformly accepted as self-evident. We recognize that reason is socially constructed and that it exists and is embodied in practices and discourses. In the past one understood the self to be exclusively unique and transcendent. In fact, the postmodern critique of the self suggests that it too is a product of language and discourse. The correspondence between language and reality once exerted a strong influence on our thinking and imagination of the truth. In fact, it was a hallmark of early notions of modernity. Today there is a healthy skepticism of what passes for the truth.

(40)

Elsewhere, Moosa (2003b) states that:

Given that modernity, according to the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, is itself a work in progress, it is not surprising that we have come to recognize many of the errors of Enlightenment thinking and modernity as legions of scholars engaged in post-modernism have pointed out. In some ways, post-modernism can be seen as a corrective as well as a continuation of modernity.

(117)

On a general level, Moosa (1994, 63–64) also speaks favorably of this weak version of the postmodern episteme. Indeed, Johnston (2007, 187) describes

Moosa as “a progressive working within postmodernist epistemology”. However, Moosa also questions the radical deconstructionist projects associated with strong versions of postmodernism. For example, writing in the context of how to critically interrogate and deconstruct the canonical Islamic tradition, Moosa (2005, 265; 2011, 113) warns against the imitation of certain types of postmodernism which have the tendency to deconstruct for the sake of deconstruction as if deconstruction was an end in itself. Elsewhere, Moosa (2005, 185) has critiqued strong postmodernism’s view of reason.

Hence Moosa’s thought, in relation to the modernity-postmodernity divide, is very much representative of progressive Muslim thought in general (Duderija, 2011, 117–139).

Concept of history, time, and progress

Moosa’s work has been at the forefront of contemporary Muslim discussions on the relationship between the past and its problematic relationship with the present that neither simplistically or in a reductionist manner privileges or imposes the former onto the latter, nor vice versa. Moosa, in this context, argues that for contemporary Muslims to resist ‘homogenization’ of both past and present, sensitive tools and theoretical applications are required. To this effect Moosa has employed, among others, the idea that history occurs *through* and not *in* time as argued by Reinhart Koselleck, and as represented in Walter Benjamin’s critique of historicism and T.S. Elliot’s idea of the past’s presence in the present (Moosa, 2003b, 124–125), all of which are considered as essential tools for understanding and writing about history as a kind of open-ended, creative, and contested process. To demonstrate the kind of theoretical relationship between past and present that contemporary Muslims should adopt, Moosa remains true to his ‘*poiesis* imperative’ and defers to the work of Boaventura De Sousa Santos. Moosa (2005) summarizes the conceptual relationship between the past and the present in the thought of De Sousa Santos as follows:

The past is, however, made present, not as a ready-made solution, as in reactionary subjectivity, but rather as a creative problem susceptible of opening up new possibilities.

(265)

Another aspect of theorizing the normative nature of the past-present relationship refers to the idea of progress. The concept of progress in progressive Muslim thought is not conceptualized in its Hegelian-Fukoyamian teleological view of history/time in a sense of inevitability of change (Duderija, 2011, 117). In this context Moosa’s theorizing of the concept of progress as “fortuitous, rather than as inevitable”, in which ‘progress’ is framed in the realm of the ‘possibility of change’ and potential advances in knowledge without

making the idea of progress contingent on the teleological view of philosophy of history, is fundamental to progressive Muslims' *weltanschauung* (Moosa, 2007, 119, 123). Moosa refers to the works of J. Herder, T.S. Elliot, and W. Benjamin as those who have recognized the fundamentalist, deterministic, and totalitarian nature of the 'inevitability of progress' thesis with which he disagrees and which he considers a major threat to humanity (Moosa, 2007). Moosa also laments that many (Muslim) modernist thinkers unfortunately have purchased into the 'inevitability of progress' thesis without carefully thinking through its implications (Moosa, 2007, 119). In this context Moosa (2007) avers:

A great responsibility rests on the shoulders of progressives to revive tradition in all its vibrancy, intelligibility, and diversity. One might have to avoid the error made by some Christian and Jewish thinkers and schools of thought who uncritically bought into the inevitability thesis of progress.

(119)

Theorizing on the nature of history and its relationship with the present (and the future) is a constant theme in Moosa's writings, and has been used for a number of purposes.³ One important function of developing a proper understanding of (Islamic) history as conceived by Moosa is its function to act as a remedy to various types of fundamentalisms and authoritarianisms that plague contemporary Muslim thought. In this context Moosa (2003b) writes:

. . . what threatens the inscrutable authority of authoritarians is history. Any serious and close study of the Muslim tradition will unmistakably vaporize claims of uniformity and absolute obedience to authorities. To their utter disbelief, protagonists of authoritarianism will discover that Muslim societies in the past, as in the present, have always been diverse, differentiated, dynamic, but also in a state of contestation as all organic human social formations naturally are. The false utopias of ideal and perfect Muslim societies in the past, widely touted by ideologues of authoritarianism, will not survive the scrutiny of history.

(117)

Furthermore, Moosa forms the view that one hallmark of various types of authoritarianisms and fundamentalisms in (contemporary) Muslim thought is their excessive and unjustifiable veneration of the past that is couched in abundantly apologetic and defensive terms while the present is viewed as "despised and fallen" (Moosa, 2003b, 123). For Moosa, such a *weltanschauung* is indicative of loss of confidence by contemporary Muslims in engaging in *poiesis* that is sorely needed to find solutions to contemporary Muslim needs and subjectivities (Moosa, 2003b, 122).

Moosa sees the actual, productive role of history vis-à-vis the present in its critical ability to historicize the traditions but without becoming “a prisoner to historicism” (2003a, 30). Another positive role a proper understanding of history (and its relationship with the present and the future) for contemporary Muslims is to view history as a kind of social experiment laboratory from which they can learn without “resurrecting the solutions from the past and without making the present entirely contingent on it” (2003a, 31). The centrality of gaining a proper insight into the workings of history, its nature, and its function is also conceptualized as a tool in developing (a) healthy self-narrative(s) regarding theorizing of continuity and change in the context of belonging to a religious tradition. In this context, Moosa (2003a) states:

critical to any meaningful self-understanding is the need to provide a narrative as to why things had changed and to get an accurate picture of how ideas, practices, and beliefs were implemented in the past; more importantly, it helps us understand how two identical ideas applied in different epochs may actually have opposite outcomes.

(31)

Hence, Moosa’s views on the nature and function of history as an open, creative process that emphasizes human agency is consistent with his intellectual and scholarly commitment to the ‘*poiesis imperative*’. Questions surrounding the role of history and the nature of the relationship between past and the need for engendering meaningful narratives take us to examining the very idea of tradition (*turath*) and its nature, and it is to this aspect of Moosa’s thought that we turn next.

The concept of tradition (*turath*) and its content

Elsewhere it has been argued that in progressive Muslim thought the concept of tradition is viewed as very complex and multi-faceted. Tradition is seen as consisting of a number of competing interpretations, a contested terrain in which numerous actors and agents with different motives, political agendas, interpretational approaches, and objectives are present. Tradition, according to this view, is like a rich and dense tapestry consisting of many interlacing or, at times, parallel running threads all of which, put together, give the tapestry its unique design. The progressive Muslim thought, furthermore, considers the concept of the Islamic tradition as a result of a fluid exchange of ideas and acknowledges a wide spectrum of interpretations that are inherent to it and acknowledges the element of power and politics which shape it (Duderija, 2011, 131–132). Furthermore, the question of authenticity (*asala*) of the Islamic tradition in progressive Muslim thought is not conceptualized in terms of a literal clinging to the heritage

but through a creative, historical, critical comprehension of it, through transcending it in a new process of creation; through letting the past

remain past so that it may not compete with the present and the future; and through a new assimilation of it from the perspectives of the present and the future.

(Boulatta, 1990, 16)

Hence, the concept of Islamic authenticity for progressive Muslims is very much in harmony with the task of *poiesis*. The view of tradition as an open-ended, creative process is fully endorsed and epitomized by the work of Moosa, who argues that the Muslim intellectual tradition ought not be seen as static or inert but as a process with its own rhythms of continuity and discontinuity which has the capacity to recalibrate itself “to the imperatives of ethical, moral, and spiritual integrity” (Moosa, 2005, 269).

Furthermore, the idea of the dynamic nature of the concept of tradition that Moosa subscribes to is evident in his view that tradition is always “subject to vicissitudes of human history, something that is subject to interrogation, correction, and advancement”. Likewise, Moosa also warns against conceptualizing tradition as a “pre-fabricated design of being”. In order to be faithful to tradition, continues Moosa, one needs simultaneously “to imitate, to question, and to interpret”. Tradition, for Moosa, is something that one neither passively inherits and internalizes nor is it “a detailed archeological map that unlocks knowledge of the past”. For Moosa the boundaries of belonging to a tradition are dependent upon a historical context in which one finds her/himself. Tradition for Moosa is, therefore, tightly linked to one’s subjectivity, something that determines one’s sense of belonging, a state of being, and a state of mind (Moosa, 2007, 123–124). In Moosa’s words it is “the self-intelligibility of the past in the present” and a “continuously evolving and mutating intelligibility or state of being” (Moosa, 2007, 124). Therefore, tradition includes but also goes beyond texts, history, practice, or methodology of interpretation.

Moosa also describes tradition as a contested, constructed, discursive, and embodied practice. Drawing upon the work of medieval scholar Ibn Jahiz (d.868 CE), Edward Said (and his idea of contra-punctual readings in particular) (Moosa, 2007, 124), Talal Asad, and Michel Foucault, Moosa (2005, 54–55) highlights the contested and constructed nature of tradition and the power dynamics that are inherent to it. Furthermore, in concert with the insights from Pierre Bourdieu and Alasdair MacIntyre, Moosa considers that one aspect of the concept of tradition can be best conceptualized in terms of embodied practices learnt by the body because the Islamic tradition is practice-oriented and, like the body, does not just memorize the past but “enacts the past, bringing it back to life” (Moosa, 2005, 53–54).

In accordance with his ‘*poiesis* imperative’ *credo*, Moosa considers that the only viable approach to the concept of tradition is to maintain a level of healthy criticism towards it with the emphasis on creative thought and the absolute requirement to interpret it in the light of contemporary Muslim subjectivities and challenges (Moosa, 2007, 116). Moosa also strongly criticizes the traditionalists’ view of the tradition who “confuse the

knowledge of the tradition with tradition itself” reducing it to a set of memories which “under trying and negative circumstances” give rise to “self-pitying nostalgia” and the retrogressive *weltanschauung* alluded to above (Moosa, 2007, 124).⁴ Furthermore, Moosa laments that those Muslims who champion the Islamic ‘authenticity’ slogan too often engage in reductionist practices by reifying the tradition to the state of either laws or metaphysics. This view of the concept of tradition is, in turn, often articulated in “formulaic phrases and repetitive practices” which strip the tradition of any elements of criticality, contestation, or conflict. Such a view of tradition, for Moosa, *at best* produces sustainable knowledge that compromises its creativity while *at worst* engenders the most aberrant forms of authoritarianism (Moosa, 2005, 61).

The question of the *content* of tradition is for Moosa possibly one of the most complex and contentious issues contemporary Muslims face and this is nowhere better demonstrated but in his hesitation to define the *content* of the ‘progressive’ Muslim tradition (Moosa, 2003b; 2007). In this context he warns that “[t]hose who think that ‘progressive’ Islam is a ready-made ideology or an off-the-shelf creed, movement, or pack of doctrines” or “a carefully calibrated theory or interpretation of Muslim law, theology, ethics, and politics” (Moosa, 2007, 115) are wrong. Instead, he argues that when it comes to the question of the content of tradition, we should resist our impulses to reify it once and for all, because such a development would transform it into an institution and therefore an ‘orthodoxy’ with ideological interests that would stifle its dynamism. Another reason why Moosa is reluctant to be prescriptive in terms of the content of progressive Muslim thought is that the process of institutionalization could potentially make it vulnerable to various abuses of power, something that has happened to other Muslim movements both in the past and in the present.

In this context Moosa (2007) opines:

What would certainly signal the death-knell for progressive Muslim thought is if there were to emerge a single voice, a unifying institution, an exclusive guild or association of scholars and practitioners who monopolized the epithet “progressive” and dictated its operations, debated its values and determined its content, like an orthodoxy. If so, then the ship of progressive Islam leaves port badly listing.

(116)

An additional reason why Moosa eschews defining, in precise terms, what constitutes a progressive Muslim tradition is that this fluidity in definition mirrors the diversity (in terms of kind of methodologies applied, ethics, and views of history)⁵ of those who are more or less associated or identified as ‘progressives’ to make it more malleable to accommodate disagreement and difference. Importantly, for Moosa, this approach to the question of the content of tradition ensures that progressive Muslim thought, in terms of its

interpretation of the normative sacred texts and practice, can be highly attuned to context, indeed be context-driven, and informed by people's historical experiences, thus ensuring a "robust diversity and pluralism" (Moosa, 2007, 127).

Therefore, Moosa's views on the nature of the concept of tradition are entirely consistent with the spirit behind the '*poiesis imperative*' principle.

The importance of contextualist Islamic hermeneutics

Elsewhere it has been argued that there are strong intellectual and hermeneutical affinities between European romantic thinkers and contemporary progressive Muslim thinkers in relation to their 'secular' approach to sacred texts. This understanding of the concept of 'secular' is not linked to its contemporary overly political meaning but is best thought of as referring to an acute sensitivity to historical context, a type of 'comprehensive contextualization'⁶ and humanization of sacred and religious books and writings, signifying what Wright describes as a discursive move from "theology to cultural and anthropological hermeneutics" (Duderija, 2011, 126; Wright, 2008, 50–51).

Progressive Muslim thought places a strong emphasis on this 'secularization' of sacred text, the Qur'an (and the traditional canon), without questioning its ontologically divine status. One of the fundamental premises of the progressive Muslim approach to the interpretation of the Islamic tradition is the idea that normative textual sources operate at a human epistemological level and, hence, are by default subject to humanly constructed interpretational processes. In other words, progressive Muslim thought emphasizes the role of human agency in the essentially humanly constructed and mediated processes of reading/understanding history and sacred texts. This interpretational awareness of progressive Muslim thought translates itself in the importance and emphasis given by it to examining the epistemological and methodological dimensions underlying and determining the validity and soundness of various inherited interpretational models of the overall Islamic teachings (Duderija, 2011). Bamyeh (2008) aptly notes this phenomenon when discussing the thought of what we here term progressive Muslim thought as *hermeneutic* Islam. In many ways this *hermeneutic* Islam is a continuation of the classical Islamic tradition. However, unlike the classical Islamic tradition which can be described as semi-contextualist,⁷ progressive Muslim hermeneutic is *highly* contextually driven (Duderija, 2011, 139–167). In addition, in the overall process of meaning derivation when interpreting the sacred texts, it emphasizes the role of the interpreter (or more specifically the *imaginaire* of the community of interpreters) and the historical context encoded in the revelation itself (Duderija, 2011).

Moosa has addressed the issue of the importance of developing novel Islamic hermeneutics that can resonate with the subjectivities and lived experiences of contemporary Muslims in many of his writings (Moosa, 1995;

Moosa, 2001/2002). The elements of this hermeneutic are very much in line with that of the progressive Muslims' Qur'an-Sunna hermeneutic briefly outlined above.⁸

The first element in Moosa's Qur'an-Sunna hermeneutic pertains to the correct understanding of the *nature* of revelation vis-à-vis its community of listeners, which, according to Moosa, is per-formative, dialogical, and dialectic. For Moosa, if this nature of revelation is not fully recognized and applied hermeneutically, it can lead to what he refers to as a 'deification of the text' or 'text fundamentalism'. In this context Moosa (2003b) warns:

From the misplaced pre-occupation with the sovereignty of the text *sans* community of the text, it is but a small step to the deification of the text that unfortunately already occurs. On further reflection, it will become apparent that the Qur'an itself prefigures a community of listeners and participants: without this audience it ceases to be the Qur'an. In all this a fundamental presumption persists: the Qur'an as revelation requires an audience of listeners and speakers. In other words, a community is integral to it being a revelation. If one does not take that audience and community seriously, implicitly one has not taken revelation seriously. This audience is not a passive audience, but an interactive audience that engages with a per-formative revelation.

(124)

Similarly, in the context of commenting on the work of a noted classical legal theorist Abu Ishaq Al-Shatibi (d.1388) and his legal hermeneutic, Moosa (2003a) argues that the renowned legal theorist understood fully that comprehending the mentality and 'civilizational progress' and worldview of the Qur'an's most immediate community of listeners is crucial to its proper understanding:

when the Qur'an invokes and makes references to ethics, historical events, geographical and meteorological phenomena, and when it highlights a repertoire of astrology and healing, then in all these matters the yardstick of understanding must take the cultural and historical experience of the unlettered Arab community of the seventh century as the benchmark. Otherwise, we will be guilty of attributing meanings to events and ideas that were not intended in the first place . . . His (i.e. Al Shatibi's) point is that the shari'a is organic to the Arab culture of the time, and not a code from Mars.

(30–31)

Elsewhere, in a similar vein, Moosa (2003b, 124–125) opines that without that voice of the communities of interpretation engaged with their scripture, it would be nearly impossible to make sense of the revelation itself.

Furthermore, Moosa believes that all knowledge is interpretive. Drawing upon the work of Bakhtin and his idea of the heteroglot nature of all speech, Moosa argues that when interpreting Islamic normative texts, context must be given priority over (plain) meaning, as the original meaning of the text/speech can never be fully recovered by means of repetition/recitation. Moosa bemoans further that the interpretational implications for the heteroglossian nature of speech (and revelation) have been grossly overlooked in (contemporary) Muslim thought (Moosa, 2005, 102–103).

Another element of Moosa's Islamic hermeneutics proper stresses the importance of the social context and (political) history of the Qur'an in its proper interpretation. This hermeneutical approach is described as "more inclined to give history and the *per-formative* role of the revelation a greater place in an interpretive schema" rather than to that of the text or even its individual reader (Moosa, 2003b, 125). This is because, for Moosa (2001/2002, 2), "[h]istory, embodiment, linguistics, time and space are all alluded to in canonical texts". Therefore, in Moosa's view, stressing hermeneutically the radical difference between the revelatory, classical, and contemporary Muslim experiences and subjectivities (in terms of culture, history, and reality) is another important factor to be considered when searching for an adequate contemporary Islamic hermeneutics.

Generally speaking, Moosa envisages the process of developing a contemporary Qur'an-Sunna hermeneutic employed for the purpose of arguing for a systematic rethinking of classical Islamic hermeneutics and the theological, ethical, and legal presuppositions underpinning it as comprising of two steps: 1.) "exploring the multiple interpretive methods that were employed by scholars in the past to discover the creativity they invested"; and 2.) the need to "explore and develop new ways of interpretation of especially the revealed text in order to allow its full breadth and vision to speak to us in a transformative way" (Moosa, 2003b, 126).

In respect to the second point, Moosa places great emphasis on the comprehensively contextualist and interpretive communities-oriented hermeneutic as *the* optimal antidote to what he considers to be the prevalence of text fundamentalism among contemporary Muslims. In this context Moosa critiques the belief that 'text fundamentalists' share, namely the idea that the text has the ability to *provide* the norms that interpreters can simply retrieve. Instead, Moosa advances the view that (a community of) interpreters in actual fact *engender* the norms through a dialogue with the revelation (Moosa, 2003b, 125–126).

Given the above-described nature of Islamic hermeneutics proper as advocated by Moosa, it becomes amply evident that the element of *poiesis* is fundamental to it.

Critique of contemporary Muslim thought currents

In the previous sections, it was pointed out that one element of Moosa's Islamic hermeneutics entails the full exploration and, at times, rediscovery of variant interpretive methodologies that characterized the classical Islamic heritage. Nevertheless, Moosa is also a strong critic of certain aspects and assumptions underpinning classical Islamic interpretational approaches in several of its versions, especially what he variously terms (dogmatic) (neo) traditionalism/conservatism and Islamic modernism (text fundamentalism).⁹ In what follows, I briefly examine the grounds and reasons offered by Moosa for this critique.

One group that Moosa subjects to critique are labelled dogmatic traditionalists/conservatives whom Moosa considers to be the most predominant contemporary community of interpretation. He (2007) describes this community of interpretation as follows:

Here, the formalized legal and ethical opinions of past jurists form the canon of normative teachings. This normativity, rooted in the past, is regarded as universally valid and perfect as inherited from the ancients. To depart from the views of past authorities is only permitted in very limited instances. Furthermore, fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] is not subject to historicization. . . . The weakness of this approach, however, lies in a static and idealistic notion of history. Authenticity lies in the experience and knowledge of the past savants of the tradition. Contemporary experiences do not qualify to influence adaptation and change to the law or ethics. Knowledge developed in the present is either resisted or reluctantly adopted in order to supplement or update the inherited corpus of ethical teachings.

(241)

Although seeing value in its coherent episteme, Moosa criticizes dogmatic traditionalism on several accounts in addition to those given in the quote above. For example, Moosa questions dogmatic traditionalism on the grounds that its pre-modern embedded ethical models have lost much of their utility;¹⁰ that it does not always acknowledge the challenges posed by history (Moosa, 2001/2002, 2); that it does not sufficiently recognize the constructed nature of tradition; and that much of it is a knee-jerk reaction, resistance, and counterbalance to the (continuing) project of modernity which is viewed by dogmatic traditionalists as largely incommensurate with the concept of the Islamic tradition itself (Moosa, 2002, 25). The root cause of this binary 'us' versus 'them' thinking is diagnosed by Moosa as a result of an inherited aberrant modus of thinking that he terms a 'theology of empire' syndrome, a (political) *worldview* which is still uncritically adhered to by the proponents of dogmatic traditionalism. For Moosa, the consequences of holding on to this worldview for Muslims are very damaging, as

this outlook on the world is responsible for creating “a paranoid, introverted and defensive school of thought among the Muslim conservatives world-wide” (Moosa, 2002, 26; 1999, 26). In this context, Moosa (Moosa, 2002) writes:

The net result of this mode of thinking was the creation of an elaborate hate-machine where Muslims viewed outsiders as potential threats or enemies. The fact that this sort of thinking is still alive and well today is beyond doubt. Looking at the sort of propaganda that you get from Islamist movements in countries like Pakistan today, all we see is the obsession with Islam’s supposed ‘enemies’ who are said to be everywhere.

(25)

Another aspect of dogmatic traditionalism Moosa is critical of is its lack of intellectual development and critical thinking that prevails among those who are trained in traditional Islamic seminaries. For Moosa, this sad state of affairs is best exemplified by numerous prosecutions of independent critical Muslim intellectuals who are seen as a threat to ‘Islam’. Moosa laments that the root cause for this situation can be traced to the fact that large chunks of Muslim thought today are still predicated on religious metaphysics that originate from the time of the Muslim empires of the past (Moosa, 2002, 28).

An additional contemporary current of Muslim thought that has attracted Moosa’s critique is Islamic modernism associated with figures such as J. Al-Afghani (d.1897), M. Abduh (d.1905), and their contemporary proponents such as Y. Al-Qaradawi (1926). Moosa argues that the phenomenon of Islamic modernism was located between two traditions, namely Islamic conservatism and secular modernity. The Muslim modernists, in their efforts to modernize and reform Islam, ended up uncritically internalizing the values, prejudices, and biases of the modern era encapsulated by notions of enlightenment, rationality, and progress as articulated and manifested in the tradition of western positivism. Moosa (2003b) writes:

key figures of Muslim modernism, like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nu‘mani, and Muhammad Iqbal all from India, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq in Egypt, as well as important figures in Turkey, Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world, were tremendously impressed by both the ideals and realities of modernity. They truly believed that Muslim thought as they imagined it from its medieval incarnation had an almost natural tryst with modernity. Modernity and “Islam” were not mortal enemies, but rather, as many of them suggested, Islam itself anticipated modernity.

(117)

Moosa refers to these devoted proponents of Enlightenment rationality within Muslim societies as not only “challenging the idea of the pre-modern tradition or tradition itself” but also uncritically endorsing this version of modernity as basically the *only* mode of living and thinking for Muslim-majority societies (Moosa, 2003b, 111).

To complicate matters further because the Western modernist project was grounded on a colonial discourse, many of the Islamic modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also ended up internalizing and reproducing these prejudices, such as their views towards folk beliefs, ancient traditions, the status of women, etc. (Moosa, 2002, 34). In this context, Moosa (2003b, 117) poses a profound question whether modernist thought in general, in light of what we have learnt about its shortcomings and problematic assumptions discussed in the second section above, is Islam’s redeemer, nemesis, or perhaps a bit of both?

Islamic modernism, opines Moosa further, failed on a number of different levels. One such failure is to be found in the inadequately theorized model of interpretation of the normative Islamic texts with the result of flattening of the Islamic tradition. Moosa (2014b) states:

The monumental task of recontextualizing the interpretation of Muslim sources and doctrines to match the new realities was hardly broached. And ijthad remained a rallying cry for mobilization, without a convincing intellectual roadmap. This invitation to reach for new interpretations had one failing. It did not provide for a coherent framework to interpret the Qur’an and the hadith. The outcome was the oversimplification of tradition.

(55)

Another important shortcoming of Islamic modernism for Moosa is its inability to comprehensively and systematically deal with Islamic history and the inherited historical sources of the *turath*. As a result, it developed an almost exclusively Qur’an-centred hermeneutic without engaging with the equally important lived experience of community (Sunna) as embodied in history. Furthermore this ‘Qur’an-centred’ hermeneutic is coupled with “exaggerated skepticism that reports of the Prophet may have been corrupted during their transmission” (Moosa, 2007, 242), which, for Moosa, has further “undermined the status of historical sources and implicitly eviscerated the historicity of tradition” (Moosa, 2007). Therefore, argues Moosa, Islamic modernists pay “little attention to the fact that even transcendent values become manifest in competing and diverse formats” (Moosa, 2007, 242).

By subscribing to the idea of linear and inevitable progress, Islamic modernists embody the diametrically opposite *weltanschauung* of the dogmatic traditionalists. For Moosa, *a priori* and uncritically privileging modern subjectivities Islamic modernist project is highly presumptuous and condescending toward past communities of interpretation who are seen to have failed

to discover the “true Islamic norms”. Moosa critiques this ‘transcendentalist’ approach on two main grounds. First, it presumes that “all norms are self-explanatory and literally derived from the revealed sources” (Moosa, 2007). Second, it does not provide a plausible explanation “for the role of the interpreter as co-author of the normative tradition and our changing subjectivity in both the interpretation and practice of ethical traditions” (Moosa, 2007). Hence, Moosa warns that it is “a short step from transcendentalism to text-fundamentalism, with its accompanying ethical fundamentalism” (Moosa, 2007).

Moosa’s positioning of progressive Muslim thought in relation to other contemporary Muslim thought currents

Moosa (2003b, 117) holds the view that contemporary progressive Muslim thought is profoundly indebted to the labors of Muslim modernist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as J. Al-Afghani, Sir Ahmad Khan (d.1898), M. Abduh, and Rashid Rida (d.1935), despite their above-mentioned shortcomings.

However, Moosa believes that important differences between the two exist with respect to how each view the nature of reason, truth, modernity, the attitude towards the modern episteme, and respective methodologies of interpretation of the normative texts and ideologies. It is to the brief discussion of differences as articulated by Moosa that we turn now.

Regarding the differences in the nature of reason and truth, Moosa (Ibid, p. 118) writes:

The way Muslim modernists understood modernity presents a very different picture from the way we perceive it today. Some of the ways in which we perceive reason, self, and truth might be very different from how early modernists of all stripes construed these very concepts. Reason in the past was seen as universal, held by all to articulate a set of rational true beliefs, to distinguish reason from tradition and emotion. Now we have to admit that reason is not a self-evident faculty but a socially constructed one. It exists within practices and discourses; reason is embodied. The idea of the self was once understood to be exclusively unique and transcendent. This is no longer the case. Now we acknowledge that the self is a product of language and discourses. The correspondence between language and reality exerted a strong influence in the modern period and this contributed to our understanding of truth. Today, we have a healthy skepticism about what passes for the truth. Truth is the result of agreement. We do not say there is no truth, or that the truth is arbitrary. What we do say is that the truth is not static, an end-state at which we arrive at once and for all.

(118)

Hence, as argued in the second section of this chapter, progressive Muslim thought embodies the weak version of postmodernist thought whereas Islamic modernism shares many of the assumptions underpinning the Age of Enlightenment and its positivist tradition discussed above.

In relation to the question of the nature of modernity, Moosa forms the view that while the Islamic modernist thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its contemporary proponents uncritically considered modernity as a natural ally, progressive Muslim scholars are much more reserved and critical of it, partly because the kind of modernity the latter inherited was markedly different from that encountered by the former (Ibid,119).

Importantly, another significant difference between Islamic modernist and progressive Muslim thought is to be found in their respective approaches to the modern episteme. In this context, Moosa writes:

With some exceptions, the critical light of modern knowledge developed in the humanities did not illuminate the Muslim modernists' theories, as applied to the interpretation of scriptures, history and society, the understanding of law, and theology. What they did not undertake or in some instances refused to undertake was to subject the entire corpus of historical Islamic learning to the critical gaze of the knowledge-making process (episteme) of modernity. . . .

They still felt that the pre-modern Muslim epistemology as rooted in dialectical theology (*'ilm al-kalam*) and legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) was sufficiently tenacious, if not compatible with the best in modern epistemology.

(119)

Moosa similarly critiques Islamic modernism on its eclectic approach to applying the advances in knowledge in (late) modernity, especially its unwillingness and fear of applying this knowledge as it relate to the study of religion itself because it was seen as ultimately subverting or undermining the knowledge on which the traditional Islamic canon is based (Ibid.).

Therefore, one important difference between progressive Muslim thought and Islamic modernism (and dogmatic traditionalism) is its readiness to critically and systematically incorporate insights from the modern episteme and apply it across all aspects of the Islamic religious tradition (Duderija, 2011).

With respect to how progressive Muslim thought differs from dominant orthodoxies of Islamic modernism and dogmatic traditionalism from an ideological perspective, Moosa contends that one of the major points of departure between them "is the excessive ideology content evident in the interpretations propounded by Islamic modernist and traditionalist groups", such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt or the Jamat-e Islami of India and

Pakistan in the orthodox seminaries of Al-Azhar in Egypt; the Deobandi, Barelwi, and Ahle Hadith schools of India and Pakistan; the schools of Najaf in Iraq; Qum in Iran, and the varieties of puritan (*salafi*) tendencies in the Gulf region and elsewhere (2007, 117). As discussed above, Moosa warns that the proponents of progressive Muslim thought not only ought *not* reify the contents of tradition, but that they also must be ever so vigilant that it does not become co-opted by or a servant of power and turned into yet another Muslim ‘orthodoxy’ (2007, 127).¹¹ The best method in ensuring this for Moosa is for progressive Muslim thought not to become institutionalized in the first place (2007, 126).

In terms of differences in methodologies of interpretation between progressive and other approaches, particularly dogmatic traditionalism, Moosa (2007) summarizes them as follows:

In a nutshell I would say that the major differences between Muslim progressives and their critics would be that the latter are either wedded to dated methodologies or committed to doctrines and interpretations that have lost their rationales and relevance over time.

(117)

Importantly, Moosa has described his approach to the Islamic tradition also as critical traditionalism. Given the above-described views of Moosa on the nature and the concept of ‘tradition’, this description of his approach should not be surprising. For Moosa, this approach is distinguished by its insistence to engage with the tradition critically, to “constantly probe and interrogate it in a productive and constructive manner” (2007, 118). In this context, Moosa (2007) writes:

A progressive intellectual posture involves a critical interrogation of the conveyer belt of tradition, namely texts, practices, and histories, by posing a series of questions to the inherited knowledges of the tradition. In other words, a critical Muslim or a progressive Muslim is also engaged in critical traditionalism.

(126)

Elsewhere Moosa (2007, 241) describes critical traditionalist scholars as those who “lean towards this ethical orientation”, those who “view the juridical tradition as a work-in-progress”, those who “invoke the critical [Muslim] thinkers of the past”, and those who “historicize and adopt contemporary knowledge and experience as part of tradition”. Critical traditionalists, furthermore, are those who are “engaged in new ethical and legal interpretations of the tradition” by means of affecting “a new knowledge synthesis” that involves a dialogical engagement between traditional Muslim religious sciences and the modern social sciences and the humanities. What sets the progressive Muslims’ approach to tradition apart from other

versions, argues Moosa further, “is its concern for the coexistence of the transcendent and the historical dimensions of a religious tradition”. This critical traditionalist approach is also described as engendering norms “through the dynamic interaction between the transcendent authority and the mediation of human history” (Moosa, 2007). As the adjective “critical” in “critical traditionalism” suggests, Moosa forms the view that it is imperative for contemporary Muslims to engage in critical, creative, and imaginative thought, *poiesis*, in order to engage with the *turath* fruitfully. In other words, it is the embodiment of the ‘*poiesis* imperative’ itself.

The paragons of *poiesis*: Al-Ghazali and Moosa

As mentioned previously, one idea that permeates Moosa’s thought as it relates to the subject matter of this chapter is Moosa’s ‘*poiesis* imperative’. By ‘*poiesis* imperative’, I wish to convey Moosa’s (2011, 110; 2005; 2006, 113) diagnosis of a woeful absence of critical and creative thought among not only the traditional religious scholars but also the mainstream Muslim intelligentsia in general, as well as at major modern institutions in the Muslim-majority world today. Moosa (2005) laments this state of affairs as follows:

Today, the most dismaying picture of intellectual perfidy emerges not only from the stereotypical images of Islam in the Western electronic media but also from desultory images produced in what are the bastions of Muslim traditional learning. Some of these are the renowned al-Azhar in Egypt, Dar al-Ulum Deoband in India, the many madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the many hazwiyas in Iran and Iraq, and similar institutions around the globe.

(61)

Indeed, the lack of *poiesis* in contemporary Muslim thought was the stated *raison d’être* behind writing of his book *Ghazali and Poetics of Imagination* (Moosa, 2005, 28–29).

As mentioned above, Moosa considers that the main and most important task of contemporary (progressive) Muslim thought is engaging in *poiesis*, a process he defines variously as “the creativity of an existential threshold position (*dihliz*) that enables one to engage in creative and critical thinking”, “the craft of imagination and inventive making and creating”, “discursive bricolage”, “the art of doing and reflecting”, “the creative and imaginative remaking/production of tradition”, etc. (Moosa, 2005, 32, 34, 39, 42, 265, 270). Importantly, as briefly alluded to above, the task of *poiesis* for Moosa is not a mere process of deconstruction as in some forms of postmodernism but of creating emergent knowledges which have the ability to respond to the subjectivities, epistemological, and numerous and complex ethical dilemmas facing contemporary Muslim communities.

Significantly, Moosa finds in the archeology of ideas and life of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (d.1111 CE) a paragon of *poiesis* from classical Islam. Moosa has been an interlocutor of Ghazali for several decades and unsurprisingly for those who are familiar with Moosa's work, it is on Al-Ghazali that Moosa wrote his doctoral thesis. In this section, I argue that one important reason why much of Moosa's scholarship has focused on Al-Ghazali is because Moosa considers him as an archetype of *poiesis* and critical traditionalism *par excellence* from the classical period of Islam.

In his book *Ghazali and Poetics of Imagination*, Moosa provides us with several arguments as to why Al-Ghazali is relevant to contemporary Muslim thought in general and progressive Muslim thought in particular. For example, in a subsection titled 'Ghazali as Exemplar for Critical Traditionalism', Moosa (Moosa, 2005) writes:

The contemporary relevance of Ghazali to Muslim thought lies precisely in his critical engagement with tradition, but more specifically in the way in which he modified, adjusted, recalibrated, amended, and supplemented the intellectual tradition. Unlike many of his contemporaries who either uncritically romanticized tradition or, in an apocalyptic spasm, took refuge in it, he took critical thought seriously. It was important for him, just as it is for us, to critically engage with the canonical tradition, a process that must culminate in radical questioning and defamiliarizing of the canonical tradition.

(29)

It is Al-Ghazali's epistemological and methodological openness and fluidity that characterizes both Moosa's and progressive Muslim thought as argued above, that renders him occupying a liminal state/threshold/interstice, the *dibliz*, which is a source of his creative thinking and dialogical imagination, the *poiesis* (Moosa, 2005, 27). Al-Ghazali as a paragon of *poiesis* is indeed a recurrent theme in the book. For example, Moosa (2005) writes:

Indispensable to Ghazali's project was the notion of a dialogical imagination: a sense that all meaning is part of a greater whole and that the different parts of meaning constantly interact with each other irrespective of whether those meanings are held by believer or unbeliever, agnostic or mystic, male or female, friend or foe. He was also, in my view, a courageous bricoleur, one who creatively managed to put to work different ideas in a coherent framework for himself, for his society, and for the community that he served . . . His relevance primarily lies in the architecture of his ideas. He was essentially a builder and creator of intellectual edifices and thought structures that produced practices for himself and societies over time.

(27)

I hope that it will be clear to the reader that the above-given quote by Moosa about Al-Ghazali applies equally to the work of Moosa himself as the major theoretician of progressive Muslim thought.

Conclusion

The above overview of the main themes, arguments, and theories informing Moosa's scholarship has been fundamental to the emergence and continued development of progressive Muslim thought. Moosa's views of the nature of knowledge, tradition, history, progress, and modernity, as well as his insights into Islamic hermeneutics and ethics, have strongly shaped discourses on progressive Muslim thought. One of the main and reoccurring messages that are germane to Moosa's scholarship is what I have termed 'the *poiesis* imperative' as the only viable approach for contemporary Muslims to fruitfully engage with the Islamic tradition. The imperative to engage in *poiesis* is a fundamental lynchpin that underpins Moosa work as a major theoretician behind contemporary progressive Muslim thought. The daunting challenge of those Muslims wishing to engage in *poiesis* today, argues Moosa, is to create emergent knowledges whose discovery will "require critical and agonizing intellectual labour" (Moosa, 2005, 40). For reasons discussed in the chapter, it is my contention that Moosa, with his extraordinary rich contribution to contemporary (progressive) Muslim thought, alongside other progressive Muslim scholars discussed in this book, has been an indispensable and inspirational voice in this process.

Notes

- 1 Yazeed Said, in the context of reviewing Moosa's book *Al Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, refers to Moosa as an "obvious polymath of western thought". See Said (2008, 228).
- 2 In relation to progressive Muslim thought in particular, see Duderija (2011, 117–139).
- 3 For example, in relation to the concept of 'tradition' to which we turn in the next section of the chapter.
- 4 For more on the retrogressive outlook of traditional Islamic epistemology, see chapter two.
- 5 As at least partly reflected in this volume.
- 6 See chapter six for details.
- 7 See chapter six.
- 8 Further elaborated in chapters six, seven, and eight in particular.
- 9 Moosa has also criticized crude and unsystematic utilitarian-based approaches to Islamic law. See Moosa (2003b, 123; 2014a).
- 10 For how this concretely plays itself out with retrospect to human rights and gender issues, see chapters five, seven, and eight.
- 11 For more on how progressive Muslims approach the question of hegemonic political power, see chapter four.