

Book Review

Martin Nguyen. *Modern Muslim Theology: Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

In his latest book, Martin Nguyen makes an important contribution to contemporary studies of Islamic theology. Building on current outlooks that emphasize the intellectual and cerebral life of the Muslim believer, he introduces readers to what a practical theology might look like when it goes beyond neo-classical portrayals to embrace the religious imagination. In doing so, he charts future territory for studies in Islamic theology, pointing them in a direction that moves away from expert-led dialogues to a layperson-centered perspective. He is clear in stating that this book is not an attempt to recast or to revive any specific historical discourse or discipline, but to reconceive of theology altogether in a way that attends mainly to “the fostering of faith” (2).

Despite its modest length, Nyugen largely accomplishes this goal. While his treatment is not exhaustive, each chapter aims to reframe a fundamental concept that is essential to his account. He begins with the concept of language, where he explains the necessity for modern Muslim theology to strictly remain in the English “logosphere” to remain accessible to non-experts (21). Nguyen then goes on to critique modern conceptions of time that both interfere with a creative engagement with revelation and tradition and impair the fostering of religious thought. Our “postdomestic” culture obscures death and matters of the end times while internalizing a linear, quantifiable notion of time that focuses our attention on anything but the present moment, where the “fullness of God” resides (31). Modern time not only prevents us from fully engaging with God, but also distorts how we receive and think of revelation. This distortion is due in part to the prevalent essentialist accounts of tradition that portray “authentic tradition” as a phenomenon that took place in — and remains in — the past. In other words, this non-imaginative view conceives of the religious tradition as an artifact in need of preservation, the way material artifacts are preserved in Western museums. Putting the tradition to use would violate its integrity as a genuine artifact; instead, it is something to be admired from afar.

Against this tendency to fossilize tradition, Nyugen argues for a dynamic, living view of it. The multi-faceted and complex Islamic tradition is more like the Ka‘bah in Makkah than an artifact gathering dust. It has undergone change and restoration, and yet it remains with us into the present. Similarly, a modern Muslim theology must acknowledge that human traditions are ongoing constructs that evolve from one generation to the next. Interacting with the tradition is required for the transformative experiences that a life of faith is meant to engender. Conceptualizing the tradition in this way calls for the religious

imagination, which Nyugen describes as “an important human faculty that can be marshalled like our sense and our reason in order to think theologically” (68).

Having set this foundation, Nyugen proceeds, in the heart of the book, to illustrate the purpose and function of religious imagination in a life of faith. He argues that no aspect of the Islamic faith can be grasped fully without a deep and penetrating imagination and creative engagement. The Qur’an and reports of Prophet Muhammad are not only replete with images, symbols, and stories for our imagination to feed on, but also are actually directed primarily at this faculty, even more than they address the intellect (*‘aql*). Islamic soteriology and eschatology, for instance, call on Muslims to constantly exercise their imaginative thinking. It is not only the basic tenets of the Muslim faith that require imagination, but the highest forms of piety and religiosity as well. Excellence (*ihsān*) in the Islamic tradition is described as worshipping God “as though” we see Him. Nyugen’s central claim is that imagination is crucial both to the Islamic tradition and to a Muslim’s spiritual life.

If imaginative thinking is so central, why and how has a rationalist discourse come to dominate theological discussions? In what are perhaps some of the book’s strongest passages, Nyugen problematizes the scholarly tradition’s emphasis on the intellect as the “seat of consciousness” and the faculty responsible for receiving and fostering faith. He argues that it is due to the success of medieval Muslim scholars in appropriating Aristotelian views that the rationalist emphasis has endured so strongly in Islamic theological accounts. The Hellenistic construct of the human as the “rational animal” has come to be an uncontested fact when, in reality, “there is no fixed, universal form of reason.” Instead, there are only “rationalities that are conditioned by and developed within traditions” (79-80). There is no reason that the human being is a “rational animal” any more than she is a symbolic or religious or liturgical animal.

In the face of overly rationalistic discussions of theology, which Nyugen sees as having a debilitating effect on alternative theologies, he instead advances the view that the task of modern theology is in dire need of new and creative perspectives that give prime of place to the imagination over and above the intellect. Imagination is not simply a mental process or act of the mind, but an “embodied activity” (87) with the potential to revive critical aspects of faithful life, such as the cultivation of empathy and compassion. Of all the possible realms where imagination plays a role, however, Nyugen focuses on prayer in the remaining chapters.

Prayer, and particularly its defining moment of prostration, is “a wildly radical act” (89-90) that represents and epitomizes Nyugen’s imaginative theology: “A faithful theology of response must be a theology of prostration” (115). To demonstrate his position, he begins by tracing historical views on the relationship between faith and action expounded by Mu’tazilī, Ash’arī, and

Māturīdī scholars. All emphasize a critical link between faith and action, and any differences between their views only strengthens Nyugen's premise that traditional views are not hegemonic ideologies to be defended, but rather conversations to be revisited and re-negotiated over time.

He then provides a brief biographical sketch of two Muslim figures, one classical and the other contemporary, to illustrate how a life of faith can be animated through engagement with religious imagination. Both Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Malcolm X (d. 1965) faced skepticism, doubt, and severe challenges to their faith and yet overcame these by refashioning their relationship to faith in bold and unanticipated ways. Al-Ghazālī's response was to articulate a theology that rejected blind imitation (*taqlīd*) in matters of faith, and Malcolm X's theological orientation emphasized the need for faith to constructively respond to the social and psychological ills of one's context. In both cases, the journey back to faith featured a moment of prayer at its tipping point.

According to Nguyen, the key to nurturing a practical, imagination-driven theology lies in prayer and prostration. The timing of prayer re-acquaints us with the rhythms of sacred time. Prayer is where revelation and response meet, the former in the form of Qur'anic recitation and the latter in the form of supplication, both integral aspects of Muslim prayer. The very form of prayer, in its climactic moment of prostration, places the heart above the head. And the advice of Prophet Muhammad regarding prayer, "Pray as though it is your last prayer," is a call to the imagination in the very act that symbolizes the religion as a whole (175).

In the end, Nyugen makes a compelling case for why Muslim theologians should occupy themselves with the new terrain he scouts in *Modern Muslim Theology*. He concludes in the hopes that his theology of prayer and prostration has served as a "demonstration of what can be achieved if we take theology and the imagination seriously" (183). Above all, Nyugen urges that future studies in Islamic theology pay increasing attention to aesthetic considerations, particularly the power of poetry: "Ours is a time in need of poetry" (184). He calls scholars of Islamic theology to "undertake the practice of theology with great care, courage, and imagination" and to "be attentive to aesthetics" and "embrace the beautiful" in future works (184-85). Nyugen makes a major contribution to ongoing discussions about Islamic theology by challenging the accepted wisdom and perduring assumptions that operate in the field, as well as by inviting students and scholars alike to reimagine key concepts in light of a practical theology.

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