Someone otherwise ignorant about Islam often knows two things: Muslim women must veil; and Islam prohibits images. Like much of popular knowledge, neither is entirely accurate. Rather, diverse practices of veiling and representation have emerged across the vast geography, cultural plurality, and millennium of Islamic histories. This universalizing misconception of Islam through the trope of sight says more about Western cultures than about Islam: it defines how we think of others as looking out onto the world, and it insists on our right to see them.

Why is the so-called image prohibition made out to be so important? Images neither determine survival nor define humanity. In a world where the visual arts no longer emphasize verisimilitude, why has the image become such a litmus test of civilization? Why does the historical plenitude of all sorts of images in the Islamic world, ranging from theological narratives to pornography, fail to automatically refute their supposed absence? The repetition of the accusation, despite all evidence to the contrary, suggests that the image at hand is never a picture, but a symbol of alterity to the ‘West.’ Its symbolism contrasts multiple cultures of a supposed ‘East’: the Orthodox Church, with its distinctive discourse of the image following the iconoclastic controversy starting in the eighth century; the Judaic sanction of the image rooted in biblical injunctions against idolatry; and the comparable absence of votive images in Islam.¹ Both Catholic and Protestant European Christian theological traditions establish norms for what an image is supposed to do: express narrative through visual verisimilitude with a normative depiction of space. The discourse in Islam is more diffuse. Attempts to pin it down often reflect modern expectations more than discussions of the image in Islamic thought.

Transcultural thought requires a revised notion of the image. As contemporary art relies increasingly on concepts over forms, our understandings of past arts similarly need to engage the ideas behind, and not simply the histories of, objects. As Socrates said, “Do you see then, my friend, that we must look for a different standard of correctness for images … and not

make presence or absence of particular features a necessary condition for something to be an image? Surely you realize that images are far from having the same properties as the things whose images they are?"²

1.1 A Lived History for Islamic Origins

The image of Islam informs our understanding of the image in Islam. If we think of Islam only through the narrative of its foundation, we ignore how it emerges across time. It is this real, sedimentary history, in which Islam regenerates its meanings, in which culture and perception form. Before considering the image in Islam, this section aims to provide a brief summary of histories and concepts necessary for thinking of Islam with increasing nuance throughout the text.

Islamic historiography traditionally begins with the rupture between the era of ignorance (jahiliyya) preceding the revelation of the Quran and the acceptance (islam) of the will of God. This divine will was expressed through the angelic enunciation of the sacred word (the Quran) to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632). Revelation took place in parts, between the first in 610 and his death in 632.³ The first revelation is believed to have taken place during his meditation in the Cave Hira, near his home in Mecca. Islamic historiography recognizes the initial converts as members of the tribes surrounding the Prophet who practiced polytheistic faiths as well as some who practiced Christianity. Islamic ritual repurposes the practice of worship through circumambulation of their primary shrine, the Kaaba, as marking the first altar given by God to Adam and revered by the prophet Abraham. The Kaaba also marks the Prophet Muhammad’s 632 reconquest of Mecca after his exile (hijra) with his followers in the nearby city of Yathrib (later renamed Medina) in 622, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Despite the paucity of physical traces, reconstructions of these early years of Islam have been central in struggles for legitimation in Islamic leadership. Modern puritanical movements have argued in favor of a singular, authentic Islam rooted among the first generation of Muslims (salaf) in the Arabian Peninsula during the first thirty years of the faith.

² Halliwell, 2002: 46 (Plato, Cratylus 432a–d).
³ The root s-l-m in Arabic and Hebrew indicates peace, thus ‘selam’ and ‘shalom’ as greetings. Islam is the practice of greeting/bowing, thus accepting the will of God. A Muslim is the person who does this. The common translation of Islam as ‘submission’ often leads to a misunderstanding of Islam as involving submissiveness, thus naturalizing authoritarianism.
This has enhanced the impression of Islam as an independent entity distinct from precedents and perennially corrupted after its inception.\textsuperscript{4} Conversely, this book reflects the understanding that, far from a pure Islam corrupted through transcultural interaction, the history of lived Islam emerged in an interplay between its origins and its lived environments, incorporating the perceptual cultures of late antiquity, the Abrahamic tradition, as well as a multiplicity of later cultural and religious interactions.

A generation after the death of the Prophet, a disagreement concerning leadership of the faithful led to a split between the followers of the established path (\textit{sunna}, giving rise to the designation \textit{sunni} Muslims) and followers of the party (\textit{shi’a}) of the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (601–661) and his descendants. Although in modern times often portrayed as a split akin to that between Catholics and Protestants, the importance of the distinction was not historically consistent.\textsuperscript{5} Both trends existed from the early era of Islam, and neither consolidated in a hegemonic form in the first century. Shi’a Islam held periodic sway over politically significant premodern dynasties. Often, it offered a position of protest within Sunni majority regions. Literature reflects the complex mixing of theological and philosophical discourses. Scholars often sustained multiple affiliations that undermine the apparently clear sectarian distinctions normalized during times of conflict, including our own. Cultures, then and now, are complicated; the label of ‘sectarian difference’ often represents political as much as doctrinal tensions.

Constitutive systems of Islam converged slowly through the codification of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (\textit{Hadith}) and development of methods to use these texts as a foundation for Islamic law (\textit{Sharia}), combining Jewish hermeneutics with ancient Greek thought inherited through Sasanian transmission. Changing geographies of Islam reflected controversies over succession as the Umayyad dynasty declared a caliphate led from Damascus in the late seventh century.\textsuperscript{6} Many new Muslims were not peninsular Arabs, complicating the simplistic model of a single, Arabian era of ignorance (\textit{jahiliyya}). On the contrary, Greek persisted as an administrative language until the eighth century. The complex visual

\textsuperscript{4} Ahmed, 2015: 80–82. \textsuperscript{5} Mulder, 2014. \textsuperscript{6} A caliph is the political successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Among (majority) Sunni Muslims, such leadership was abolished following the 1922 fall of the Ottoman Empire. Shi’a Muslims recognize a different leadership, the imamate, based on inspired spiritual leadership from the lineage of ‘Ali; some Shi’a leaders have also adopted the title of caliph.
iconography, executed in mosaic and three-dimensional sculpture, in Umayyad architecture underscores cultural continuity with Roman and Sasanian precedents during the institutionalization of Islam.\textsuperscript{7}

Although the Quran is at the core of Islam, its historical origins remain unclear. Standard interpretations suggest that in a largely oral culture, believers who memorized the revelation trusted the human mind as the most secure transmitter of Quranic recitations from believer to believer over that of writing, subject to destruction or desecration. Some scholars differ, indicating Quranic and \textit{Hadith} references to Muhammad himself writing down the revelations, as well as their later abrogation or cancelation.\textsuperscript{8} By the mid-seventh century, multiple recensions of the Quran competed for authority. The consolidation of these versions into a single codex, the supposed destruction of all other versions, and the reproduction and distribution of a single redaction under the caliph ‘Uthman (r. 644–656) represented one of the formative attempts under the so-called Rightly Guided Caliphs (\textit{salah}), before the Shi’a split, in the creation of a single, institutionalized, hegemonic understanding of Islam. Some contemporary scholars of the Quran go so far as to suggest that this consolidation was compiled not from multiple recensions of the same text, but from multiple sacred texts, including some shared by Christian and Jewish communities, and even suggest that the revelation was an anachronistic foundational narrative established under the Umayyad dynasty.\textsuperscript{9} Whatever the origin, the text compiled under ‘Uthman became the dominant recension of the Quran.

This record of Prophetic revelations was soon supplemented by biographies of the Prophet, which began to appear under the first Umayyad caliph, Mu’awiyah (r. 661–680), coinciding with religious institutionalization. Most of these biographies survive primarily in later canonical compilations. These emerged as part of the ninth-century growth of literary culture fostered under the Abbasid dynasty, which gained control over the caliphate in 750 and moved Islamic rule to Baghdad in 762.

The Umayyad caliphate had brought the basic Quranic text at the heart of Islam into an administrative and cultural environment dominated by Orthodox Christian precepts in a Greek-language environment. By insisting that only Arabs could be true Muslims, they assured their sovereignty and gained wealth by taxing converts. But they made many enemies. Their Abbasid challengers capitalized on this enmity by removing the linguistic/ethnic requirement for being Muslim. The Abbasids soon conquered the
caliphate in the Levant. Surviving members of the Umayyad dynasty migrated to North Africa and Spain, where they continued to rule until the eleventh century, and culture flourished in close communication with both local Christian dynasties and the Eastern Islamic world.

The cultural openness of the Abbasids was reflected in the promotion of translation and the incorporation of philosophical legacies from antiquity in the administrative and intellectual discourses constructing Islam. They inherited the sophisticated intellectual environment fostered by the Sasanian promotion of philosophy after its ejection from Christianized Rome. In 529 the Roman emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565) had issued an edict against pagan teaching, expelling philosophers from the School of Athens. Scholars from Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa, and Harran came together with Sabean scholars under Sasanian patronage. The Sasanian king Khosrau (r. 531–579), known as Anoushirwan, established libraries in cities such as Jundishapur to contain translations of Hellenistic texts into Pahlavi (Middle Persian) as well as the poetic accounts of history written for the pleasure of kings. As Zoroastrians, they believed that all knowledge had been given to the prophet Zoroaster in a book comprising 12,000 volumes. They developed a narrative that when Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 334–324 BCE, he had destroyed everything, but had arranged for the translation of all the books of Istakhr (a city 5 kilometers north of Persepolis) into Greek. His armies had transferred this library to Egypt, causing the global dispersal of knowledge. Through this story, Sasanian rulers established an ideology dependent on a culture of translation as the foundation of all civilization, a wealth protected in their libraries. Yet this wealth was not limited to Greek philosophy. During the same era, Anoushirwan is said to have sent his physician Borzuya to India to acquire what would become the most widely disseminated secular work of the Islamic world, *Kalila and Dimna*, offering ethical and princely wisdom in the popular form of animal fables.10

The Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun (r. 813–833) adopted the Sasanian institutionalization of translation under the name *buyut al-hikma*, or houses of wisdom: relatively modest translation bureaus designed to enrich the intellectual coffers of the state. The Sasanian understanding of knowledge as universal and translatable thus became central to the Abbasid translation movement of the eighth and ninth centuries, during which diverse philosophical works were translated into Arabic and incorporated into the thriving Islamic theological, philosophical, and scientific thought of Baghdad. One of

the first texts translated was Aristotle’s *Topics*, which introduced classical methods of disputation into the Abbasid administrative toolbox as well as the systematic debate being developed by religious scholars.11 Other early translations included Plotinus’ *Enneads*, and summaries of four Platonic dialogues by the Pergamonian physician Galen (130–210). Translation featured not only philosophy, but also tales and epics that long remained central to Islamic literary culture. These include the eighth-century Syriac and Arabic translations of fables from India as the popular *Kalila and Dimna*, which circulated further through Rudaki’s early tenth-century translation into Persian verse, and the ninth-century translation of Alexandrian epics from Syriac into Arabic.12 Translation engaged with commentary, rewriting, and dissemination.13 The translation of ancient Greek works into Arabic, often through intermediary Syriac translations, took place within a much wider atmosphere of cultural mixing through the integration of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and intellectual traditions into the evolving discursive sphere of Islam. Although often glossed as a vague relationship with ‘Neoplatonism,’ longstanding and sophisticated engagement with these sources can be traced in many facets of Islamic literature and perceptual culture.

This era of translation coincided with the emergence of Islamic law. The methodical juridical use of precedent (*taqlid* or imitation) and reasoned interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the Quran and *Hadith* emerged in the thought of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (767–820).14 Muhammad al-Bukhari (810–870) edited the earliest compilation of *Hadith* based on verified lineages of transmission (*isnad*) through the oral tradition. Without a method governing these traditions, however, hundreds of interpretive systems soon competed for authority. By the end of the century, this multiplicity of legal interpretive practices was reduced through a state-sponsored inquisition (*mihna*) pitting philosophical against literalist approaches to the Quran. The Abbasid caliphs initially supported an interpretive regime that accepted philosophy as central to Islamic interpretation. However, the

12 Stoneman (1991) translates compiled legends attributed to Callisthenes of Olynthus (360–228 BCE), a great-nephew of Aristotle who became historian of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) when Aristotle served as his tutor. However, as the legends include events after the death of Callisthenes, who was executed for criticizing Alexander’s adoption of Persian court ritual, the unknown author is now called Pseudo-Callisthenes. The popularity of these legends was reflected in their ninth-century translation from Syriac into Arabic, perpetuating the importance of Alexander the Great in Islamic literature. See Stoneman, Erickson, and Netton, 2012. The popularity of the genre may relate to the association with the figure Dhu‘l-Qarnayn (the two-horned one) in Q18:83–102, although the potential Syriac source identified by Theodor Nöldeke in 1890 remains controversial. Bladel, 2008.
state reversed its position and philosophy was formally outlawed as part of legal interpretation. Nonetheless, it remained central to intellectual life and was disseminated through the poetic arts.

The complicated politics of this event resonated throughout later Islamic intellectual history. With grounding in philosophy, the theological school known as the Mu'tazila argued that the principle of the divine unity of God (tawhid), reflecting the transcendence and uniqueness of God, rendered divine attributes metaphorical rather than material. Affirming free will within divine predestination and recognizing reason as essential to human action and scriptural interpretation, they interpreted the Quran as a translation of divine essence into terms suitable for human comprehension. They viewed God as the creator who set creation in motion without interfering with its function. The design of the world was essentially the design of God.

The Abbasid caliphs initially supported Mu'tazilite theology, perhaps because they had also resisted the Umayyads – their name (which means ‘to withdraw’ or ‘to secede’) may refer to their withdrawal to their home city of Basra in response to suppression of the Shi’a. In 833 the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun instituted an inquisition (mihna) that required Islamic scholars to attest to the created nature of the Quran. However, this position was contested by literalist interpreters, the most prominent of whom was Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855). He held that the Quran should narrowly govern all aspects of Islamic life. Taking references to the anthropomorphic attributes of God implied in the Quran literally, he believed in divine predestination and argued against free will (Q38:75, 55:27, 20:5). Ibn Hanbal’s refusal to acquiesce to the inquisition bolstered his reputation under the caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–861), who reversed and terminated this inquisition in 848.

The controversy was quelled when Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-Ash’ari (d. 936) articulated a position mediating rational inquiry and divine omnipotence. Reflecting Mu'tazilite incorporation of Platonic occasionalism, he asserted that the world is composed of elements that are ultimately reducible to minimal parts (atoms). Reflecting a literalist position, he asserted that the behavior of these atoms in every instant is subject to the continual will of God. There are thus no laws of nature. Each instant expresses God’s will. Since God works logically, instantaneous divine acts appear with a regularity that allows us to perceive them as natural laws.

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In the meantime, the Fatimid dynasty (909–1171) of North Africa quickly grew into a rival caliphate from their capital city in Cairo. Isma’ili Shi’ā tracing their descent from the seventh Imam (leader) after ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Fatimids claimed sovereignty based on divine guidance to interpret beyond the superficial (zahiri) to the intrinsic (batini) meaning of the Quran. In 945 the Buyid dynasty (934–1062), which had sympathy for the Twelver Shi’a (who claimed descent from the twelfth Imam), took the Abbasid caliphate as a vassal state. Resisting the growing strength of the Shi’a, the Abbasid caliph al-Qadir (r. 991–1031) issued an edict in 1017 in which he claimed to ‘close the doors of interpretation.’ Yet the edict failed to eliminate the practice of rationalist argument and interpretation: philosophy was not only already ingrained in the Islamic legal system, it continued as part of scholarly education.\(^\text{17}\)

A systematic educational and legal system emerged for the first time in the late eleventh century, when the Nizamiyya Madrasa, instituted by the Seljuq grand vizier Nizam al-Mulk (1018–1092), established a system of reasoned debate based in the four approved schools of law. Islam developed through the discourse of these schools of jurisprudence (fiqh), each of which favored different Hadith and legitimated different discursive procedures balancing precedent and interpretation. This model of educational institutions teaching the four canonical schools of law became paradigmatic for some later Sunni dynasties. Judges from theological seminaries would adjudicate based on their education, and practices differed vastly across time and region. The extent to which any judgment had real-world efficacy depended on its enforcement and circulation as precedent. Thus, no single scholarly judgment can establish universal dogma, such as that implicit in the phrase ‘image prohibition’.

With the advent of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the introduction of modern educational systems and secular law interrupted and marginalized this system of juridical and theological authorization. On the one hand, this has enabled Orientalists and puritanical Islamists alike to directly cite originating texts without reflecting on their complex interpretive histories or potentially diverse legal rulings. On the other hand, this democratization has enabled modern scholars in the tradition of Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), including Taha Hussein (1889–1973), Mohammad Arkoun (1928–2010), and Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid (1943–2010), to argue that the Quran itself renders interpretation, a necessarily human and historical practice, incumbent on all Muslims. But

\(^{17}\) Hallaq, 1984; Berlekamp, 2011: 49–50.
is this possible? Or does reading depend so much on reception that our modern episteme occludes Quranic meaning?

Common wisdom often suggests that those curious about Islam should simply read the Quran. Yet the Quran is a famously difficult book. Whereas Norman Brown interprets it as a “radical thunderclap” that calls for a reevaluation of history akin to that of post-modernity, the nineteenth-century Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle condemned it as a “confused jumble, crude, incondite, endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite; – insupportable stupidity, in short! … one feels it difficult to see how any mortal could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the Earth; as a well-written book, or indeed as a book at all.” Brown, 1981: 55, 50. Although apparently bigoted, this is precisely the reaction that Jalal al-Din Rumi would have expected from a novice attempting to read the Quran. He explains:

The Koran is like a bride. Although you pull the veil away from her face, she will not show herself to you. When you investigate the Koran, but receive no joy or unveiling, it is because your pulling at the veil has caused you to be rejected. The Koran has deceived you and shown itself to be ugly. It says, “I am not that beautiful bride.” It is able to show itself in any form it desires. But if you stop pulling at its veil and seek its good pleasure; if you water its field, serve it from afar, and strive in that which pleases it, then it will show you its face without any need for you to draw aside its veil. Rumi replaces the entitlement of reading with the union of collaborative engagement. The reader seeking mastery over the Quran fails intrinsically. The Quran is the agent of her own accessibility; reading her through the entitlement of the reader amounts to rape.

His thought reflects intrinsic approaches to Islam that foster spiritual union with the divine that had developed contemporaneously with jurisprudence. Often called ‘Sufism’ (tasawwuf), these practices trace their origins to the visionary nature of the Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. Early mystics, such as Rabia of Basra (718–801) and Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), could be described as independent, wandering, mad, poetic sages. By the early twelfth century, however, when Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who taught at the Nizamiyya Madrasa, extolled intrinsic paths to wisdom in his Alchemy of Happiness (1105), Sufism had become mainstream. The elaborate cosmologies of Platonic Sufi thinkers such as Shahib al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191) and Muhyi al-Din ibn Arabi (1165–1240)

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reverberated in the teachings of thirteenth-century sages, who often expressed their thought in poetry. The orders that developed in memory of these sages practice spiritual exercises through which to traverse the stations of the path to God. Many of these rituals incorporate practices of divine remembrance (\textit{dhikr}) combining meditation, music, and bodily movement, known as audition (\textit{sama}).

Membership in these orders was central to Muslim communal life, and often linked with guild participation. Associating them with those who obey God as described in the Quranic verse 4:69, even the conservative Hanbali scholar Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) recognized Sufism as

the science of realities and states of experience. The Sufi is that one who purifies himself from everything which distracts him from the remembrance of God. [The Sufi] is so filled with knowledge of the heart and knowledge of the mind that the value of gold and stones will be equal to him. Sufism safeguards the precious meanings and leaves behind the call to fame and vanity to reach the state of truthfulness.\textsuperscript{20}

Opposition to Sufism could be complex. For example, the historian ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) described Sufism as equivalent to the law in defining Islam.\textsuperscript{21} Yet he also issued a ruling (\textit{fatwa}) condemning the writings of ibn Arabi, one of its germinal theorists.\textsuperscript{22}

The tension between legalism and mysticism predates Islam. Sufism reflects a Platonic approach of \textit{eros} (‘ishq), while legalism espouses a doctrine parallel with \textit{nomos}. Established through Pythagorean and Platonic thought, the idea of \textit{eros} considers the soul as divine and therefore as the human internalization of God. Redemption occurs through return to the divine. In the \textit{nomos} tradition, the soul is created along with the body, and does not have a preceding existence to which it can return.\textsuperscript{23} The opposition also reverberates with Zoroastrian opposition between \textit{getik}, the terrestrial, opaque, and heavy nature of creatures, and \textit{menok}, the ethereal, transparent, and subtle one.\textsuperscript{24} Thus the Hanbali scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi (1116–1201) derides Sufism:

Where is the association between the Creator and the created that can produce affection, love, or yearning? What relation is there between mud and water, and between the Creator of the heavens? … God has no quality towards which human nature can incline or souls yearn. Rather, the complete dissimilarity between the

Divinity and His creatures produce in men’s souls awe and timidity. What the Sufi lovers maintain concerning God is pure delusion.25

Yet far from peripheral to legalistic Islamic orthodoxy, membership in dervish orders was common to religious and legal scholars, guild members, and royalty.26 The immense economic and spiritual power of Sufi shaykhs led at various times to political alliances with rulers, cooptation by rulers, and the outright prohibition of specific brotherhoods. Although at times condemned as heresy, many of these restrictions served political exigencies.

Even when officially marginalized, Sufi interpretations of the Quran and existential parables circulated in poetry. In the practice of falsafa (medieval Aristotelian philosophy), allegory provided a means of teaching non-initiates the hidden knowledge of gnosia readily misunderstood as heresy. In relation to his tales (qisas), ibn Sina suggested that hints and pointers (rumuz wa-isarat) could be used for purposes of instruction, but their nature as parables should not be revealed.27 In one of his odes (ghazal), Jalal al-Din Rumi says, “All this is a symbol (rumuz) and its meaning is that you world is always coming into the world (of this life).”28 Sufi shaykh Ankaravi Ismail Rusuhi Efendi (d. 1631) explains the mathnawi poetic form, dominating Rumi’s production, as intending meaning by way of symbol and allusion to signify subtlety and secrecy.29

The segregation of Sufism as ‘heterodox’ in opposition to a presumed orthodoxy emerges only in the modern era.30 Modern Sunni puritanical movements deny the legitimacy of lived historical Islam and retroactively assert that authenticity belongs only to the Islam of the first generation of Muslims after the life of the Prophet, a generation known as the salaf. Many of these movements rely on the thought of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1702–1792).31 His theology relied extensively on the thought of ibn Taymiyya, whose work had limited contemporary efficacy, as he wrote during house arrest in Damascus following the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions. Wahhabi thought redefines the doctrine of the oneness of God (tawhid) through strict adherence to social and institutional practices defining the community, focusing not on faith but on ritual practice. Failure to observe signs of practice is equated with repudiation (kufr) of truth and must be persecuted by just believers.32 Historical Islam becomes inauthentic as it fails to follow these primordial precepts. In contrast to ibn

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Taymiyya, his vehement opposition to all Sufi practices, Shi’ism, and the veneration of saints as innovation and idolatry led to the destruction of the Shi’a shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf in 1803 and the destruction of the historic al-Baqi Cemetery in Medina in 1806. This has served as a precedent for much of contemporary Islamic iconoclasm, such as that of the Taliban and that of the so-called Islamic State, which attacked Sufi and Shi’a shrines as well as monuments more important for Western observers.

The association of restrictive interpretation with orthodoxy conforms to the modern conflation of so-called progress with the growth of liberalism and secularism based on the history of Christianity in Europe. Yet neither the teleological movement from conservatism to liberalism nor the distinction between religion and secularity clearly pertains to the Islamic case. In premodern Islamic societies, perceptual culture partook of an intellectual culture steeped in faith, and often suffused with Sufism. The alignment of so-called orthodoxy with a neutral, objective, and properly academic understanding of religion ends up promoting an unacknowledged political identification of art with a secular space absented of faith: if orthodoxy excludes Sufism, and Sufism informs the arts, then Islamic art cannot be properly Islamic, and art reflects culture rather than religion. This perspective ends up confirming a Salafist position, excluding the lived history of Islam as expressed in perceptual culture and intellectual history from a purely theological Islam. As Edward Said suggests, “the general liberal consensus that ‘true’ knowledge is fundamentally nonpolitical … obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced.”

While contemporary theologians can prescribe how they believe Muslims should be in the world, they cannot excommunicate the past. Neither can art historians.

1.2 Discourses of the Image in Islam

The persistent premise of an absolute Islamic image prohibition has led to extensive modern scholarship concerning the regulation of art through scripture. Yet experience undermines this premise. Muslims do not use votive images, but the plethora of representational images of religious, fantastic, historical, scientific, and even pornographic subjects suggests a richer

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34 Arnold, 1928; Creswell, 1946; Paret, 1976/7; Flood, 2002; Watt, 2002; Naef, 2003; Ibric, 2006; Vilchez, 2017: 70–78.
relationship with the image than one based on permissibility.\textsuperscript{35} The discourse of prohibition misapprehends the discursive structure of Islamic law and its wide range of expression in the varied histories and cultures of Islam. As Barry Flood points out, a “neat dichotomy” between theological norms as absolute or irrelevant occludes an “illuminating middle ground of compromise and negotiation.”\textsuperscript{36} It cynically suggests that the plenitude of figural imagery in Islamic art contravened an established rule due to elitism or to cultural inauthenticity. It fails to recognize that prohibition does not emerge directly from scripture, but from implementation of its interpretation – and this was far from uniformly enforced.

The lived history of images in the Islamic world can be roughly periodized as: the era of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Caliphs; the formative era under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates; the era dominated by manuscript painting following the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions and the subsequent imperial dynasties with Persiane court cultures; and the modern era, incorporating Western hegemonic practices. In contrast to the heated ecclesiastical debates about the religious legitimacy of images that followed the Christianization of the Roman Empire, almost no discussion of the legitimacy of the image emerged in Islamic theological debates.\textsuperscript{37}

Historical sources documenting the transition to Islam in the Hijaz suggest that idolatry was understood not simply through representational verisimilitude, but through attribution of divinity through worship. According to reports two centuries after his death, Muhammad and his followers destroyed the traces of polytheistic practice in Mecca in 630, including the idols worshiped at the Kaaba by the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet. The sculptures that were destroyed may have included a red agate statue of Hubal, the primary male deity of Mecca, who guarded and guided the seven divination arrows that guided decision making within the clan.\textsuperscript{38} The Kaaba also contained wall paintings depicting the prophets holding divining arrows, explicitly forbidden in the Quran. However, the image of Mary holding the baby Jesus in her lap (probably a portable icon depicting the Virgin Enthroned) located in the Kaaba was reported to have been spared. Rudi Paret’s discussion of the emergence of various Hadith suggests that the status of the image was subject to debate in the era of the prophet, yet the enforcement of such concerns was apparently inconsistent.\textsuperscript{39} In sharp contrast, a Hadith related by the Prophet’s youngest wife A’isha bint Abi Bakr (614–678) indicates that he always destroyed objects

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{35} For discussion of the religious image in Islam, see Gruber, 2009; Gruber and Shalem, 2014; Roxburgh, 2001. For discussion of erotic images, see Leoni and Natif, 2013.\textsuperscript{36} Hallaq, 2005; Flood, 2013.\textsuperscript{37} Elias, 2012.\textsuperscript{38} Faris, 1952: 23–24.\textsuperscript{39} King, 1985: 268; Paret, 1977: 162; Natif, 2011: 42.}
in his home marked by a cross.\textsuperscript{40} Although one commentator, the Yemeni Muhammad al-Shawkani (1759–1839), expanded this restriction of the cross to forbid all representations (\textit{taswir}) on garments, curtains, or carpets, the \textit{Hadith} point to doctrinal rather than representational concerns.\textsuperscript{41} Whereas the cross promotes the Crucifixion as the distinguishing doctrine between Islam and Christianity, the image of Virgin and Child reflects a shared doctrine of miraculous birth.

Although rare, periodic destruction of votive images did occur. During the Umayyad period, doctrinal concerns continued to render the display of the cross far more problematic than the representational imagery also avoided by contemporary iconoclastic Christians.\textsuperscript{42} However, the very same caliphs who patronized theologians and institutionalized the Islamic tradition incorporated sophisticated wall painting and sculpture in the decoration of their palaces, hunting lodges, and baths. The only legal prohibition of images during the early years of Islam occurred under the Umayyad caliph Yazid, when a 721 ban was implemented, lasting only until his death two-and-a-half years later. Even Roman Christian sources of the period found his action unusual enough to attribute his decision not to Islam, but to a Jewish sorcerer who promised him a long reign if he destroyed all the paintings in his realm.\textsuperscript{43}

The seizure of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain icons in ninth-century Afghanistan and eleventh-century India reflects a culture in which destruction accompanied display, symbolizing conquest more than iconoclasm. For example, physician and chronicler Abu 'Ubayd al-Juzjani (d. 1060) relates that the \textit{linga} of the Hindu temple of Somnath was destroyed under Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 998–1002), with parts laid at the entrance to his palace and mosque. Idols were also sent to Mecca and Medina, for display as well as public destruction. Not unique to idols, such destruction also befell Islamic texts promoting Shi'a or Mu'tazilite ideas.\textsuperscript{44} Far from being universally sanctioned, Mahmud’s destructive tendencies were disparaged by the scholar Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni (973–1040 CE), who wrote an extensive treatise about India following his patron Mahmud’s conquests, and regarded Hindu Brahmins as part of a social hierarchy distinguished not by religion, but by reason.\textsuperscript{45}

Discussion of images seems to have increased in concert with the introduction of manuscript illustration. The twelfth-century geographer Muhammad ibn Mahmud ibn Ahmad al-Tusi indicates ambivalence regarding the function of images in a preface to his discussion of the wonders of creation. He says: “Know that many images have been made

\textsuperscript{40} Flood, 2002: 645; King, 1985: 270. \textsuperscript{41} 'Isa, 1955: 252. \textsuperscript{42} King, 1985; Fowden, 2004: 59. \textsuperscript{43} Vasiliev, 1956. \textsuperscript{44} Flood, 2009: 32–34. \textsuperscript{45} Kavuri-Bauer, 2018: 292.
on earth for the sake of admonition so that people may take heed of them ... Know that image-making is unlawful, but it affects the soul.”

His emphasis on utility over permissibility exemplifies a wide range of uses for visual images in diverse temporal and geographical Islamic cultures. The earliest surviving manuscript paintings include thirteenth-century illustrated volumes of the Arabic translation of *The Pharmacy* by Pedanius Dioscorides (40–90), *The Assemblies of al-Hariri* by al-Qasim al-Hariri of Basra (1054–1122), and copies of ibn Bakhtishu’s *The Usefulness of Animals* and *Kalila and Dimna*. In the fourteenth century, the ethnically Mongol Ilkhanid rulers funded the production and distribution of illustrated copies of books such as the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Abu al-Qasim Firdausi (940–1020) and the *Compendium of Chronicles* by Rashid al-Din Hamadani (1247–1318) throughout their empire. Within its attempt at a full history of the world legitimating Ilkhanid sovereignty, the *Compendium* included an extensive illustrated history of the Abrahamic prophets, including the life of Muhammad. Often illustrated, a new literary genre (mirajnamah) emerged, emphasizing the visionary journey (mir’aj) establishing him in the lineage of Abrahamic prophets. As Christiane Gruber has shown, far from universally forbidden, paintings of the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets were widespread, shifting over time from figural to more conceptual modes of representation.

In the fifteenth century, the ethnically Mongol–Turkic, linguistically Persianate Timurid courts of Central Asia patronized poetry and painting, producing lavish books that complemented extensive wall painting. Perpetuating this legacy, early modern imperial dynasties including the Ottomans, the Mughals, and the Safavids retained and further developed the visual culture that had emerged in previous eras. These traditions faded with the printing press and the introduction of modern methods of producing images (such as lithography and photography), as well as the adoption of Western artistic practices, such as representational oil painting.

Although Islamic thinkers periodically objected to the use of images, others found their destruction no less inappropriate. Images were destroyed not only through iconoclasm, but also through rubbing and kissing from physical devotion to portions of a sacred image. In later centuries, image destruction did not constitute a cultural norm, but occurred in discrete events disempowering the image. Even where images were legally limited, social practices, including drinking and sexuality, rarely adhere to the stringent ideals set out by religious scholars, so

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there is no reason to assume that a dogmatic norm predominated over lived visual culture.\textsuperscript{50}

The modernist theologian Muhammad ‘Isa’s 1955 discussion of the image exemplifies the method of reasoning through which legal judgments remain open to reconsideration. By staging a discussion between jurists, he engages the reader in a processual rather than static relationship with Islam. He argues that far from demonstrating prohibition, the relative rarity of rulings concerning images in the vast sea of Islamic jurisprudence suggests overarching lack of interest:

The subject of \textit{taswir} [representation] is one which is not often dealt with in … Islamic jurisprudence … I believe that Islam neglected this subject as unimportant. All that exist are a few \textit{Hadiths} which Muslim jurists have used by way of explanation or comment in forbidding, disapproving, or permitting the making of representations (of living creatures), or acquiring or looking at them … No one can say that the Quran has either explicitly or implicitly provided for the prohibition of \textit{taswir} … If the question of \textit{taswir} had been as important as other problems, such as those of strong drink, marriage, divorce and inheritance, the Quran certainly would have dealt with it explicitly, as it did with other problems of conduct and worship.\textsuperscript{51}

‘Isa underscores the fact that Quranic quotations and \textit{Hadith} emerge as law through the disputation of previous interpreters. Rather than viewing their arguments additively, ‘Isa argues in relation to these commentators using procedures of precedent (\textit{taqlid}) and reason (\textit{ijtihad}) as called for in the procedures of Islamic jurisprudence. He thus conceives of himself as partaking in a debate among commentators from any temporal or geographical context, ancient or modern.

Conversely, when scholars cite the Quran or \textit{Hadith} as a direct source for a presumed ban on the image without recognizing this process, we construct a normative Islam distinct from its historical evolution – in effect, we become secular arbiters of Islamic dogma rejecting the lived diversity of practice. Through this process, the secular scholarly premise of a universal image prohibition has ironically become a defining feature of Islam for many contemporary Muslims.

The absolutism of an image prohibition emerges more from modern scholarship than from Islamic law. ‘Isa points out that only Orientalist scholars have used the following Quranic verse as instigating an image prohibition: “You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices (\textit{ansab}) and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts – Satan’s doing – shun them so you may

prosper” (Q5:90).^52 Modern scholars often cite a familiar set of Hadith as demonstrating the image prohibition. Yet without legal citation and use, Hadith alone cannot demonstrate law.

What these Hadith do provide is insight into how early Muslims thought about images. Bukhari writes that A’isha said that the Prophet said: “The image-makers will be punished on the Day of Resurrection and will be told, ‘Give life to that which you have created’” (Hadith 2151).^53 Bukhari also relates that the Prophet decried: “Those who will be most severely tormented on the Day of Resurrection are those who make representations.” The ninth-century commentator Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–929) understood this to refer to objects that “one consciously worships instead of God, which makes one an unbeliever.”^54 Thus a sign or image of an object without the breath of life (ruh) cannot in any case be embodied, and is therefore sanctioned; a sign of an object with ruh can only be sanctioned if it clearly cannot be embodied. Abu ‘Ali al-Farisi (d. 987) confined the restriction to the representation of God in corporeal form. The commentator Zamakshari (d. 1144) offered a concrete solution by proposing to cut the head from the body by drawing a line across the neck of a figure.\(^{55}\) Similarly, in his widely read treatise Ihya al-Ulum (Revival of the Religious Sciences), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali emphasizes restriction on three-dimensional objects imitating the form of animals, and explicitly pronounces images on objects such as textiles and bowls, licit.\(^{56}\) He does not mention wall paintings, which did exist in his era – he uses them as a metaphor, as discussed in Chapter 5 – or manuscript paintings, which seem to have been a later development. ‘Isa points out that this interpretation entered Islamic juridical discourse in the Riyadh al-Salihin of the commentator Abu Zakariya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi (1234–1278). Writing during the tension following the Mongol invasions, he wrote:

The authorities of our school and others hold that the making of a picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and that it is one of the great sins because it is specifically threatened with the grievous punishment mentioned in the Hadith … the crafting of it is forbidden under every circumstance, because it imitates the creative activity of God.\(^{57}\)

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52 Abdel-Haleem, 2004: 76.
53 [www.aHadith.com](http://www.aHadith.com) offers searchable Hadith in English, last accessed September 27, 2016. The similarity between this statement and the biblical book of Isaiah 44, extensively debated during the Eastern Roman iconoclastic controversy, underscores the cultural overlap.
56 Graves, 2018: 61.
Shahab Ahmed argues for the normativity of this ruling based on its own assertion of comprising earlier opinions. Yet if it had become normative, the Shafi’i scholar from Cairo, Taj al-Din al-Subki (d. 1370) might not have needed to repeat it, saying that “the painter should not paint animals on a wall, nor on the ceiling, nor on an object, nor on the floor.”

Conversely, al-Nawawi’s contemporary ibn Taymiyya, vehemently against the veneration of saints, said little concerning images. The compilation of his judgments (Majmu al-Fatawa) relates that he commanded the destruction of “two types of images: images which represent the deceased person, and images which are placed on top of graves – because shirk (the ultimate sin of placing another in the place of God) may come about from both types.” Even the modern Salafi scholar Sayyid Sabiq, an ardent follower of ibn Taymiyya, points out that if images were unlawful, the Prophet would have explicitly forbidden them. Like al-Nawawi, he addresses the affectivity of the image in the viewer at particular sites where the image might induce ancestor worship, and not a general prohibition of the image.

Another frequently cited Hadith advocates restraint from images because of association with other unclean things. Al-Bukhari relates that ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib said that the Prophet said: “The angels do not enter a house where there is an image, a dog, or a Junab person” (Hadith 262). ‘Isa points out that the early Quranic commentator al-Tabari (839–929) qualified the interpretation of this Hadith as referring to images “that one consciously worships instead of God, which makes one an unbeliever.” In yet another frequently cited Hadith, Bukhari relates that “A’isha said that she hung a curtain decorated with pictures of animates on a cupboard. The Prophet tore that curtain and she turned it into two pillows for her to sit on” (Hadith 669). ‘Isa points out that al-Ayni (1360–1453), who served as chief judge in Cairo in 1426–1429, situated it within polytheistic contexts. Similarly, a twentieth-century judgment by Muhammad Abduh, who served as the shaykh al-islam (official leading religious scholar) of Cairo between 1900 and his death in 1905, points out that in the absence of the obstacles of pure pleasure and polytheism, the representation of persons assumes the same status as the representation of plants and trees. You must not adduce the verdict that a representation, under all circumstances, is liable to be worshipped; for I think that one could say to you that

your tongue also is liable to tell lies, but is it necessary to tie it up even though it may tell the truth as well as falsehood? I am convinced, in short, that Islamic law would never prohibit one of the most useful means to knowledge if it were certain that it contained no danger to religion, faith, or action.64

The Islamic concern with images pervading these sources differs from the explicit biblical bans on representation, where God enjoins his followers: “Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it” (Leviticus 26:1); “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4–6). Islamic sources do not mention the image except as a distraction from prayer (as in the case of the curtains); defilement (the angels not entering the house, as well as associations with forbidden practices such as the paying for blood, usury, and tattooing in Hadith 299); and, most importantly, of attributing to man the creative function reserved for God – sinful not as idolatry but as shirk.

These Hadith never address the image so much as its recipient. They express a concern about misapprehension more than regulation of representation. In contrast to the clear Abrahamic injunctions against idols, these Hadith offer norms helping the believer to focus on the unseen divine rather than on potentially distracting representations.

1.3 Image Desecration

Assertions of an Islamic image prohibition have often been mixed with assertions of iconoclasm, the social imperative to destroy images. Yet image desecration has not only been relatively rare, it was generally politically rather than theologically motivated. Soon after Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni’s destruction of the temple of Somnath, some historians and poets glorified him by comparing his act to the Prophet’s destruction of the idols of the Kaaba.65 A sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript painting uses images of contemporary Indian statuary to represent the destruction of idols at the time of the birth of Muhammad, described apocryphally in the Hamzanamah, a sixteenth-century work commissioned by the Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Yet in doing so, it does not eschew figural representation of either the idols or the people whose images

were iconoclastically rubbed out only in the nineteenth century [Plate 1]. In 1839, colonial British administrators adopted the legend, justifying their sovereignty in India by framing the desecration of Hindu idols at Somnath as delegitimating imperial Muslim rule. This historiography has contributed to anti-Muslim sentiment modern India.

Similarly unrelated to jurisprudence, the image of the Prophet’s iconoclasm at the Kaaba entered popular Islamic culture through Moustapha Akkad’s 1976 film al-Risala/The Message, which effectively places the viewer in the subject position of the Prophet in an effort to avoid worship of the actor as his iconic representation. The film dramatizes the Prophet Muhammad’s destruction of the idols in the Kaaba as symbolic of the victory of Islam over paganism. Popular modern filmic iconography thus ties the inception of the religion to a visual trope never used in Islamic law as a justification for aniconism. Probably intended as a non-violent dramatic climax symbolizing the Prophet’s leadership, the film effectively constructs a contemporary iconography of iconoclasm.

This iconography reemerged when the so-called Islamic State in Syria released a video recording the destruction of the Mosul Museum in 2015. A Quranic recitation from Sura 21:58 including the phrase “he reduced them to fragments” floats over an interior scene of men taking sledgehammers to antiquities. To a score of religious chants accompanied by war cries, a text on the screen explains, “These idols and statues were not visible in the days of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions but were extracted by the worshippers of devils.” Although the cited Quranic passage apparently references the Prophet Muhammad’s iconoclasm, it actually recounts the resistance to Abraham against his father’s worship of and trade in idols. Such conflation of the prophets Muhammad and Abraham frequently functions in Islamic culture as proof of prophecy. It parallels several earlier retellings: in the Jewish Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 38:13; in the biblical book of Deuteronomy 12:3, enjoining the people of Moses to smash idols as they enter Jordan; and in the biblical book of Micah 5, which describes the entry into Nimrod and the subsequent destruction of Assyrian idols. Ironically, the video reflects an Orientalist vision of Islamic iconoclasm rooted firmly in the biblical tradition.

Yet the Kaaba represents a transition to Islam separate from those roots. Although it lies at the center of all Islamic prayer, its symbolism is rarely elucidated. It is an empty building draped with the kiswa, a heavy gold-and-velvet brocade covering embroidered with Quranic verse. Surrounding
by a silver frame uniting its fragments, the Black Stone (believed to be a meteorite) in its wall serves as the nexus of worshipful circumambulation during pilgrimage. The building is not entered during worship. What, then, makes it the nexus of Islamic prayer? How does its aniconicity (absence of the image) engage with a premise of Islamic iconoclasm (prohibition of the image)?

In his *Book of Idols*, the Baghdadi scholar Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (737–819) describes the Kaaba in the context of a need for religious renewal satisfied by the Quranic revelation. He explains that God commanded Abraham to establish the Kaaba as the first house of worship. Visitors to Mecca would thereafter carry away a stone of the Sacred House (*al-haram*) as a token of reverence, and subsequently circumambulate the Stone as a symbol of the Kaaba. This act of circumambulation needed an object at its center, rendering aniconic stones functionally interchangeable with statues of deities: “Whenever a traveler stopped at a place or station in order to rest or spend the night, he would select for himself four stones, pick out the finest among them and adopt it as his god, and use the remaining three as supports for his cooking-pot.” While al-Kalbi seems to ridicule such arbitrary attribution of sacrality, it suggests a polytheism relying less on visual representation than on objects conjuring divine presence through worship.

This worship of stones made Christians condemn Islam as idolatrous. Thus both Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople (r. 715–730) and John of Damascus (650–754) describe Muslims as venerating an inanimate stone in the desert which John of Damascus claimed was believed to represent the head of Aphrodite. Bukhari relates that the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–644), said, “I know that thou art a stone, without power to harm or to help, and had I not seen the Messenger of God kiss thee, I would not kiss thee.”

The narrative of the Stone condenses the teleology of Islam. The Stone is believed to have fallen from heaven to instruct Adam and Eve where to put their first altar to God after their fall. Forgotten before the flood, the Stone was rediscovered by Abraham, who incorporated it into a temple. The Quraysh tribe protected the temple and reconstructed it after a flood in 602. Biographies of the Prophet relate that various tribes cooperated until the symbolic act of placing the meteoric Black Stone. A respected elder called a halt to the fighting, suggesting that the first person to enter the sanctuary would solve the problem. The young Muhammad entered, and

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proposed that the Stone be raised on a mantle lifted collectively by all the tribes. A 1315 illustration from the *Compendium of Chronicles* underscores the key moment in the text, when the future Prophet lifts the Stone and places it as a cornerstone in the sanctuary, foreshadowing his rededication of the site in the name of Islam several decades later. [Figure 1]

This mode of memorial representation also informs the spatial structure of mosques. A mosque has no architectural requirement beyond directionality (*qibla*) toward the Kaaba. This is often indicated by a niche in the frontal wall of a prayer space called a mihrab, indicating leadership taken by the imam in front of the *qibla* niche before the congregation, and, by anachronistic extension, by the Prophet at the mosque of Medina. In late antiquity, such a niche would have held a devotional sculpture. The absence of such a sculpture signals both the Prophet who hovers before it as the leader of Islam and the idea of the distant Kaaba to which it points. Just as an image indicates reality across a representational picture plane, the mihrab signals Prophetic guidance toward the Kaaba. The replacement of a devotional image with a devotional absence redirects prayer inward,

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70 Khoury, 1998.
toward God located as close to the believer as her jugular vein (Q50:16). Rather than indicating prohibition, the absent image signifies a conflation of signifier and signified communicating directly from the votive object into the devoted believer.

This implicit understanding of representation reflects participation in late antique discourses of mimesis largely excluded from modern aesthetic theory. Mimetic representation suggests a family of concepts of representation using any intermediary – words, sounds, physical images – to signify and communicate hypothesized realities. As these realities are “imagined possibilities of experience,” the Greek tradition emphasizes the effects of mimetic artworks on their viewers or hearers, and frequently “characterizes and evaluates the kinds of recognition, understanding, emotional response and evaluation that such artworks can or should elicit in their audiences.”

Stephen Halliwell suggests that

The history of mimesis is the record of a set of debates that form themselves around a polarity between two ways of thinking about representational art. The first of these places central emphasis on the “outward-looking” relationship between the artistic work or performance and reality (“nature,” as it is often though problematically termed in the mimeticist tradition), whereas the other gives priority to the internal organization and fictive properties of the mimetic object or act itself … encapsulating a difference between a “world-reflecting” model (for which the “mirror” has been a common though far from straightforward metaphorical emblem), and, on the other side, a “world-simulating” or “world-creating” conception of artistic representation.

Heidegger captures this sensibility in describing the “Greek man” as “the one who apprehends (vernehmen) that which is, and this is why in the age of the Greeks, the world cannot become picture.”

Modern considerations of Islamic painting recognize the ‘outward-looking’ aspect of mimesis – how we as agents apprehend the world. As in late antiquity, Islamic commentators and theorists focused largely on an ‘inward-looking’ aspect – how the world as agent enters human subjectivity. The philosopher al-Farabi (c.872–950) indicates this preference in saying, “Many people believe that the imitation of something in the most indirect form is preferable to direct imitation, and they hold the creator of those expressions to be the author of a more genuine form of imitation, as well as more skilled and experienced in the art.” The image that early Islamic thinkers consider is not a

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means of showing so much as internalizing the real. The first author of Islamic parables, ibn Sina defends the mimetic effect of poetry as a means of formulating images in the imagination.

People respond to imagination (tahyil) more easily than to verification (tasdiq) ... because truth that is already known is like old merchandise, which has no freshness to it; and one cannot relate to truth that is as yet unknown. So if a true saying is phrased in an unusual way, and is associated with something that is agreeable to the soul, then it may impart both verification and imagination.\(^{75}\)

Similarly, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, the Cordoban philosopher ibn Rushd (1126–1198) echoes a Platonic recognition of representation not as external but internal to its creator, saying, “Art is nothing but the form of the thing produced by art, and this form resides in the soul of the artist; it is this idea which is the principle for the form produced by art in the matter.”\(^{76}\)

The relationship between the Islamic and late antique worlds remains insufficiently analyzed. Historiographic emphasis on the so-called closure of the doors of interpretation in the eleventh century corroborated the premise that the Islamic world functioned as a transparent vessel preserving antique texts for their revival through scholastic translation beginning in twelfth-century Europe. One response to this has been to assert purely Arab origins for Islamic practices.\(^{77}\) Yet the Arab world of early Islam was integral to the world of late antiquity even before Islam’s northward spread. As the seeds of faith spread geographically, Islam developed through interactions with local societies, whose scholars engaged with philosophy. Ideas do not remain tied to boundaries of ethnicity or religion. The relevance of late antique mimetic norms in Islamic discourses does not imply that Islamic culture was derivative or unoriginal, but rather that Islam emerged in an integral relationship with its environments.

As participants in late antique culture and avid readers of ancient Greek philosophy, Islamic thinkers developed understandings of perceptual culture that favored inward over outward mimesis. Discussed in the next four chapters, this understanding permeates discussions of music; the perception and ontology of the Quran; the mirror as the imaging surface of the heart; and the role of transient images in dreams and legends.

\(^{75}\) Stroumsa, 1992: 199.  \(^{76}\) Porter, 2000: 113.  \(^{77}\) Khoury, 1993; Vilchez, 2017: 51 n. 74 critiques Mohammad Arkoun’s comparison between Qahir al-Jurjani’s analysis of Quranic rhetoric and Aristotelian rhetoric, suggesting that Quranic rhetoric can be entirely derived from Arab sources. I would suggest that these are not necessarily opposed so much as reflecting longstanding transcultural communication accompanying trade.