

## Concluding Remarks

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## Concluding Remarks

### WILSON CHACKO JACOB

*The true picture of the past flits by.*  
— Walter Benjamin

My comments are brief because my interlocutors have brilliantly and fairly elucidated the aspects of *For God or Empire* that are its major strengths and weaknesses. Every book and every author face this Manichean reality and must do so as gracefully as possible. Accordingly, brevity of authorial response is the best course. I limit myself to two observations that will hopefully extend the conversation rather than end it with some sort of authoritative and final reading. They concern the forms of history and the form-of-life, their intersection and dis-juncture.

Walter Benjamin's critical insights on time and history, language and life, animate this book in its structure and the flow of its argument. Though he was not the sole inspiration for the final product (which was touched to varying degrees by the emerging rich historiography and ethnography of the Indian Ocean World; Agamben and Foucault; Butler, Asad, and Mahmood; and, most importantly, the 'Alawi Way's canon of texts and shrines), Benjamin was a primary conduit enabling me to connect my personal memory of living a spiritual life when younger to the historical experiences of Sayyid Fadl. In turn, I was inspired on the one hand to forge from that connection a hopefully meaningful history of a world that was being made global through the devices of competing sovereignties, which were reconceptualized in the process — as universal, singular modern state sovereignty. On the other hand, trying to trace this global history through Fadl's documented historical experiences while sorting through flashes of our combined memory, a persistent question surfaced about the proper life of history in relation to a life thought to be out of time.

Among his many insightful essays, Benjamin's study of Proust is filled with rich nuggets of how a text that is itself overflowing with time, not as history but as remembrance, not as boundless but as convoluted, effects an image of the author.<sup>1</sup> Proust's obsessive pursuit of meaning in times remembered and forgotten ultimately reveals that "Only the *actus purus* of recollection itself, not the author or the plot, constitutes the unity of the text."<sup>2</sup> While Benjamin's appreciation of

the mystical is well known, his insight takes on a whole new character if applied to an actual mystic (even with all the limitations of that translation): the Sufi Sayyid Fadl. It might be said that Fadl, precisely because of his Sufi tradition as thick textuality *and* exercises of the self, appreciated the power of remembrance (*dhikr*) to bend and pierce time and to make life Other in more intimate and visceral ways than Benjamin. Proust “frenetically” sought happiness in the difference between the finitude of lived experience and the infinity of the “remembered event,” wherein the remainder was the florid written word. For Fadl, the proper relationship to written language as a vehicle for capturing time’s passage had been modelled by his ‘Alawi predecessors of the preceding centuries. In this accumulated tradition, history’s finitude and therefore its relative insignificance was indeed thought in relation to the infinity of remembrance; however, the in-between was not exclusively literary flight, rather an ecstatic condition, with its plenitude of happiness, love, freedom, and the annihilation of the melancholy of everydayness.

Dr. Mian illuminates this strand of the work most effectively and surely more cogently than I did in the book. I would only add, in light of Dr. Willis’s comments about historical occlusions, that the accelerating terms of Istanbul’s urban modernity during Fadl’s stay there in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and how that quickening of time might have affected his historical consciousness and the trajectory of his heirs could have benefitted from further analysis. Then, the unfolding of sayyid sovereignty on the terrain of history and transnationally in the twentieth century with multiple possibilities could have been drawn out in more detail.<sup>3</sup> However, subject to a certain economy of text and committed to exploring the relationship between a sense of historical crisis and rejuvenation, with their distinct though overlapping temporalities, it seemed in fact the potentially more generative (*and* historically accurate) approach to privilege the dissonance and unreason of mysticism over the harmony and rationality of history. The latter’s ordering of the world in terms of historical time became an indispensable ballast of modern sovereignty. The developing scientific knowledge of the past and its attendant uses for secular government in the wake of the Tanzimat was, I argued, an ingredient in Fadl’s sense of historical crisis that was indeed a crisis of Muslim futures in this world and after.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin traces the play of outward aging (of world and self) with inward remembrance (of life) to clarify how Proust materialized eter-

nity as the passage of time, always convoluted and in bounded space. "Proust has brought off the tremendous feat of letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration in which things that normally just fade and slumber consume themselves in a flash is called rejuvenation. *À la Recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost awareness."<sup>5</sup> Fadl experienced an aging world that was dramatically transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the flashes of memory and the effects of remembrance at the end of his biological aging process generated texts that invoked multiple lifetimes of Sufi saints in the 'Alawi Way and an eternity that was not bounded by the history of the world. Awareness and remembrance at the end of life and history, for Fadl, were intimately entwined in the seeking and the approach to eternity and the Eternal; this was his "unity of the text," a web of life and non-life that spanned the dimensions of the seen and the unseen.

Therefore, while there are many relevant histories and futures-past that *For God or Empire* elided or glossed over lightly, this was not entirely haphazard. Surely as Dr. Prange elaborates here and in his book on the Indian Ocean World, commercial pathways and Islamic forms of authority, the power to be or not to be hospitable, the accommodation of some but not others, all have very specific and historically changing trajectories. It was my contention as I alluded above that while those are immensely important and rich histories to retrieve, in the process of retrieval some things are always lost in time. That something in this case was the unity of life (or form-of-life) that nineteenth-century Fadl, his ancestors, and his forebears engaged with varying degrees of knowledge and commitment. And despite the specificity of their historical lives and contexts, this "life" was decidedly not historical and could not be but glimpsed between records and treatises, law and worship, mosques and shrines, migration and settlement. A conception of life that was not historical, however, was conceived historically. This paradox ultimately dictated the time-traveling form of the book, as it sought to trace the trajectory of political containment within the horizon of the state while marking its limit on the ethical subject (sayyid sovereign and other) that Fadl sensed as emergent and that remains salient to the present.

I wish to end with a note of gratitude to Professors Mian, Prange, and Willis for taking the time to engage with what is admittedly an undisciplined work that often borders on the esoteric in its "presenting" of history and life in language. Kindly devoting their time to this

engagement in the context of a global pandemic that has wreaked havoc for people everywhere makes them truly heroic. Their interlocutions have enabled me to clarify to my own mind what the lineaments of *For God or Empire* are.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), 201-15.
- 2 Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," 203.
- 3 Historical individuals are messy beings and always belong to multiple worlds, and this was certainly true of sayyids from the beginning. Unity-of-life, however, is a disruptive idea that could only be glimpsed in history even as it was not of history, as its end was the undoing of the very worldings that locate the self in time and space.
- 4 Fadl, it might be said, anticipated Benjamin's tenth thesis of History, which begins with monastic discipline and ends with the urgent need for radically reconceptualizing history as discipline. See "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, 258.
- 5 Benjamin, "Proust," 211.