The algorithm as an archivist: Muslim digital artists and the spiritual work of AI

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Abstract

This article examines how Muslim artists use artificial intelligence (AI) as both a speculative tool and a spiritual medium to reimagine religious memory, aesthetics, and cultural belonging. Grounded in the frameworks of digital religion, and *Muslim Futurism*, I analyse projects such as *Khawab*, *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, and *Fanar* to show how artists mobilise AI to preserve, remix, and animate Islamic traditions. I argue that this artistic practice fosters 'digital spirituality' a form of meaning-making and remembrance that transcends institutional boundaries and blends online and offline religious lives. This article contributes to emerging conversations about Muslim AI aesthetics and proposes that these creative interventions offer an alternative vision of technology one that is ethically rooted, spiritually resonant, and politically subversive in an era of digital surveillance and erasure.

Keywords: Muslims and AI; AI-generated art; digital art and religious experience; artificial intelligence; artist

1.Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining feature of contemporary life shaping communication, creativity, and knowledge production across a range of fields. As AI systems increasingly enter domains once reserved for human intuition and interpretation, they are not only transforming industry and media but also influencing how individuals and communities engage with the sacred. Yet, while AI's technical and ethical implications are widely studied, its spiritual dimensions remain comparatively underexplored. The research questions guiding this paper are: What happens when religious memory, ritual, and emotion are mediated by code? How do artists navigate the possibilities and tensions of using AI to represent faith, imagine futures, or archive tradition? To answer these, this paper turns to Muslim digital artists as cultural producers who are actively experimenting with AI to express and reinterpret religious experience. Rather than seeing technology and faith as oppositional, artists use AI as a speculative and spiritual medium layering Islamic aesthetics, diasporic memory, and theological symbolism into generative art, digital archives, and immersive installations. Their work challenges reductive narratives of Islam in digital spaces, while also participating in the long-

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standing Islamic tradition of adapting form and method to context. Focussing on projects such as *Khawab* (a reimagining of Muslim women's alter-ego through AI-generated fashion portraiture), *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism* (an immersive, multisensory exhibition exploring liberation, identity, and love through Islamic futures), and *Fanar* (an Arabic language AI trained to understand religious nuance), this article argues that AI is functioning not only as a creative tool, but as a digital archivist reinterpreting religious symbols, reshaping aesthetic memory, and enabling new modes of devotional engagement.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in digital religion, media studies, and Islamic art, I situate these works within a broader framework of digital spirituality where AI becomes a site of reflection, remembrance, and ethical imagination. Rather than merely mimicking tradition, these artists animate it, using algorithmic tools to generate affect, presence, and wonder. In an era of increasing digital surveillance, erasure, and algorithmic bias, particularly for Muslim communities, this work represents a powerful mode of religious agency and cultural resilience. By highlighting the affective, aesthetic, and spiritual stakes of AI in Muslim artistic practice, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations on how technology mediates religious experience. It asks how machine learning might support not only innovation, but also how it might archive the sacred without flattening its complexity. Ultimately, it proposes that AI, when placed in the hands of minority artists, offers a way to reimagine religious experience as something not just preserved in the past, but actively unfolding in the digital now.

2. Literature review

The emergence of digital religion as a field of study has been shaped by pioneering scholars who have examined the intersections of faith, technology, and digital culture. Gary R. Bunt, a foundational figure in this area, has extensively explored how Muslims engage with digital technologies to express religious beliefs, construct online identities, and challenge dominant narratives. Through works such as *Virtually Islamic* (2000), *iMuslims* (2009), *Hashtag Islam* (2018), and Islamic Algorithms (2024) Bunt has coined critical terms like 'Cyber Islamic Environments,' providing a framework for understanding how Islamic discourses are negotiated and transformed online. Alongside Bunt, Heidi A. Campbell has been instrumental in establishing digital religion as a scholarly field. Her research spans multiple faith traditions, with a particular focus on how religious communities adopt, resist, and reshape new media technologies. In books such as *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010) and *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), Campbell introduces the concept

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of 'religious-social shaping of technology,' arguing that religious groups actively shape the use of digital tools in ways that reflect their theological and cultural values. Together, Bunt and Campbell offer complementary perspectives that illuminate the complexities of religious expression in digital spaces, making their work central to any study of AI and religious experience.

Expanding on their foundational work, both Bunt and Campbell have developed nuanced theoretical frameworks that remain central to understanding the religious transformations taking place in digital environments. Bunt's (2018) concept of *Cyber Islamic Environments* (CIEs) captures the multiplicity of ways Muslims interact with technology from online fatwas and Qur'anic apps to sociopolitical activism and identity formation. His interdisciplinary lens drawing from sociology, anthropology, and political science emphasises the shifting landscape of religious authority, where traditional gatekeepers compete with decentralised digital voices. Similarly, Campbell's theory of *Digital Religion* explores how religious beliefs and practices are not merely replicated but reshaped within digital ecosystems. Her notions of *networked religion*, together with Echchaibi and Hoover's (2014) *third spaces* address how everyday religious life is increasingly mediated through digital networks, challenging binaries between online and offline spirituality. These frameworks provide a robust lens through which scholars can examine the emergence of new Islamic subjectivities, evolving notions of community, and the ethical tensions that surface as sacred traditions intersect with algorithmic cultures. Their influence is evident across a growing body of literature that applies bibliometric and sentiment analysis to track key developments, gendered participation, and evolving themes in digital Islamic studies.

Furthermore, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), the digital realm can be conceptualised not simply as a storage space for religious content, but as a dynamic and political site of memory-making. Derrida (1995) suggests that the archive is never neutral; it is always bound up with power of what is remembered, how it is ordered, and who has access (p. 37). In digital spaces, these tensions become even more pronounced. Platforms like *YouTube*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* function as algorithmically governed repositories, where religious texts, practices, and performances are uploaded, tagged, circulated, and recontextualised. For Muslim users, these archives are living systems where everyday acts such as sharing a verse, remixing a call to prayer, or creating AI-generated Islamic art contribute to a constantly evolving and participatory record of contemporary religious life.

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As for AI, it increasingly assumes the role of a digital archivist; a system capable of storing, reinterpreting, and even generating new versions of cultural and religious memory. Yet the implications of this are anything but neutral. Drawing from Islamic theological and philosophical traditions, Yaqub Chaudhary (2024) critiques AI's rapid integration into social life as a metaphysical and political project: a modern-day sorcery that, like Pharaoh's illusionists in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses, simulates life without possessing it. Just as the golden calf misled the Israelites by mimicking divine presence, generative AI systems, he argues, risk drawing societies into the worship of artificial constructs devoid of spiritual essence. Chaudhary's (2024) critique is not a technophobic rejection, but a theological caution: AI, by blurring the lines between animate and inanimate, intelligence and simulation, may mimic religious authority while concealing its epistemic opacity. This concern resonates with Islamic teachings about life and agency as divine attributes. From an Islamic perspective, knowledge (*ʿilm*) and life (*hayāt*) cannot be reduced to algorithmic functions. They are part of a cosmological order that centres divine will, revelation, and the prophetic model of ethical guidance. The risk, Chaudhary (2024) warns, is not just misrepresentation it is seduction. AI, framed as omniscient and neutral, may become an idol that reshapes how Muslims conceive of spiritual authority, tradition, and even reality itself.

In contrast to the alarmist tone of much contemporary discourse, Kurbalija (2024) offers a longer historical view, grounding AI's conceptual foundations in the Islamic Golden Age (eighth–fourteenth century). Scholars like al-Khwārizmī, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and al-Kindi contributed significantly to algebra, algorithmic thinking, statistics, and logic fields, foundational to today's AI systems. Al-Khwārizmī's work on algorithms and algebra laid the groundwork for computational logic. Avicenna's 'flying man' thought experiment anticipated questions of consciousness and virtuality by proposing that self-awareness could exist independently of bodily sensation. Al-Kindi's statistical analyses in cryptography foreshadowed probabilistic reasoning used in machine learning.

These contributions challenge the narrative of AI as an exclusively Western innovation. They also highlight the centrality of epistemology in Islamic thought: knowledge is not just utilitarian data but a layered construct informed by ethics, metaphysics, and divine revelation. Concepts like *qadar* (divine decree) and human agency formed complex debates in classical theology and philosophy, particularly about certainty, risk, and moral responsibility, which are deeply relevant as AI increasingly automates decision-making. For Kurbalija, Islamic history

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provides not only technological roots for AI, but ethical and intellectual resources to guide its use in ways that honour human dignity, responsibility, and spiritual purpose. In doing so, these perspectives position Islamic intellectual heritage as a vital framework for reimagining AI not merely as a technical advancement, but as a moral and spiritual enterprise rooted in justice, balance, and human accountability.

3. Methodology and theoretical framework

The recognition of digital spaces as active archives and generative platforms for religious expression aligns powerfully with broader cultural movements that imagine alternative futures beyond the constraints of colonial memory. Afrofuturism offers a critical framework for understanding how marginalised communities reimagine identity, technology, and spirituality. Emerging first through Mark Dery's (1995, p. 180) definition, and radically reshaped by Black scholars and creators like Alondra Nelson and Nnedi Okorafor, Afrofuturism critiques the historical erasure of Blackness and insists on centring African and diasporic imaginations. Afrofuturism more precisely, shifts the gaze entirely away from the Western context, rooting speculative futures deeply in African cosmologies, indigenous knowledge, and lived realities. This tradition imagines futures not marked solely by historical trauma, but by resilience, creativity, and community-building where technology serves not as an alienating force but as a means of spiritual renewal and political empowerment. The archival practices of Afrofuturism thus parallel the dynamics of digital religion: both actively contest hegemonic narratives, use technology to rewrite collective memory, and create speculative spaces where new theologies and solidarities can emerge.

Within this broader landscape, *Muslim Futurism* similarly emerges as a vital and necessary framework. *Muslim Futurism* builds on these traditions by centring Muslim experiences, both religious and cultural, as a launching point for imagining futures unbounded by Islamophobia, colonialism, or surveillance capitalism (MIPSTERZ, 2022). Like Afrofuturism, *Muslim Futurism* seeks to break away from Western paradigms that have historically defined Muslim identity through conflict, threat, or victimhood. Instead, it envisions worlds where Muslim aesthetics, spiritualities, and technologies are sources of power, joy, and innovation. It treats Islamic cosmology, prophetic tradition, and diasporic experience not as relics of a romanticised past but as generative forces for envisioning just and pluralistic futures. As Muslim artists engage digital archives and AI technologies, they are not only participating in the remaking of religious life but also asserting new speculative imaginaries. Generative algorithms, once tools of

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corporate surveillance and homogenisation, are being reappropriated to craft expansive visions of Muslim worlds that centre healing, futurity, and communal flourishing. *Muslim Futurism*, like Afrofuturism, challenges who is allowed to dream—and insists that Muslim imaginaries deserve not only survival, but abundance.

MIPSTERZ is an arts and culture collective based in New York City that brings together Muslim artists, creatives, and thinkers to challenge dominant narratives surrounding Muslim identity through multimedia projects, fashion, music, and speculative art. Foundational in conceptualising *Muslim Futurism*, MIPSTERZ use interdisciplinary artistic practices to imagine liberatory Muslim futures that draw from Islamic traditions, global resistance movements, and Afrofuturist frameworks, while centring imagination, community, and self-determined storytelling (MIPSTERZ, 2022). Through projects like *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, MIPSTERZ have positioned *Muslim Futurism* not just as an aesthetic, but as a speculative technology and an active tool for reimagining Muslim identity, community, and belonging beyond colonial, racialised, and Islamophobic frameworks. The multidisciplinary exhibition, which is three years in the making, first launched at the Fine Arts Center and showcases a broad range of media including paintings, photography, sculpture, digital installations, soundscapes, VR experiences, and interactive art. Each piece is not merely artistic output but a form of speculative labour: collectively, they function as world-building devices that reframe Muslim subjectivities through imaginative, resistant, and liberatory lenses. Drawing explicitly from Afrofuturism's political project of envisioning Black futures outside of white supremacy, *ALHAMDU* also incorporates the liberatory aspirations of global resistance movements from Palestine to Sudan, from the Rohingya to the Uyghurs, rooting *Muslim Futurism* firmly in ongoing struggles for justice, dignity, and self-determination.

MIPSTERZ's use of art as speculative technology constructs a living framework around five thematic pillars: imagination, identity, community, resistance, and liberation. Each theme is interrogated not only through creative production but through academic dialogue and community engagement, reinforcing that *Muslim Futurism* is both an aesthetic practice and a sociopolitical methodology (Patel, 2024). *Imagination* becomes the foundation for rupturing inherited narratives of Muslim victimhood; *identity* is rearticulated beyond orientalist typologies; *community* is reimagined as pluralistic and transnational, woven through digital and diasporic solidarities; *resistance* is framed not only as survival but as joyful disruption; and *liberation* is proposed as both a spiritual and material horizon. This paper adopts a mixed methods approach, drawing on textual analysis and visual ethnography to examine the ways

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Muslim digital artists engage with AI as a creative and spiritual tool. Select digital artworks produced using platforms such as *MidJourney*, *DALL·E*, and *Fanar* are analysed as visual texts, attending to aesthetic strategies, Islamic motifs, and narrative layering that reflect religious memory, identity, and futurist imagination. This analysis is complemented by a literature-based framework, synthesising current scholarship on digital religion, AI ethics in Islamic contexts, and Muslim Futurism. Through this arts-based lens, the research not only explores what is represented, but how digital tools are employed to re-archive, reimagine, and ritualise spiritual expression in the age of AI.

4. Data findings

Through the act of archiving artistic engagements across exhibitions, digital platforms, VR spaces, and community programming, MIPSTERZ contest dominant narratives about Muslim historical memory and assert alternative modes of storytelling that centre community voices and lived experiences. Their evolving archive resists the logic of static preservation and instead embraces a living, participatory, and generative model of cultural memory. *Muslim Futurism*, as articulated through *ALHAMDU*, thus becomes both a curatorial practice and a theological act: it invites Muslim creators and audiences to embody their dreams, build speculative sanctuaries, and assert their presence in futures too often imagined without them. As Muslim communities engage more deeply with digital technologies, new artistic practices have emerged that not only reclaim narrative space but also challenge the biases embedded within the very tools they use. Muslim digital artists are increasingly using artificial intelligence (AI), photography, digital editing, and multimedia storytelling to produce speculative, identity-affirming works that transcend orientalist, racialised, and Islamophobic representations. These digital arts practices are not simply aesthetic; they are political and spiritual interventions reshaping the archive, curating futures, and offering counternarratives that resist mainstream erasure. Within this growing movement, AI tools like *MidJourney*, *DALL·E*, and other generative engines serve as both mediums of creativity and sites of critical interrogation, as artists grapple with the biases and exclusions these technologies often reproduce.

One significant case study that exemplifies this intersection of Muslim digital art, storytelling, and AI is *Khawab*, a collaborative project with MIPSTERZ, foundational in conceptualising *Muslim Futurism*. *Khawab*, meaning 'dream' in Urdu, is a storytelling and visual arts project that transforms Muslim women into fictional alter-egos through photography, fashion, and AI-enhanced imagery. Inspired by futurist studies and grounded in *Muslim Futurism*,

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as an analytical framework *Khawab* seeks to reimagine the inclusion of Muslim women in speculative fiction spaces that too often exclude them. Rather than merely being descriptive, the project draws upon *Muslim Futurism*'s conceptual emphasis on imagination, resistance, and world-building to critically intervene in dominant visual cultures. By leveraging intersectionality and speculative aesthetics through fashion the project breaks barriers around who gets to imagine and occupy fictional realities, positioning Muslim women not as passive subjects but as co-creators of dynamic, self-defined futures that challenge Islamophobic, racialised, and gendered tropes (Mirza, 2021; Lodi, 2020).

The methodology of *Khawab* merges traditional photographic practices with the use of AI software such as *MidJourney*, allowing participants to co-create visual narratives of their imagined alter-egos. Through collaborative dialogue, participants designed characters rich with cultural, religious, and fantastical symbolism such as Minhas's transformation into a 'Desi Elf' or Aaliya's embodiment of *Jal Pari* ('mermaid' in Urdu), which centres South Asian relationships to aquatic life beyond Western mythologies (Patel, 2024, p. 3). In each case, the participants challenged dominant fictional tropes and inserted their own cultural frameworks, aided by digital enhancement tools. However, the project also revealed critical tensions: the AI-generated outputs often reinforced orientalist and colourist biases, demonstrating how generative technologies replicate the colonial assumptions embedded in their training data. By confronting and creatively subverting these algorithmic biases, *Khawab* illustrates how Muslim artists navigate and reshape the technological architectures that attempt to contain their self-expression. *Khawab* is thus not only an art project but a form of archival activism and speculative resistance. By envisioning Muslim women in futuristic, alternative realities, it contests the limitations often imposed on brown Muslim bodies in both traditional media and emergent AI art spaces. The project's exhibition at international venues like the Mosquers Film Festival demonstrates the growing resonance of *Muslim Futurism* as a serious cultural movement; one that insists on dreaming futures where joy, agency, and flourishing are centred for Muslims, particularly for those historically marginalised within both religious and secular imaginaries. *Khawab* exemplifies how Muslim digital artists use technology not as a neutral tool, but as a contested site of power, imagination, and reclamation, pushing the possibilities of Muslim identity beyond the boundaries of current algorithmic and cultural limitations.

While *Khawab* offers a compelling example of *Muslim Futurism* as an act of reclamation through digital art and AI, other projects similarly demonstrate how Muslim artists engage technology, storytelling, and archival practice to challenge hegemonic narratives. Two

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particularly resonant projects are *The 1001 Nights: A Visual Retelling* and Wesaam Al-Badry's *Fabric of Identity* series, each illustrating different strategies for weaving together culture, futurity, and visual disruption. *The 1001 Nights: A Visual Retelling* project, led by artist Bryony Devitt, reimagines the iconic tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* through a collaborative, multimedia framework. Inspired by Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh's retelling of the traditional stories, Devitt invites contributors from across genres to create visual interpretations of the classic narratives, emphasising the personal, evolving relationship between storyteller and story. Over six years, Devitt produced a series of twenty illustrations that embody both homage and critical reflection: while engaging the lush aesthetic traditions associated with the *Nights*, the project also grapples with the history of exoticism and Orientalist imagery in Western retellings. Rather than replicating static or idealised visions of the 'Arabian Nights,' *The 1001 Nights Project* becomes a living, participatory archive and evolving repository of diverse interpretations that foregrounds human resilience, creativity, and complexity. In this way, the project mirrors broader *Muslim Futurist* goals: it disrupts singular narratives about Muslim cultures and imagines pluralistic futures shaped by collective storytelling.

Islamic art has always been more than an aesthetic tradition it is a living archive, a vehicle of cultural memory, and a mode of transmitting knowledge, devotion, and identity across generations. As the Diriyah Biennale Foundation's 2023 and 2025 exhibitions demonstrate, Islamic art collapses the binary between past and present. At the world's first Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah, ancient marble columns from the Abbasid era stood beside minimalist installations of the *ihram*, inviting viewers to see ritual, movement, and the sacred as continuous and ever-evolving. This curatorial choice placing historical artefacts in conversation with contemporary expressions reflected a central tension at the heart of Islamic art: it is rooted in tradition, yet dynamic; it is devotional, yet open to innovation. Rather than being confined to a specific time period, medium, or geography, Islamic art travels across centuries and borders, embodying the multiplicity of the Muslim world.

In this sense, the digital and speculative work of Muslim artists today—like *Khawab*, *Fabric of Identity*, and *The 1001 Nights Project* does not break from Islamic artistic tradition but extends it. These artists draw from Islamic aesthetics, oral storytelling, textile heritage, and symbolism, infusing them with new media and AI technologies such as *MidJourney* to create artistic pieces. In digital Muslim Futurisms, veils become canvases, myths are reinterpreted through AI, and archives are speculative rather than fixed. This is not simply about preserving the past but

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animating it, making it speak to the current moment and projecting it into possible futures. Islamic art, in its contemporary forms, remains a tapestry continuously woven by new hands; each thread an act of memory, resistance, and imagination.

The ambition to develop AI tools that accurately engage with Islamic texts and traditions is already underway. The Arabic Language Technologies group at Qatar Computing Research Institute, led by Majd Hawasly (2025), has developed *Fanar*, an Arabic-centric large language model (LLM) trained on Qur'anic texts, hadith collections, and classical jurisprudential sources. According to Hawasly (Abbas *et al.*, 2025), *Fanar* represents a significant leap in culturally contextualised AI, addressing the need for interpretive nuance, textual fidelity, and linguistic diversity often lacking in global LLMs like GPT. Unlike commercial models that produce general responses based on probabilistic word prediction, *Fanar* retrieves relevant religious texts and presents answers grounded in established Islamic frameworks. However, as Ghaly (2024, p. 439) emphasises, even such context-aware models are not substitutes for human scholars. The Islamic tradition of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*), and ethical reasoning (*ijtihād*) relies on skills such as weighing conflicting evidences, considering context, and prioritising communal wellbeing—all of which exceed the capabilities of current AI systems. The concern is not only technical but epistemological. AI models, however advanced, risk flattening interpretive diversity, especially in Islam where multiple schools of thought and methodologies coexist. Muslim engagement with artificial intelligence spans both textual and visual domains. While Fanar is a culturally-specific LLM designed to interpret Islamic texts with theological accuracy, tools like *MidJourney* are being creatively adopted by Muslim digital artists to visually speculate alternative futures and reimagine Muslim representation through AI-generated imagery.

Moreover, AI's 'black box' phenomenon, the inability to fully explain how a model arrives at its outputs, introduces profound bioethical and theological concerns. Ghaly (2024, p. 444) notes that in Islamic bioethics, transparency, intention (*niyyah*), and accountability are essential for ethical judgment. If AI-driven outputs are opaque even to their creators, who holds moral and legal responsibility for their consequences? These issues become especially urgent when AI enters sensitive domains such as medical fatwas, legal arbitration, or ethical decision-making in Muslim-majority societies.

This brings us back to the question of AI as a digital archivist. At one level, AI tools like *Fanar* offer powerful new ways to engage Islamic texts, preserve endangered manuscripts, and

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democratise access to religious knowledge. Projects that incorporate computer vision to scan Qur'anic calligraphy or use machine learning to classify architectural motifs in historic mosques, participate in the preservation of Islamic heritage in a digital age. Generative AI has also allowed artists to remix classical forms like Persian miniatures or Ottoman tilework with futuristic overlays, recontextualising traditional motifs in new visual languages. Yet, on another level, the line between preservation and simulation is perilously thin. As generative AI begins to create Islamic art or respond to theological questions with simulated authority, it risks transforming acts of interpretation into algorithmic performances. Rather than amplifying a living tradition through contextually grounded engagement, such AI interventions may simulate religious authority by relying on probabilistic outputs, potentially hollowing out the interpretive richness that defines Islamic epistemology. From an Islamic perspective, archives are not passive repositories. They are part of an ongoing transmission of *sanad* (chains of knowledge), embodying lived relationships between teacher, student, and divine source. When AI intervenes in this chain, it must do so with epistemic humility and ethical boundaries. As Ghaly (2024, p. 432) cautions, AI can assist scholarship but cannot reproduce the relational, affective, and spiritual dimensions that make Islamic knowledge a living tradition.

The erasure and later reappearance of 'Islamic art' in both institutional and popular imaginaries tell a story not only of aesthetic evolution, but of dispossession, fragmentation, and identity reconstruction. As one historical analysis notes, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Islamic art increasingly displaced by Western art forms, first through colonial educational reforms and the establishment of European-style art academies, and later through the valorisation of Western modernism. Calligraphy, architecture, and geometric abstraction once central to Islamic aesthetics were relegated to folklore or museum-bound artefacts. By the time contemporary art reemerged in Arab and Muslim-majority societies in the late twentieth century, 'Islamic art' no longer referred to a living tradition but to a visual vocabulary retroactively invoked to signal cultural identity in a modernised world. This tension continues to haunt artists working across Islamic and diasporic contexts today. The challenge is not simply how to engage Islamic visual languages, but how to do so without succumbing to essentialism, nostalgia, or exoticisation. As Babaie (2011, p. 148) observes, contemporary artists often struggle to reconcile Islamic aesthetic traditions with dominant frameworks of modernity and global art. The pervasive assumption that Islam is incompatible with contemporary art or that Islamic art is inherently premodern creates a conceptual impasse.

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This reactivation is not a return to tradition, but a *re-assembly of signs,* a process deeply shaped by postcolonial migration, marginalisation, and cultural estrangement. Attia's (2007) own work exemplifies this: installations like *Untitled (Skyline)* use conceptual media, empty refrigerators encrusted with mirrored fragments to comment on displacement, architecture, and the loss of cultural coherence in the Parisian banlieues. As Babaie (2011, p. 139) notes, these are not merely aesthetic interventions; they are strategies of translation, where Islamic visual legacies are deployed as conceptual gestures that bridge the Occidental and non-Occidental worlds. In this context, AI emerges not just as a technological tool, but as a speculative platform for what we might call *diasporic archiving*. Muslim artists using generative AI are not recreating Islamic art they are remixing it to construct new, hybrid narratives of belonging, memory, and resistance. AI enables a kind of speculative restoration, reconfiguring lost fragments, calligraphy, tilework, cosmology, and textiles into imaginative futures that speak to diasporic conditions. Projects like *Khawab* illustrate this potential: by using AI and photography to transform Muslim women into mythic alter-egos, *Khawab* does not reproduce tradition but reinhabits it, layering it with new textures of fantasy, identity, and aesthetic agency.

What these works reveal is a broader shift: Islamic art is no longer bound to traditional forms or religious institutions, it has become a field of cultural negotiation, affective memory, and political visibility. In diaspora, especially, Islamic aesthetics become tools for counter-narrative, often wielded against Islamophobia, erasure, or the flattening effects of globalised media. AI, when embedded with critical and ethical intent, can amplify this work by making visible what has been forgotten, inaccessible, or deemed irrelevant by dominant canons. Yet, this is not a neutral process. As the earlier historical account makes clear, the 'rebirth' of Islamic aesthetics is often constrained by the absence of the conditions that once gave them meaning: devotional practice and spiritual knowledge. Contemporary iterations risk becoming detached signifiers floating in algorithmic space, aesthetically pleasing but spiritually emptied. Babaie's (2011, p. 140) reading of this risk is not defeatist, but cautionary: without intentionality, reappropriation may slide into commodification.

It is precisely here that AI's role as a *digital archivist* becomes ethically complex but potentially generative. When used carelessly, it may aestheticise tradition without honouring its depth. But when used critically as in *Khawab*, or installations inspired by Islamic cosmology, AI becomes a site of what Derrida (1995, p. 9) calls *archive fever*: the compulsion not just to preserve, but to *animate* and *possess* memory. In these acts, the archive is not passive, it is

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insurgent, reconfigured by those who have been historically excluded from its making. Islamic visual traditions, then, are not static heritage forms, nor purely sacred symbols. They are raw materials in a larger conversation about how diasporic Muslims reclaim identity, confront modernity, and dream alternative futures. When filtered through AI, especially tools trained on Islamic databases or programmed to honour aesthetic and theological nuance, these traditions gain new life. They become not just echoes of the past, but interfaces with the present and invitations to imagine what has yet to be. This interplay between memory, imagination, and machine, marks a shift in how we understand both archives and art. For diasporic Muslim creators, AI is not merely a medium it is a mirror, a translator, and a portal. It extends Islamic aesthetics into digital space, not to fossilise them, but to let them move again.

As artists and technologists continue to harness AI to reinterpret Islamic aesthetics and reassemble cultural memory, what emerges is more than visual experimentation it is a practice of spiritual reorientation. These digital works are not only engaging with heritage but are also reactivating sacred symbolism, devotional affect, and theological imagination in new and embodied ways. In this sense, AI-generated Islamic art is not just archival it is liturgical. It invites contemplation, provokes remembrance, and makes space for Muslim spiritual experiences within virtual environments. The question that now arises is not only how AI stores or simulates religious meaning, but how it becomes a site of digital spirituality where ritual, reflection, and revelation are increasingly performed through code, image, and interaction. In what follows, I explore how AI enables new forms of performing religion online, and how Muslim creators are negotiating authenticity, affect, and agency within these emergent sacred spaces.

The emergence of AI-generated religious art and text is not only transforming Islamic visual cultures, but also reshaping how Muslims encounter and perform spirituality in digital contexts. As generative tools become increasingly sophisticated in mimicking sacred aesthetics, reciting Qur'anic phrases, or even simulating religious reasoning, they blur the lines between passive consumption and active devotional engagement. In this shifting landscape, AI functions not merely as a medium of representation, but as a spiritual interface, a site where religious identity, memory, and emotion are enacted, felt, and sometimes even intensified. Building on Heidi Campbell's (2006, p. 9) concept of 'networked religion,' we can understand digital spirituality as a form of mediated religiosity that is distributed across platforms, images, sounds, and symbolic cues. In this model, faith is not confined to physical mosques or printed

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texts it circulates in Instagram stories, *MidJourney* prompts, VR prayer rooms, and AI-generated *tasbih* apps. These modes of interaction are not peripheral or superficial; they represent how many Muslims today, particularly in diasporic or digitally-native contexts, perform religion through acts of visual remembrance, algorithmic reflection, and aesthetic reverence. Projects like *Khawab* exemplify this transformation. While not explicitly ritualistic, their affective power rooted in beauty, symbolism, and speculative healing draws from the same reservoir of spiritual longing that animates more traditional forms of worship. The images are not merely artistic they become contemplative artefacts, encouraging viewers to meditate on alternate worlds, divine justice, and the sacred presence in marginalised lives. Similarly, the use of AI to generate celestial patterns, Qur'anic verses, or sacred geometries offers a way for Muslims to experience awe, introspection, and presence: core components of Islamic spirituality even within highly mediated environments.

Yet, these emergent forms of digital religiosity also raise critical questions: Can AI truly embody or transmit spiritual authority? What happens when devotional meaning is generated by algorithms rather than human intentionality? As we navigate these tensions, the next section explores how digital spirituality both challenges and expands traditional Islamic practices—pushing us to consider how sacredness, presence, and ethical agency can be reimagined in the age of intelligent machines.

Digital platforms increasingly function as spaces where religious meaning is not just accessed but *performed*. Campbell's (2006) concept of 'networked religion' is foundational in understanding this transformation. She outlines five characteristics: networked community, storied identity, convergent practice, shifting authority, and multisite reality, which together frame how religious individuals increasingly experience faith as dispersed, interactive, and co-constructed across digital platforms. For Muslim creators, this means Islam is not confined to *masjids* or manuscripts but also practiced through *Instagram* posts, *TikTok* reflections, or AI-generated artworks that remix sacred motifs and scripture. In these spaces, religion is no longer a fixed tradition to be received, but an evolving narrative to be actively shaped. This process constitutes what scholars are now calling digital religion: a broader shift in how religious identity, ritual, and epistemology are mediated through technology. Digital religion does not simply refer to religion *on* the internet, but to religion *reshaped by* digital logics: the aesthetics of platforms, the speed of content circulation, and the emotional grammars of online expression. Here, spiritual performance is layered with visibility, symbolism, and aesthetic engagement. A Qur'anic verse in a stylised AI image, a *du'a* presented in glitch art, or *tasbih*

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beads rendered in 3D animation can all evoke powerful emotional responses, acting as prompts for remembrance (*dhikr*) and internal reflection. These are not marginal phenomena. They illustrate how AI-generated religious art is becoming a site of digital spirituality, an affective, symbolic mode of religious engagement that blends tradition with technological creativity. Rather than replacing embodied forms of devotion, these digital expressions offer parallel spaces of connection: to God, to memory, to imagined communities of believers. Spirituality, here, becomes something one can scroll through, remix, or generate, yet it still retains its gravity, evoking beauty, humility, or awe.

Digital spirituality in the Islamic context is especially compelling because of Islam's long-standing emphasis on aesthetics as a pathway to the divine. The Islamic tradition has always used material culture, geometry, calligraphy, light, and fragrance as means of invoking presence and transcendence. AI, then, is not a rupture but an extension: it allows for new iterations of this visual theology in formats legible to younger, globalised Muslim audiences. In this sense, digital religion is not a dilution of Islam, but a recontextualisation of its affective and aesthetic roots in a hyper-mediated world. As Muslim digital artists engage with AI tools to reinterpret Islamic heritage, they do not do so in a vacuum. Rather, they operate in Siuda's (2021, p. 373) exploration of Campbell's (2013, p. 12) analysis of 'hybrid spaces', socio-technical environments where the boundaries between online and offline religious life collapse. These hybrid spaces are not merely sites of artistic display; they are part of a broader transformation of how religion is mediated, practiced, and archived in the digital age. Within such environments, AI-generated Islamic art—be it calligraphy-infused avatars, virtual mosques, or algorithmically enhanced Qur'anic motifs becomes both a visual archive and an evolving site of religious meaning-making. Siuda builds on Campbell's notion of 'networked religion', emphasising that religious authority and tradition in digital spaces are no longer top-down or static. Instead, they are reconfigured through participatory media, social platforms, and the algorithmic architectures that shape visibility and engagement. This shift is particularly significant for diasporic Muslim artists who, often distanced from traditional institutions and geographic homelands, turn to digital art and AI as tools to reconstruct memory, embody faith, and build new epistemologies of identity.

Islamic art, in this context, functions as more than aesthetic heritage—it becomes a site of epistemic negotiation. The use of AI tools to remix Islamic visual traditions (e.g., tilework, sacred geometry, miniature painting) does not merely aestheticise the past; it invokes it as a *living archive* that can be queried, reimagined, and even spiritually inhabited. These practices

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blur the categories as Siuda (2021, p. 372) outlines 'religion online' as informational authority compared to 'online religion' as interactive community because projects like *Khawab*, *Fanar*, and others straddle both. These projects provide historical and theological content (like religion online) while inviting users to interact with and participate in the creation of new religious narratives (like online religion). For Muslim digital artists in the diaspora, AI functions as both medium and method: a means to access, remix, and preserve endangered cultural memory while actively reimagining what constitutes religious authority. As Siuda (2021, p. 374) points out, digital religion allows for individual agency in the selection and recombination of religious knowledge, contributing to what some describe as the commodification of belief. But rather than reducing religion to consumer preference, these creative acts often serve as deeply personal and political interventions—especially for those navigating systemic marginalisation or racialised Islamophobia. This is particularly salient when we consider the concept of the *third space* in digital religion. Originating in cultural studies and adapted by scholars such as Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), the third space is where traditional norms, digital technologies, and lived experiences intersect. In this space, Islamic art and AI converge to create new forms of religious intimacy and cultural belonging spaces that are not wholly traditional nor wholly innovative, but emerge from the tensions between them. Muslim artists reappropriate aesthetics not simply to preserve them, but to translate them into visual languages that resonate with contemporary struggles for representation, dignity, and spiritual continuity. In this way, AI as digital archivist does more than store or replicate it reanimates. It opens new typologies of religious engagement and artistic production that challenge institutional monopolies on tradition while resisting the flattening forces of algorithmic standardisation. As Muslim creatives negotiate between inherited forms and speculative futures, they transform Islamic visual culture into a vibrant, participatory archive, one that is as much about belonging as it is about belief.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Muslim artists are using artificial intelligence not only as a tool of aesthetic production, but as a speculative and spiritual technology, one that archives, reinterprets, and reanimates Islamic visual heritage in the digital age. Through case studies like *Khawab* and projects such as *Fanar*, *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, and *The 1001 Nights Project*, we have seen how AI can serve as a digital archivist, a site of reimagination, and a platform for diasporic identity-making. At its core, this emergent practice reflects what might be called a

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Muslim AI aesthetic—an approach that is rooted in Islamic visual traditions while remaining deeply attentive to contemporary ethical, political, and spiritual concerns. Unlike purely technical or secular uses of AI, these artworks are animated by *niyyah* (intent), *ta'dhim* (reverence), and *dhikr* (remembrance), embodying the values and imaginaries of a living tradition. In this way, AI becomes not just a generative engine, but a medium of reflection and spiritual resonance.

The concept of *digital spirituality* helps us make sense of this shift. Rather than viewing digital religion as simply the online transmission of sacred content, scholars like Heidi Campbell describe it as a *networked* phenomenon: dynamic, participatory, and shaped by the interplay between technological affordances and lived religious practice. In the hands of Muslim artists, AI becomes a new spiritual language one capable of translating affect, memory, and theology into visual form. From artworks adorned with Qur'anic calligraphy and *tasbih* beads to speculative visions of paradise or liberation, these images are not merely representations they are *performances* of belief, mourning, hope, and resistance. This mode of spiritual expression is particularly significant for Muslim communities in the diaspora. As scholars such as Campbell and Siuda have argued, digital spaces offer both risk and opportunity: the internet can amplify Islamophobia and misinformation, but it also provides platforms for marginalised voices to curate their identities, articulate their values, and resist erasure. AI tools, when used critically, offer new terrain for these negotiations. They allow Muslim artists to remix visual traditions, challenge orientalist aesthetics, and centre narratives that have long been excluded from mainstream artistic and religious discourse. Yet this future is not without tension. As Mohammad Ghaly (2024) and Yaqub Chaudhary (2024) caution, the integration of AI into religious life raises deep epistemological and ethical questions. Can generative algorithms truly understand the spiritual weight of the Qur'an or the interpretive nuance of *fiqh* (jurisprudence)? What happens when algorithmic outputs reinforce cultural biases or flatten theological complexity? And most crucially, who has the authority to determine what counts as 'authentic' digital religious expression?

These questions are not easily resolved. But perhaps that is the point. As Muslim artists, scholars, and communities engage with AI, they are not simply accepting or rejecting the technology, they are *negotiating* with it. They are embedding their ethics, aesthetics, and aspirations into its infrastructure, turning machines of simulation into instruments of self-definition. This negotiation is itself a form of *ijtihad:* a collective effort to interpret and respond to the challenges of the present in light of enduring spiritual values. In this light, *Muslim Futurism*

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and AI-generated Islamic art are not niche experiments. They are part of a larger reckoning with the nature of knowledge, identity, and meaning in a world increasingly shaped by artificial systems. They remind us that the future is not a neutral terrain, it is imagined, contested, and made. And for Muslim artists using AI, that future is not just about technological innovation—it is about reclaiming the right to dream, to remember, and to belong. As we move forward into ever more digitised realities, the stakes are high. Islamophobic surveillance, cultural erasure, and algorithmic discrimination are real and ongoing. But so too is the power of Muslim creativity, resilience, and visionary thought. A Muslim AI aesthetic offers us a glimpse of what it looks like to refuse invisibility, to centre the sacred in the speculative, and to imagine otherwise.

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