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**The Commodification of Religious Identity: Economic Exploitation in  
Nadeem Aslam's The Wasted Vigil**



**Uzma Rabi**

Ph.D. Scholar in English Literature at Muslim Youth University, Islamabad Email: uzmarabi99@gmail.com

**Altaf Hussain\***

Department of English Literature and Linguistics, Riphah International University Email: altafhussain33162@gmail.com

**Bilal Ahmad**

Department of English Literature and Linguistics, Riphah International University Email: nmbilalaeg@gmail.com

**Fazal Rabi**

Ph.D. Scholar in English Literature, Senior lecturer at Department of English Literature & Linguistics, Riphah International University Email: fazalrabbi999@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This study explores the religious identity commodification and economic exploitation in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), with the aim of analysing how religious leaders, jihadis, and religious institutions are presented with the pursuit of material gain taking precedence over religious and moral commitments. Primary data collection took place through the close reading of the novel, analysing select text passages that demonstrate financial dealings, materialism, or religious manipulation, supplemented by secondary texts concerning Islamic ethics, political economies, and literary interpretations. This study takes a qualitative interpretative methodology, with the use of thematic analysis techniques to determine patterns in the text including economic opportunism, corruption, or the use of religious power. This study takes Critical Race Theory and Political Economy as its theoretical framework to position the intersectionality of religious systems, economic motivation, and politico-social structures. This study finds that the novel represents religious leaders, institutions, and jihadis as exploiting religious power for economic motives, deconstructing the trust that religious institutions have with the rest of the public, as well as the corresponding lawful and right-minded principles behind the religion of Islam, while concurrently reinforcing misinformed ideas about Muslims.

**Keywords:** Religious Commodification, Economic Exploitation, Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, Political Economy, Materialism,

**Introduction**

Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) presents a grandly complex literary representation of Afghanistan's extensive exposure to war, foreign incursions, and ideological fundamentalism, which situates religion at the core of social and political life. Against the background of decades of conflict that have moved from Soviet occupation to the Taliban regime and post-9/11 militarization, the novel projects a society in which moral values and institutions have been deeply disrupted. Religious identity here takes the shape not only of a spiritual marker but also of a utilitarian resource through which power and legitimacy and survival are negotiated. Characters connected with jihad, madrasas, and mosques are more often than not projected as indulging in violence, manipulation of charity, and institutional control for material ends. This represents the foregrounding of the transformation of religion into an economic enterprise in a war-torn society—a reflection of wider universal anxieties about Islam, militancy, and moral corruption. While powerful in exposing the devastation wrought by war, it also provides space for critique on how religious identity has been projected as commodified and exploited within a literary trope.

Previous scholarship on *The Wasted Vigil* has primarily engaged with such concerns as trauma, violence, Islamophobia, ethical misrepresentation, and geopolitics after 9/11. Even though such scholarships are highly informative, it tends to neglect the material, economic aspects of religion as portrayed in *The Wasted Vigil*. There is a clear omission concerning such a study as might interpret how religious identity as such is precisely commodified as a source of economic sustenance, of power, or of social location. Additionally, notwithstanding scholarship's attention to such aspects

as Islam's misrepresentation, there is insufficient attention to such a feature as economic exploitation by religious individuals as, on average, translated to racialized readings of Islam itself. The interrelation of religion, war economy, and racialization appears to be unexplored.

The focus of this research is to critically review how *The Wasted Vigil* presents the concept of religious identity as a means of commodity formation, meaning as something that can be economically extracted in a conflict-ridden society. This research aims to critically review the narrative presentation of religious figures as a means of using their religious authority for selfish, material purposes, as well as how the ideological implications of such narrative performances serve as a means of perpetuating the notion of Islam as something that is imbued in greed, violence, and immorality in the larger global literary canon. Based upon the aforementioned, the following research questions will be explored throughout the process of this research: How does *The Wasted Vigil* portray the concept of religion as an economic system? How does *The Wasted Vigil* portray religious institutions as venues of material exploitation as opposed to spiritual guidance? How does the concept of the commodity of religious identity serve in furthering the notion of racialization in Islamophobia? How does critical theory serve in separating the concept of the faith of Islam from its improper uses in the setting of conflict and survival?

In this research, an integrated theoretical approach incorporating Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Political Economy of Religion shall be used. Critical Race Theory enables this research to excavate how the religion of Muslims gets racialized, homogenized, and rendered inherently corrupt or violent in dominant culture discourses. Critical Race Theory also enables this research to find how literary discourses are involved in broader patterns of power marginalizing or discrediting epistemologies and ethics of Muslims. On the other hand, the political economy of religion enables this research by emphasizing how religion operates under material conditions in conflict zones, where religion-based symbols, structures, and persons are converted into economic capital (Javed Ashiq, Usman, Rabi, & Uzma, 2024). This integrated approach enables this research to study how religion becomes dually racialized and commodified in *The Wasted Vigil*, which also enables this research to ensure the economic exploitation in this literary text being separate from the Islam religion's theology and ethics.

This research has immense importance for literary studies, post-colonial studies, as well as religious ethics because it provides a concentrated analysis of religion as an economically and ideologically constructed phenomenon in modern literary fiction (Nawaz et al., 2024; Rabi et al., 2025). This research overturns the existing largely theological or moral complaints about religious exploitation by inspecting the exploitation of religious identities in economically driven contexts to provide a new outlook to literary analyses of "*The Wasted Vigil*." This research also promotes the boundaries of interdisciplinary studies by combining Critical Race Theory with political economy to explain how literature shapes the world's understanding of religious conflict. This research ultimately provides better guidance on understanding the intersection of faith, money, and politics in the way that literary representations of the Muslim world conceptualize these very concepts.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Economic Exploitation and Religious Identity**

A growing scholarship base has identified the intersections of religion with economic exploitation, underlining how religious identities are commodified for personal and institutional gain. In conflict zones, religious spaces and movements become sites of material accumulation, negating all ethical and spiritual objectives that they were set up to serve. CRT can become a lens to understand such exploitation at the intersection of power and racialized structures, which situates marginalized communities as both producers and victims of ideologically framed economic practices. These theoretical perspectives frame the investigation of this study into how Nadeem Aslam depicts characters who manipulate religion for gaining wealth and influence, bringing out the disjunction between sacred ethics and materialistic pursuits.

#### **Jihadism, Personal Gain, and Material Motivation in The Wasted Vigil**

In the novel by Aslam, different religious actors such as jihadis, Taliban, and religious leaders have motivations based mostly on material rather than spiritual gains (Aslam, 2008, p.197). This is portrayed through examples of characters such as Nabi Khan and Gul Rasool, who through their religious credentials, accumulate personal gain in terms of both material wealth, status, and power through mosques or madrassahs (Rabi & Rabi, 2025; Ullah, Rabi, Khan, & Ahmad, 2025; Hassan, 2025). The book portrays through examples the misappropriation of charity, kidnapping for ransom, and violence being made prerequisites for material gain. This corresponds with ideas presented through research on the commodification of religion, which indicates that the mix of religious and economic power weakens social cohesion and good governance (Gilborn, 2006; Aaron, 2008; Rabi, Bibi, Mukhtiar, & Zahir, 2025). The study places the book by Aslam in the context of broader discussions related to material gain and religious corruption through these examples from the text.

#### **Political Economy and Religious Commodification**

Political Economy models identify the structural and systemic processes that make economic exploitation in religious settings possible (Piketty, 2014; Harvey, 2010; ur Rehman, 2023). In the novel, interventionist actions such as the CIA pumping huge amounts of financial resources into the Afghan war lords, who in turn integrate into religious and militant groups in the region (Aslam, 2008; Ahmad, Rabi, Sardar, Khan, & Begum, 2025), clearly illustrate the financial interest that melts with the religious sector to fuel the hierarchical and opportunistic energies of both spheres. In this vein, it is noted that the commercialization of religion cannot simply be attributed to the corrupt behavior of individuals and contrary to the previous case, is visibly enshrined in the broader political and financial systems of the international environment (Saeed, 2007; Rabi, Zahir, Aziz, Mukhtiar, & Bibi, 2025).

#### **Materialism vs. Ethical and Spiritual Imperatives**

Islam stresses the values of honesty, altruism, and appropriately using finances for the collective good (Esposito, 2003). The disconnect between these values and the presentation in *The Wasted Vigil*, in which clergy seek personal advantageous action, illustrates an underlying theme in current scholarship about religion and materialism (Beckford, 2003; Saeed, 2007; Ijaz & Rabi, 2022). Finally, CRT helps explain how such portrayals are raced in international discourse, which in turn perpetuates an

orientalist interpretation of Islam as being inherently corrupt or transactional. Such underlying tensions in literature convey the message that economic exploitation in a religious context carries sociopolitical undertones.

### **Media, Literature, and the Construction of Religious Stereotypes**

Literary works also play their part in establishing a public perception of religious groups. Researchers suggest, as stated by Khan et al. (2026), that literary works like *The Wasted Vigil* might unwittingly fuel Islamophobia by dwelling on the corruption and consumerist tendencies of religious figures (Werbner, 2005; Klung, 2012). All these play a part in the media coverage of Islam, as it often comes across as a way of gaining quick profits through extreme means (Gilborn, 2006). The novel becomes a ground where literary discourses meet those of media, as it tends to shape the collective perception of Muslim ethics (Gilborn, 2006).

### **Societal Implications of Religious Commodification**

The commodification of religious identity also poses significant risks for society, such as undermining community trust, condoning immoral behavior, and perpetuating systemic inequalities (Aaron, 2008; Saeed, 2007). CRT identifies these implications within the context of systemic power relationships that are racialized and ideological, showing that sentiments of corruption within Islam are also exaggerated within the context of global socio-political orders that continue to marginalize Muslim populations systematically (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zaib, 2025). The commodification of religious identity also identifies significant implications for governance, accountability, and community cohesion that are discussed below.

### **Research Gap and Justification**

Extensive scholarship on religion and economics notwithstanding, few studies have attempted to analyze religious identity commodification as represented through literature. While work has been done on negative religious identities in Hamid's *The Prisoner*, and the framing in moral terms in Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*, no study has systematically analyzed how materialistic motivations within religious frameworks are depicted in literature and interpreted through a CRT and a Political Economy perspective. This study tries to fill that gap by exploring the ideological, ethical, and socio-political dimensions of religious commodification in the novel *The Wasted Vigil*, to present a complex understanding of the underlying economic exploitation within sacred institutions.

### **Research Methodology**

This research uses qualitative & interpretative design, which is appropriate for analyzing the ideological significance, narrative discourse, & thematic representations in literary texts. The major sources used in this research are Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), which has been explored comprehensively with a special reference to the narratives involving religion, jihadi organizations, madrasas, mosques, charity transactions, & war economies. These representations within literary narratives are explored for the ideological construction of religious identity as an economic venture in terms of money, power, & prestige as opposed to any spiritual & ideological values. Secondary sources used in this research include peer-reviewed research studies in post-9/11 literary discourse, Islamophobia, commoditization of

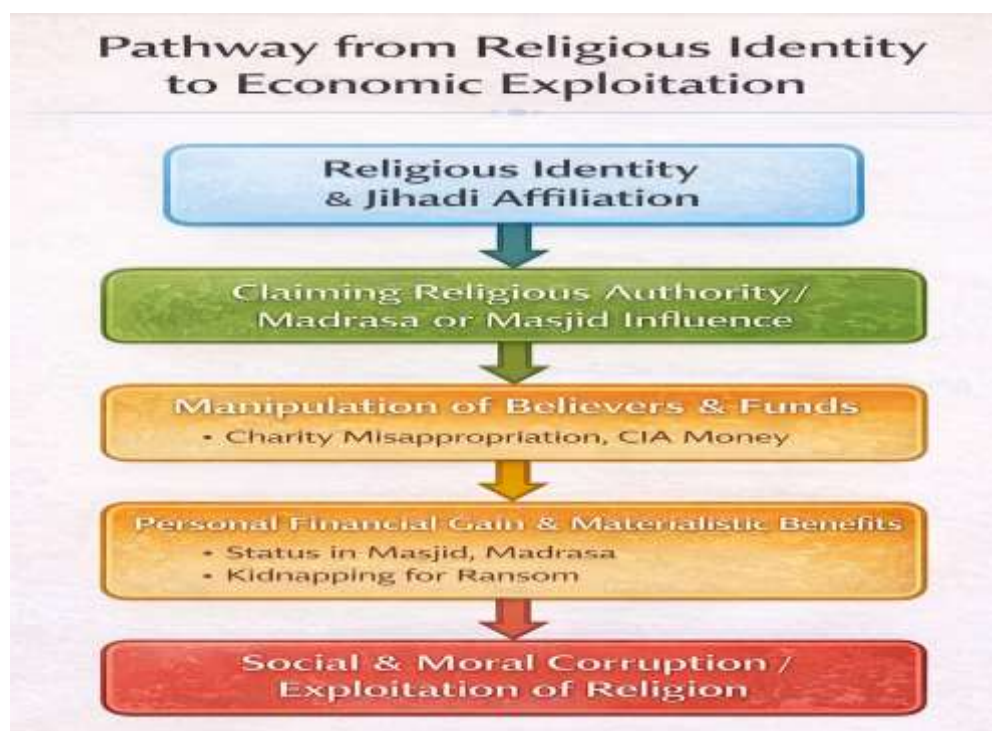
religion, & theoretical discussions related to Critical Race Theory & political economies.

This analysis is performed through close reading and thematic analysis with a framework informed by Critical Race Theory & Political Economy. Critical Race Theory permits the examination of how religious identities are made race and universalized in the framework of global power, while Political Economy assists in decoding the conditions and motivations of religious exploitation specifically in relation to the novel being studied. Using themes like the commercialization of religion, opportunistic religion, and religious exploitation for money in violence can be deciphered by close involvement with the themes and analytical requirements of Critical Race Theory & Political Economy on textual themes. To have analytical precision in this research, contextual awareness of Islamic religious interpretations and non-essentialization of religion by carefully demarcating religious notions of faith from its fictional exploitation for money is maintained.

### **Analysis**

#### **Religious Identities and their Love for Money Making**

In the novel the writer has depicted the jihadis, Taliban, madrasa and masjid the place to earn money.



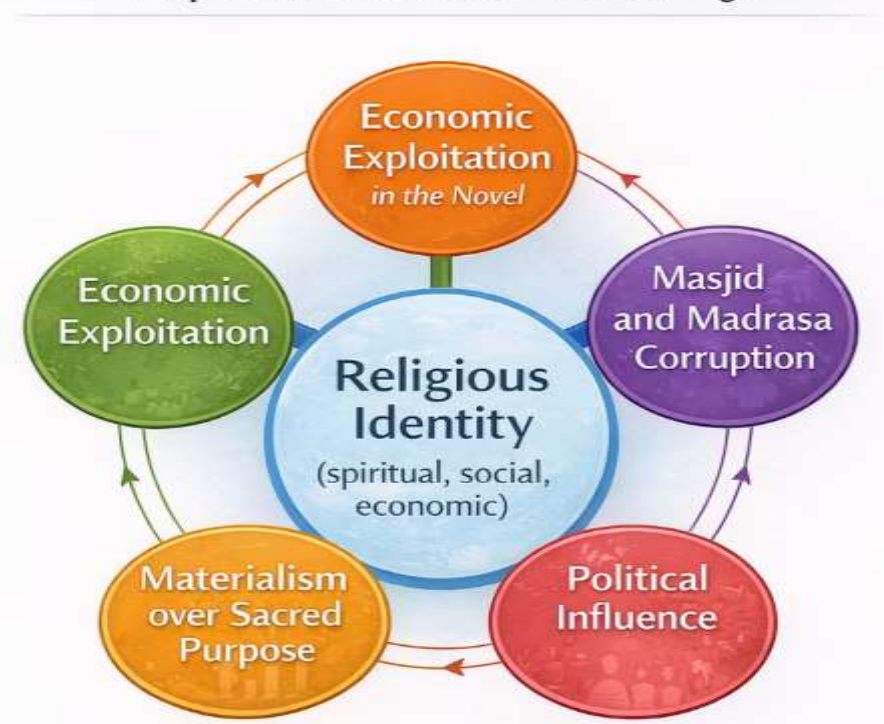
There are characters which are not honest to their cause in novels, here in the disguise of the religion some character like Nabi khan and Gul Rasool, has shown as the working for money, power and place in the society. i.e. “The first CIA team that arrived in Afghanistan soon after the attacks, to persuade warlords and tribal leaders, had brought five million dollars with them. It was spent within forty days. Ten million more was flown in by helicopter: Piles of money as high as children – four cardboard boxes kept in a corner of a safe house, with someone sleeping on them as a precaution



against theft.” (Aslam, 2008, p. 197).

The jihadis are doing for personal gain. They are taking the charity fund. Even they shed blood for money. The writer has depicted the jihadis with the criminals of UF. The religious are not serving for the religion nor country. They fight for their personal gain. They kidnap for people for money and even try to capture a big fish. Which will earn them the best money. The religious scholars and mullahs try to get place in the rich masjid for their benefits. They do not do for the sacred cause but for materialistic gains.

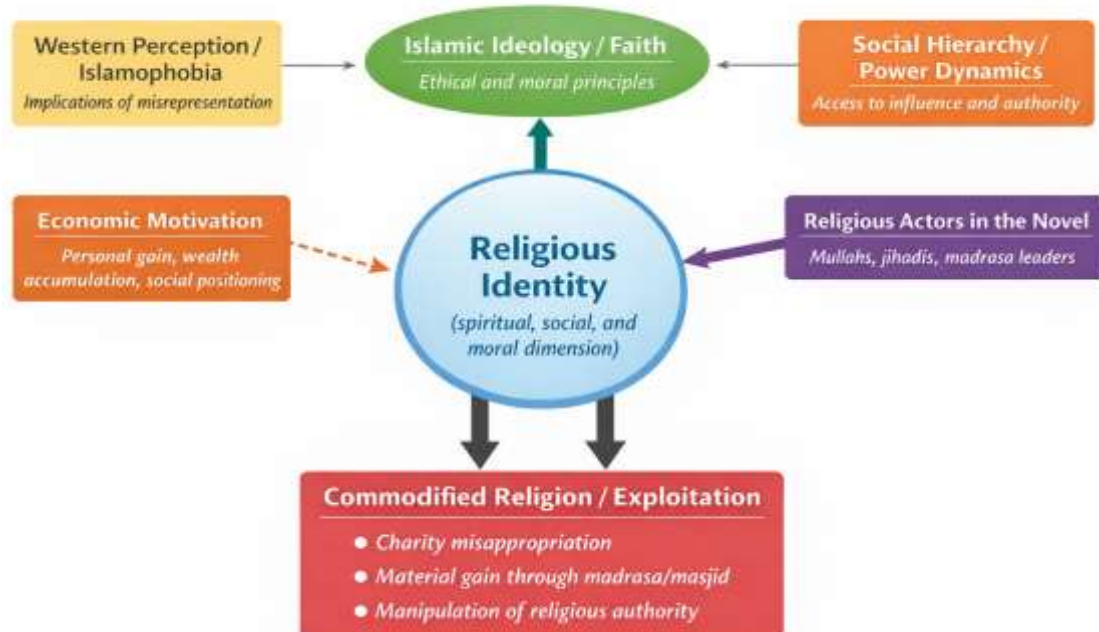
### Religious Commodification and Economic Exploitation in *The Wasted Vigil*



Conceptual framework of religious identity and economic exploitation in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*.

Nowadays, here is indeed an acumen such as 'Islam' plus the 'West' are quarrelling, and that hardly no side is happy to comply with or fathom the other's sentiment. There is explicit evidence of scaremongering amidst particulars in leadership bearings in western confederations. Islamism is perceived a menacing to Western society (Gilborn, 2006). Several individuals obviously think this that becoming a faithful Muslim all the while residing in United States is unthinkable. Gilborn (2006) goes on to say that there are basic worries about the impact Islam has on cultural and ideological engagement oppression. There is indeed a widespread belief about 'Islam' which inspires a varied scale of nationalities and communities. By any realm of fascination, the West is not the perpetrator; rather, the West tends to just be antagonistic to Islam, according to popular belief, and therefore the West must not be considered the underlying tenet of Islamophobia (Saeed, 2007).

**Economic Exploitation of Religious Identity in *The Wasted Vigil***



Jihadism is not the same as Islam. Islamic terrorism can be dated directly to the history of the Region. Islamic fundamentalists, according to some observers, are to blame for Muslim terrorism. Certainly, jihadis use the Qur'an and Hadith to support their acts and arguments, citing verses in the Qur'an and Hadith that deal with violence and battle. However, there are numerous such parts of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, and Christian history is littered with conflicts fought in God's name. 12 Jihadis refer to Westerners as "Crusaders," and no one can forget the fall of Palestine in 1099. Is modern-day jihadist terrorism a result of or a feature of Islam? Similarly, the Aryan Nations are an unavoidable result of Christianity. While all militant groups consider oneself Muslim fundamentalists, only a small percentage of Muslims, or even fundamentalists, are jihadis. Islam, or even faith, is not the only source of fanaticism and murder. This point, as clear as it may be, must be emphasised. This book is based on the claims made by jihadists and their limited understanding of Islam. As important as it is to understand their ideas, they do not reflect Islam overall. This book organises excerpts from jihadi texts so that the reader can access references on specific issues. However, because the majority of the excerpts cover multiple topics, the placement of the quotes is necessarily subjective. For example, anything under 9/11 is about that awful day, however that section does not contain all regarding 9/11. The goal of this book is to follow the exhortation to "know thy adversary" through its own words, rather than to spread jihadi propaganda. We do have an enemy, as the next pages vividly reveal, and we must attach importance to how it operates and what it intends to do to us (Aaron, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

The commodification of religious identity in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* has been explored, especially how the jihadist and Taliban actors in it exploit religious institutions such as mosques and madrasas for personal economic gain. By this analysis, it has become evident that the characters, such as Nabi Khan and Gul



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Rasool, are more attracted to material possessions than to the sacrosanct and moral tenets of Islam. Their misuse of donations meant for charitable use, monetization of violent acts, and opportunistic behavior in order to rise to positions of influence establish a critical tension between what one might consider the moral obligations of religious actors and individualistic, materialistic ambition. Such insights from the text highlight that the religious façade has often been used as an economic and social opportunism, at the cost of shaking faith-based institutions and morality.

Moreover, the research contextualizes these practices in broader socio-political and international contexts. Aslam's account demonstrates that the injection of foreign capital, the pressure of international powers, and the manipulation of religious authority entrench the structural inequalities and undermine communal ethics. By excavating the discourse of Critical Race Theory and Political Economy, the study contextualizes these practices within a framework that examines both the racially driven conception of Islam and the incentives of corruption indicated within the political economy. The study supports that jihadism and violence, commonly reduced to Islam itself, entrench the conditional interpretation of Islamic tenets, rather than encapsulating the tenets of those beliefs themselves, rather than encapsulating the communal practices of Muslim society that are commonly reduced within a monolithic—not to mention orientalist—framework of orientation (Gilborn, 2006; Saeed, 2007; Aaron, 2008).

Lastly, the research highlights the importance of its findings in terms of the broader implications that relate to ethics, the social implications, as well as the literary implications. As the novel by Aslam points out, the critique of the economic oppression that exists within religious institutions, in addition to the effects that materialistic intentions have on building trust in the financial system, as well as the concept of Islam in the world, cannot be overemphasized. As the religious players in the text are portrayed as acting out of financial gain, the need to critically review the literary text as well as the world that the text defines cannot be overemphasized.

### Religious Commodification and Economic Exploitation in *The Wasted Vigil*



### From Religious Identity to Economic Exploitation



### Material vs. Spiritual Motivation



### Claimed Religious Purpose vs. Actual Actions

| Claimed Religious Purpose | Actual Action in Novel       |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Serving Religion          | Earning Money, p.197         |
| Protecting Community      | Kidnapping / Ransom, p.198   |
| Moral Leadership          | Power / Social Status, p.200 |

### Timeline of Funding & Exploitation Events



### Mechanisms of Economic Exploitation



### Timeline of Funding & Exploitation Events



### **Recommendations**

First, this research suggests increasing the levels of transparency and accountability in religious bodies responsible for charitable and educational work. In *The Wasted Vigil*, mosques, madrasas, and jihadist networks have been discussed as pathways to achieve undue benefits; therefore, such measures should be placed that retain certain barriers against the diversion of funds and manipulation of religious power. Ethical monitoring by scholars, policy makers, and community representatives forms the basis on which proper bookkeeping and integrity to the moral and spiritual precepts of Islam preserve institutional and social trust.

Second, education and raising awareness become very important in counteracting ideological distortion. The misrepresentation of Islam, its use as an economic or political tool, only feeds into societal prejudice, radicalization, and Islamophobic perceptions. Universities, media houses, and religious scholars have to work together in the development of contextually relevant understandings of religious texts, making a clear distinction between the practice of religion and its misuse by a few through extremism, and enhancing critical literacy levels both locally and globally. Such steps would cut misconceptions and enable ethical engagement with religion.

Finally, the research points to the fact that religion and political economy should be considered through an interdisciplinary lens that combines literary critique with Critical Race Theory and socio-political thought. Subsequent research should investigate the larger implications of economic exploitation within the realm of religion around the world by emphasizing the structural elements that make possible the presence of exploitation or corruption within religious institutions. By examining research through such models of analysis, the ethical problems rising from the commodity of religious identity may begin to be remedied.

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