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ENCOMPASSING JUDAISM: ELMESSIRI AND THE “ISLAMIC HUMANIST” SELF

Abstract

Despite the weight of his work and his prominence in Arabic public debate, the Egyptian public intellectual ‘Abd al-Wahhab Elmessiri (1938–2008) has not been the subject of much serious study. In this article, I show that Elmessiri’s oeuvre offers a rich and creative perspective on both Judaism and Zionism. Studying Elmessiri from the perspective of identity/alterity studies, I argue that his representation of Judaism qualifies as what Gerd Baumann and André Gingrich call “encompassment by hierarchical subsumption.” The article offers an analysis of the discursive logic behind this image of Judaism and its connection to Elmessiri’s anti-Zionist agenda, rejection of anti-Semitism, and critique of Western modernity.

Keywords: alterity/identity; Elmessiri; encompassment; intellectual history; Zionism

During the latter half of the 1990s, the Egyptian scholar and public intellectual ‘Abd al-Wahhab Elmessiri was arguably the Arab world’s most prominent expert on Judaism, Zionism, and Israel.¹ Although his academic background lay in English literature, his publications revolved around critical approaches to Jewish and Zionist thought as well as Israeli politics. In 1975 he published the *Encyclopedia of Zionist Notions and Concepts*,² which he described as a working paper and continued to develop for the remainder of the 20th century. In addition, Elmessiri published studies—always for a broad audience—on topics such as secularism, Western modernity, the falsity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and his concept of “function groups.” With few exceptions, in particular *The Land of Promise: A Critique of Political Zionism* (1981), Elmessiri published in Arabic. His critique of Zionism was part of a broader intellectual project of deconstructing Western modernity. Apart from his published works, Elmessiri influenced the intellectual climate through salon meetings at his house, inviting an eclectic mix of intellectuals and students. In addition, he made himself available to the public for questions through his Facebook page and website.³ As he grew older, the former Marxist became associated with the Islamist current. He was involved with the Wasat Party from its establishment in 1996, and in 2007, towards the end of his life and already struggling with health issues, he accepted an offer to become leader of the Kifaya opposition movement. Elmessiri died in 2008.

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Remarkably for a person of his intellectual and public stature, studies of contemporary Arab thought rarely discuss Elmessiri in any depth. Apart from an article by Götz Nordbruch on Elmessiri's writings concerning *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a short discussion by Oliver Schmolke, and a two-page biographical introduction by Hartmut Fähndrich,⁴ the only publication exclusively concerned with Elmessiri is Haggag Ali's *Mapping the Secular Mind*.⁵ In this work, Ali offers a comparative study of Zygmunt Bauman's and Elmessiri's critiques of (post)modernity. Highly sympathetic to Elmessiri's objectives, Ali's work may be seen as an elaboration of Elmessiri's thought more than a metastudy of it.⁶ Easily the most important book-length study of Elmessiri is Betsy Mesard's 2013 dissertation titled "Abdelwahab Elmessiri's Critique of Western Modernity and the Development of an Islamic Humanism."⁷ Mesard's study is primarily concerned less with the part of Elmessiri's oeuvre that deals with Judaism and Zionism, than with Elmessiri's critique of Western modernity, the wider project that binds Elmessiri's work together. Approaching this subject from the perspective of comparative religious ethics, Mesard argues for an inclusive understanding of Elmessiri as a critic whose work is valuable beyond the largely Arab and Muslim context within which it emerged.

The dearth of studies on Elmessiri in European languages is difficult to understand, but it is especially puzzling why publications that specifically deal with Arab images of Judaism and Jewish history often neglect Elmessiri. One reason may relate to their tendency to focus on *negative* images of Judaism, in particular anti-Semitism. Much of this literature is polemical, and much of it has been criticized for quoting texts out of context, seeking out the "lunatic fringe," or not distinguishing between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.⁸ For scholars and pundits seeking to sound indiscriminate alarm bells over Arab anti-Semitism, Elmessiri complicates the picture. The only publication on Arab perceptions of Judaism that discusses Elmessiri at some length is Meir Litvak and Esther Webman's *From Empathy to Denial*.⁹ The authors discuss Elmessiri in the context of Arab responses to the Holocaust, and primarily criticize the way Elmessiri links Zionism to Nazism. Litvak and Webman show the many historical and analytical flaws that mar Elmessiri's writings on Judaism and Zionism, but fail to acknowledge what this article demonstrates: Elmessiri's generally sanitizing influence on a radicalized discourse.

Employing an approach developed by anthropologists Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich, this article, which is part of a larger project focused on the oeuvre of Elmessiri, particularly in regard to his representation of Judaism, Zionism, and the West, examines identity/alterity.¹⁰ This means it is a study of images. Often misunderstood, the study of images is mainly interested in the agent behind the creation of images, and the purposes that images serve in frameworks of ideology or identity. The focus of this article, therefore, is not Judaism or Israel, and it is not about pointing out whether Elmessiri is "correct" in what he writes about these topics. Neither is it an exercise in cataloguing Arab stereotypes of Jews. Instead, I analyze the ways in which Elmessiri represents Judaism and Zionism, and attempt to uncover the discursive logic behind these representations. I argue that Elmessiri's image of Judaism qualifies as "encompassment by hierarchical subsumption"—one of Baumann and Gingrich's grammars of identity/alterity. In their 2004 edited volume on "grammars" of identity and alterity formation, Baumann and Gingrich distinguish between three common

“grammars” of defining identity and alterity: Orientalization, segmentation, and encompassment. Based on Said’s critique of Orientalism, the first grammar is rather straightforward and needs little elaboration.¹¹ But Baumann and Gingrich remark that it is important to realize that the workings of Orientalism need not necessarily be of the variety “them bad; us good.” In their view, Orientalism simply means a mirror image that can reflect a negative image of the self and a positive image of the Other.¹² The second grammar, segmentation, is an adaptation of yet another canonical piece of scholarship, E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer*. As Baumann and Gingrich observe, this grammar “works by context-dependent . . . scales of selfings and otherings among parties conceived as formally equal.”¹³ This grammar is best explained by means of the example of football-based identities. A person might identify with a local football club, but stand together with opposing teams’ supporters at the regional level, or with supporters of a variety of other teams at the national level. In other words, identities and alterities are dependent on time and place. The third and last grammar is the most interesting for the purposes of this study. To quote Baumann and Gingrich again, encompassment “works by a hierarchized sub-inclusion of others who are thought, from a higher level of abstraction, to be really ‘part of us.’ It thus includes some others, but never all others, and it tends to minimize the otherness of those it includes.”¹⁴ Thus, for example, Afro-Caribbean political activists opposing racism in Southall in the 1980s extended the category of “black people” to include people of Asian descent, without asking them whether they consider themselves part of this category. Likewise, in the same time and place, Hindu definitions of self often included Sikhs as “really being Hindus too.” In doing so, they incorporated other people in a definition of the self, or as the authors put it, “selfing by appropriating,” or “adopting or co-opting, selected kinds of otherness.”¹⁵ There are reasons why certain groups of people are included in the self or other, and an important part of image studies is to analyze these reasons. In this article, I argue that Elmessiri’s image of Judaism can be seen as a case of encompassment, even though his position entails a devastating critique of much of contemporary Judaism and Zionism per se.

The next section assesses Elmessiri’s life and work. I mainly rely on Elmessiri’s autobiography and his final two-volume edition of the *Encyclopedia of Jews, Judaism and Zionism*.¹⁶ Because Elmessiri describes the encyclopedia as the produce of his life’s work and his autobiography as a *tafsīr* (commentary) on his oeuvre, these publications are the best starting point for anyone interested in Elmessiri’s intellectual world.¹⁷

ELMESSIRI AND HIS WORK

‘Abd al-Wahhab Elmessiri was born in Damanhur in 1938 to a rural bourgeois family. In his memoir, Messiri contrasts his family’s traditional ways to the ways of urban bourgeois families at the time, which were “estranged from Egyptian Arab culture.”¹⁸ After finishing high school in 1955, he went on to study English at the University of Alexandria. His introduction to Alexandria may have been somewhat of a culture shock: “I suddenly found myself in the middle of a city that was Egyptian in name, but Western in fact . . . A cosmopolitan environment that was deviant and rootless, [a world that] could enrich man or devour him.”¹⁹ In 1963 Elmessiri left Egypt for the United States to complete a Master’s degree at Columbia University. He continued his studies in the US, and in 1969 completed a PhD thesis on the romantic poets Wordsworth and Whitman at

Rutgers University.²⁰ Elmessiri describes this period of study in the US with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he had access to first-class education, while on the other hand, the experience deepened the alienation that he had initially felt upon entering the modern city of Alexandria. After returning to Egypt, Elmessiri became a professor of English literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo. In the years that followed, he also took up positions at other universities and institutions in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world.

In his autobiography, Elmessiri describes being politically active from an early age, even participating in agitation against King Faruq (though he was fourteen by the time of the king's abdication) and joining the Muslim Brotherhood before committing himself to the revolution of the Free Officers shortly thereafter. In 1955, at the age of seventeen, he joined the Communist Party.²¹ Elmessiri stresses that when he was growing up it was normal for young people to be politically active. Later in life, influenced by the Frankfurter Schule's critique of materialism, consumerism, and positivism, he gradually distanced himself from Marxism. By his own account, he eventually let go of all remaining traces of Marxism in favor of his humanist Islamic vision (*ru'yatī al-islāmiyya al-insāniyya*).²²

Although Elmessiri is commonly described as an Islamic or even Islamist thinker, a careful reading of his work offers little to substantiate this moniker. During his time in the United States he became familiar with Western critiques of Enlightenment thought.²³ Elmessiri became convinced that materialist rationalism, when driven to its logical conclusion, would cause the individual to disappear along with cultural and spiritual values, leading to totalitarianism and racism.²⁴ In general, one could describe Elmessiri's position in the 1960s and 1970s as Third Worldist: the West has plundered its way to world domination at the expense of the rest of the world and functions as an imperialist power.²⁵ During this period, Elmessiri ceased to think of racism, Nazism, Zionism, and imperialism as excesses or exceptional aspects of Western civilization, instead considering them essential or natural components of it.²⁶ The next stage in his thought entailed a struggle with the binary couple of matter and spirit. Initially he felt that he had to reject materialism as incompatible with human values, but gradually he began to wonder whether the distinction between matter and spirit was as absolute as commonly assumed.²⁷ As he put it, "And so I went from the naivety of a limited materialism to a complex understanding of humanity."²⁸ Instead of thinking of matter and spirit as entirely distinguished aspects, Elmessiri developed the idea that the supernatural transcends the material world, an idea he describes as both supernatural naturalism and metaphysical humanism.²⁹ The final stage in his intellectual farewell to a confined materialism consisted of his acknowledgement that if the world shows itself in binaries of man and not-man, nature and not-nature, matter and not-matter, then

to explain this dualism it was necessary to presume yet another binarism, that of the realm of consequence and the point that was outside of this realm: a fixed point, infallible, transcendent . . . and this point is God. . . . And in this manner, instead of reaching man through God, I reached God by means of man, and this continues to be the basis of my religious belief, and I call it Islamic humanism.³⁰

It is from this conviction that Elmessiri criticized what he termed universal secularism (*ilmāniyya shāmila*). This notion covered various philosophical constructs that, when taken to their extreme, leave no space for anything but the world of matter and

ratio. Democracy, for instance, must be limited in its application. To demonstrate why, Elmessiri constructs an imagined scenario of the audience of a football match possessing the democratic right to appoint the losing team as the winner, which most would find objectionable. In other words, there are certain values, principles, morals, and rules that should not be subject to democratic considerations.

Despite Elmessiri's description of this critique of materialism, rationalism, and secularism as "Islamic humanism," it is hard to conceive of it as "Islamic thought." Elmessiri's oeuvre generally reads as a Third Worldist critique with a Romantic twist. Haggag Ali's comparative study of Bauman and Elmessiri shows how the thought of these two intellectuals is closely related.³¹ Elmessiri's autobiography is best understood by readers familiar with Western political philosophy and Romance literary history. References to Muslim history or Islamic theology are few and never essential to Elmessiri's argument. Moreover, Elmessiri's work is hard to link to that of other Arab authors, contemporary or otherwise. Although Elmessiri rarely makes use of footnotes or endnotes, it is clear from his in-text references (or bibliography, when he includes one) that he mostly engages with Western authors such as Hannah Arendt, Walter Laqueur, and Zygmunt Bauman. Were it not for the fact that Elmessiri portrays the West as the civilization of the Other, his critique of modernity would read as part of Western critical thought.

This othering of the West is done in a less than subtle manner. For this task, Elmessiri draws on the concepts of *Gesellschaft* (society) and *Gemeinschaft* (community). He defines the latter—typically associated with traditional life—as a social collective held together by human bonds of family and friendship, and the former—in the ascendant since the rise of modernity—as a contract-based social unit in which human relationships are calculated instruments that fulfill purposes of wealth, consumption, and pleasure.³² The *Gesellschaft* is a cold place without love or compassion. In his memoir, Elmessiri connects this notion to a personal experience from his youth. Describing the moment when he embarked on his studies in Westernized Alexandria, with its rootless cosmopolitanism and anomie, he writes:

I was struck by vertigo and nothing in my background could help me deal with it. Then when I went to the barber and exposed my head to the employee who did not know me and who did not know my father or my uncles, I knew I had entered the *Gesellschaft*, the city of contracts.³³

His description of the simple life in Damanhur is brimming with nostalgia: the people were generous, environmentally conscious, and full of love for the religious Other.³⁴ This warmth is contrasted with "the West," with its absolute individualism and conflictual relationships.

In the West we find . . . a savage antagonism and absolute individualism to the extent that a youth who reaches the age of 16 needs to find his own dwelling, for his family will refuse to continue to spend money on him. And the [elderly] person needs to find a resting home because his children will only have him over once a year. . . . Sometimes I wonder, will we reach this level of "progress" one day?³⁵

This kind of unsophisticated othering of the West, in combination with a critique of progress, is not unique to Elmessiri. The same can be found in the later work of the Egyptian economist and author Jalal Amin.³⁶

Elmessiri's ultimate objective was to formulate an alternative modernity that would liberate Muslims from Western epistemology. This task required deconstructing the West and the assumptions of modernity. Elmessiri's study of Judaism and Zionism must be seen in this light. Throughout the *Encyclopedia*, Elmessiri discusses the ills of modernity and positions the Muslim world as the victim of Western imperialism. In an interview in 1999, Elmessiri said that for a long time he wanted to stop writing about Zionism in order to compose a theoretical study. In the end, he realized that his theoretical study would only see the light by means of engaging with Zionism.³⁷

JUDAISM AND ZIONISM CONTRASTED

At first sight, Elmessiri's *Encyclopedia* is a confusing work. It is ordered thematically rather than alphabetically, and as such does not strike the reader as an encyclopedia. Moreover, the entry titles, such as "The Jewish Essence," "The Nature of the Jews," "Jewish Disloyalty," and "Jewish Crimes," are somewhat bewildering, and suggest a very essentialist approach. Upon reading the text, however, one begins to feel the work is indeed an encyclopedia because the paragraphs are organized as encyclopedic lemmata. Furthermore, it turns out that the entry titles are misleading, for the entry content tends to approach them critically. For instance, under the entry title "Jewish disloyalty," Elmessiri writes:

Jewish disloyalty is an expression that supposes that there is an independent Jewish belonging to the Jewish community that takes the form of a complete loyalty to the Jewish people and to the exclusion of loyalty to other peoples or homelands. We are of the opinion that if there is indeed a Jewish belonging or loyalty, then it must be a belonging to the Jewish creed or the Jewish beliefs, since there is no such thing as a [single] shared Jewish heritage or past. The past or history of each Jewish community is the past or history of its society. . . . Zionists and Nazis stressed that members of the Jewish communities did not belong to the civilizational and national formations in which they existed, assuming a purely Jewish loyalty. The Zionist political program underlines the presence of such a loyalty. But actual behavior by American Jews for instance makes it clear that they are loyal to their American *patrie*.³⁸

This entry is typical of the deconstructive function of the *Encyclopedia*. It starts with a notion presumed to resonate with the reader, and subsequently explains why that notion is flawed. The entry is also typical of how the *Encyclopedia* pairs Zionism and Nazism with respect to the notion of Jewish disloyalty. Whatever association readers may have had with this notion, they would likely be surprised to hear it was shared among Nazi and Zionist authors. It must be kept in mind that this encyclopedia was written to serve an Arabic-speaking audience that is less sensitive about anti-Semitism than is common among Western European and American audiences. While the average reader of the *Encyclopedia* may not be anti-Semitic, after more than half a century of war with Israel, a common feeling towards Jews in the Arab world is one of hostility.

Another example of the deconstructive quality of the *Encyclopedia* is the entry "Jewish interests," which Elmessiri describes as follows:

Jewish interests is an expression that supposes that there are specific Jewish interests that are agreed upon by "the Jews" (i.e., members of the Jewish communities), and that they defend these

interests openly or secretly wherever and whenever they have the opportunity to do so. It is a widespread proposition in both Zionist and anti-Jewish writings.

The text then rejects the idea of Jewish interests, explaining that the interests of a Jewish community in a specific time and place are determined by context, and that the interests of the Israeli state are not necessarily the same as the interests of Jews (be they inside or outside Israel).³⁹

These fragments show that Elmessiri challenges two discourses. First, he counters a narrative of anti-Jewish stereotypes. One particular myth that Elmessiri has done much to dispel is the veracity of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In the *Encyclopedia*, several of his articles, and his book, Elmessiri has explained how philological research clearly shows that *The Protocols* cannot be genuine and that the struggle against Zionism should not rely on a forgery. It is telling that Elmessiri has felt the need to publish on this topic numerous times; he clearly found that his message was unwelcome among certain publics. Elmessiri's 2003 article in the prominent post-Islamist journal *al-Manar al-Jadid* (The New Lighthouse) denouncing the use of *The Protocols* in anti-Zionist discourse was promptly and unceremoniously criticized by Baha' al-Amir in the following edition of the same journal.⁴⁰ Evidently, although Elmessiri was recognized in the Arab world as an expert in Jewish and Zionist studies, his academic and principled discourse was not immune from being shot down by the blunt dictates of political expediency. Nevertheless, Elmessiri tirelessly warned that anti-Zionism should not descend into anti-Semitism, which he considered a form of racism. This brings us to the second angle in Elmessiri's approach—his critique of Zionism. As will be discussed shortly, Elmessiri challenges the Zionist claim that Jews form a nation or an ethnicity, arguing instead that it is the attachment to a religious creed that forms the basis of Jewishness. For Elmessiri, Judaism should be understood as a religious tradition just like Christianity and Islam, and to link Jewishness with inherent character traits or behavioral patterns would be racist.

The strength of his dual polemic is that it cannot be split; by stressing that Judaism is a religion rather than a racial category, Elmessiri undermines both anti-Semitism and Zionism. An anti-Zionist reader is confirmed in his or her anti-Zionism, but is also inoculated against anti-Semitism. On numerous occasions, Elmessiri's arguments are reminiscent of the critique of essentialism voiced by scholars of Islamic studies, which often targets both classical Orientalist stereotypes as well as Islamic fundamentalist myopia. Warning against the undue weight given to sacred texts, for example, Elmessiri writes: "It would be as if [one believes] that the situation of the Zionists and the Jews of the modern age, regardless of whether they are in the US, South Africa, or Ethiopia, is the same as the situation of the ancient Hebrews or as the Jews of China in the fifteenth century, and as if what the Old Testament and the Talmud say . . . is an expression of an everlasting Jewish essence."⁴¹

JUDAISM ENCOMPASSED

That Elmessiri made a sharp distinction between Zionism and Judaism is not remarkable. Anti-Jewish rhetoric was undeniably present in the heyday of Arab nationalism, but it was a common position among Arab intelligentsia that the problem with Zionism

lay not in the Jewish religion with which it was associated, but in its imperialist politics.⁴² As Gilbert Achcar has shown, this distinction was already made quite explicitly in the 1930s.⁴³ The question we need to ask here is how the Jewish religion is portrayed in the writings of Elmessiri.

Although Elmessiri was never formally trained in Jewish studies and did not read Hebrew, he was knowledgeable of Jewish history. In his various works, he explains that Judaism has gone through different historical phases and is a multilayered phenomenon that knows many different traditions of interpretation. One key distinction that Elmessiri makes is derived from a reading of the Old Testament:

The Old Testament is a document of struggle between two directions: one that is morally monotheist, believing in a God standing above the two worlds [i.e., the here and the hereafter] and not favoring one people over another except as reward for piety. The other [direction] is the heathen direction of popular immanentism that bestows a god upon the Jews, who resides in them alone and favors them . . . and the Jews see themselves as a holy people in the center of creation In the context of [immanentism], Judaism has become a closed religion that excludes others from the circle of holiness. . . . And in the modern age, [this particular kind of immanentism] has been translated into the Zionist movement.⁴⁴

This fragment introduces a key notion in Elmessiri's work, namely immanentism (*ḥulūliyya*). As used by Elmessiri, immanentism refers to the idea that the Creator is present in his creation, rather than separate or transcendent from it. Elmessiri believes that an immanentist approach reduces the divine to the profane world of matter and thereby denies it its universality. Thus, in the above passage, the Jewish idea of the "chosen people" or the "Holy Land" is a form of immanentism, in which God is present in a certain people or land. From the perspective of the belief in a universal God, such immanentism is problematic because it suggests that God has demographic or geographic favorites.

If Elmessiri clearly viewed Zionism as the latest embodiment of an errant direction in Judaism, as I have described, we might ask how Elmessiri views the monotheist direction. His perspective on this issue becomes clear in his entry on the pillar of Jewish theology, Maimonides, titled "Musa bin Maymun and Islamic Philosophy":

Musa bin 'Abd Allah bin Maymun al-Qurtubi. A thinker of Arab-Islamic civilization and thought who believed in Judaism and was a member of the Jewish community in Islamic Spain. He was born in Cordoba to a family of judges and Jewish scholars. He was brilliant in religious studies, the study of the Old Testament, medicine, mathematics and philosophy. He received Arabic and Jewish religious instruction, and one of his teachers was a student of Ibn Bajja.⁴⁵

In this introductory statement, Elmessiri stresses the Arab-Islamic background in which Maimonides lived and worked. By linking him to a famous Muslim scholar, he firmly positions Maimonides in Muslim intellectual history. Also notable is the praise that Elmessiri bestows on Maimonides as an epigone of Arab and Muslim culture, which he continues in the subsequent sentences:

Among his most important books is the *Kitab al-Siraj*, which is a concise commentary of the Mishna. *Mishnay ha-Torah*, i.e., the doubling of the Tora, is the only book he wrote in Hebrew so that the Jewish judges could read it and profit from it and were not obliged to consult the Talmud. It is a compositional work influenced by comparable Islamic compositions. . . . Bin

Maymun's most important book by far is the *Dalalat al-Ha'irin* [Guide for the Perplexed, which he wrote in Arabic and then translated into Hebrew. . . . In this book Bin Maymun wanted to reconcile reason with religion, given that reason was planted in man by the Creator. And when Bin Maymun studied the divine essence he concluded that given the masterful organization of the universe, there must be a divine intellect controlling this universe. According to him, the Creator was rational, without a body, and all expressions describing the Creator that refer to body parts must be explained through a metaphorical explanation. His attributes cannot be separated from his essence and he is the prime mover. . . He is the Creator of the world out of nothing. And with this he refuted the particular view of Aristotle on the eternity of the universe. The world is a whole, the parts of which are connected according to specific laws that rest in their entirety on the act of creation, which is an act without an equal in history. This view is close to that of the Ash'arites, although Bin Maymun attacks them. Bin Maymun stresses this notion of the Act of Creation because without it the world would be mere matter moved by laws of material causality.⁴⁶

In this quotation, Elmessiri not only continues to point out Maimonides's Arabic and Islamic background, he also conveys an aspect of Maimonides's theology, which is important to Elmessiri. The belief in a Creator God as prime mover functions as an insurance against a world of mere matter, and this logic is close to the conclusion that Elmessiri reached in his intellectual journey away from materialism and into Islamic humanism. It should come as no surprise that Elmessiri's understanding of Islam is so close to Maimonides's theology. In fact, Elmessiri makes the point that Maimonides was a reforming Jewish theologian whose Jewish creed bears key ingredients of the divine message of Islam:

Bin Maymun established what is known as the thirteen principles of Judaism; it is the most important effort to define the creed of the Jewish religion. . . . In its essence it does not differ much from the Islamic doctrines, and it rejects any divine incarnation whatsoever:

1. God is the creator of the universe and its regulator
2. He is one since eternity and for ever more
3. He has no body, He is not confined by bodily limits
4. He is the first and the last
5. The Jew is not to worship anyone but him
6. The word of the prophets is truth
7. Moses is the father of the prophets; those who came before him and those who came after him
8. The Torah of the Jews is that which was given to Moses
9. The Torah is not subject to change and will not be replaced by another sharia
10. The creator is knowing of all actions and thoughts of man
11. The keepers of his commands are rewarded and those transgressing are punished
12. The Messiah will come, and the Jews are to wait for him
13. The Jew is to believe in the resurrection of the dead.⁴⁷

For Elmessiri, contrary to the flawed heathen direction, the true monotheist definition of Judaism is similar to the Islamic creed. One need only replace Moses, Jews, and Torah with Muhammad, Muslims, and Qur'an to have an almost flawless abstract of orthodox Sunni Islam. To the Muslim reader, exterior appearances such as ritual notwithstanding, this Judaism is so familiar that it hardly qualifies as an Other. Maimonides did not recognize Muhammad as a prophet of God and therefore could not be counted among

the Muslims, but his worldview and his conception of God were identical to those that were and remain prevalent in the Muslim world. As such, he and his Judaism can be seen as “Islamic.”

Elmessiri expands on this notion in a comparison between Judaism and Islam. He states that the comparative study of religions should go beyond superficial observations about rituals and declarations of faith, because what may appear similar from the outside sometimes has a different rationale behind it. For instance, two religions may have the practice of circumcision in common, but the meaning of circumcision as a means to obey God is different from circumcision as a means to marking one as distinct from the rest of mankind.

In our study we see two basic religious orders [*nasaqayn*] or two basic views of existence, one of which is monotheist which sees God as one, who transcends nature, history, and man (although he is caretaker over them), and another that is immanentist which sees God as present in nature, history, and man, and where everything is unified in a cosmic material oneness [*wāḥidiyya*] ruled by a single law. In our opinion the essence of the Islamic religious order is of the monotheist transcendent kind, while we find the Jewish religious order to be an accumulative geological composition in which there is a monotheist layer and an immanentist layer. Over time, it is the immanentist layer that has increased in strength, has become more firmly entrenched, and has gained centrality.⁴⁸

If Judaism is such a multilayered phenomenon, the question arises under what influence it appears in a particular shape or form. In addressing this question, Elmessiri once more points out that Islamic influences are instrumental. In his discussion of “Islamization of Judaism and Judaization of Islam,” Elmessiri writes:

And so, the Islamization of Judaism refers to the increase of the level of monotheism in [the Jewish] religious order, [which took place] whenever Judaism came in close contact with Islam. This becomes evident in Karaite thought and in the thought of Musa bin Maymun. This direction reached its apex in Bin Maymun’s attempt,⁴⁹ in Egypt, to Islamize several Jewish religious rites such as the prayer.”⁵⁰

If Elmessiri sees Maimonides as the embodiment of Judaism proper, one might say he sees Theodor Herzl as the modern Zionist embodiment of the heathen tradition of immanence. As described by Elmessiri, “He was a Western assimilated Jew, nothing was left of his Jewishness but an empty shell, meaning he was an un-Jewish Jew.”⁵¹ Under the influence of Darwin and other materialists, Elmessiri goes on, Herzl had come to believe that anti-Semitism was an inescapable aspect of modern Western civilization. Befitting his instrumentalist manner of thinking, he adopted the notion that the Jews have historically performed specific economic functions in Western societies. Looking for a solution to anti-Semitism, Herzl devised the idea of establishing a separate state for Jews, which would serve the needs of Western civilization while delivering the Jews from anti-Semitism.⁵² In short, Elmessiri presents Herzl and the Zionist ideal as a typical product of Western modernization, the latter combining imperialism, secularism, materialism, and immanentism.

Elmessiri’s rejection of true Judaism’s otherness is a means to distinguish Judaism as an Abrahamic tradition from Zionism as the real and opposing Other. This manner of identifying a purported Jewish Other as part of oneself is replicated in a remarkable

section in the *Encyclopedia* that deals with the Holocaust. Elmessiri has done the Arabic public a favor by writing with clarity on the horrors of the Nazi persecution of European Jews. In these descriptions, however, he eventually lays the blame for these atrocities not on Nazism or Fascism but rather on Western modernity's broader ills. For Elmessiri, the carnage and cruelty of the war can only be explained as the result of a descent into totalitarianism, which in turn was caused by materialism, immanentism, and secularism. In that sense, Elmessiri frames the persecution of European Jews as a cruelty imposed by the same powers as those responsible for colonial and neoimperialist crimes. After having thus positioned the Arab-Muslim world conceptually alongside the victims of Nazi genocide, Elmessiri proceeds to blur the lines even further. In a lemma entitled "Arabs and Muslims and the Nazi annihilation of the Jews of Europe," we read:

[According to the sources], the victims who were led into the gas ovens (*sic.*) were given "strange" names. . . . They were called *Muselman*, that is "Muslim" in German. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* says the following in an entry entitled 'Muselman' . . . "it is one of the [concentration] camp slang words, used to designate prisoners who were "on the verge of death, that is, they showed the final stages of hunger, disease, mental indifference, and exhaustion." It is as if the Western mind, when it was destroying its victims, saw in them the Other; and the Other has since the Frankish wars been "the Muslim." It is well known that in the Middle Ages the Western mind associated Muslims with Jews . . . The Nazi experience inherited this Western understanding, and the Nazis carried the burden of this outlook and they were the representatives of Western civilization in its confrontation with the closest Eastern civilization, and that is the Islamic civilization. And [indeed] they never forgot about the burden, not even when they were destroying a part of Europe's population. The whole thing is that the range of the cognitive field to the word "Muslim" is extended to the point that it connotes "the Other" in general, regardless of whether he is Gypsy, Slavic or Jewish (and this does not differ much from the expansion of the cognitive range for the word "Arabs" in Zionist discourse, to it becoming "the Others").⁵³

In this fascinating fragment, Elmessiri seems to misunderstand the context in which the word "Muselman" was used in Nazi death camps. He makes it appear as if it was the Nazi's who referred to the dying Jews as *Muselmänner*, when in fact it was fellow prisoners who used the word, for reasons that remain opaque.⁵⁴ This misunderstanding—if indeed it is a misunderstanding—allows Elmessiri to cognitively transfer the victimhood from Jews to Muslims.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the paucity of publications on Elmessiri, it turns out his oeuvre is an interesting topic for study for various reasons. In Elmessiri we find a movement away from Marxism to Islamism in a way that is different from the many others who took the same trajectory. As I have pointed out, Elmessiri eventually formulated an intellectual position that relies less on "Islam" than on "Western" critical schools of thought. However, Elmessiri's thought is undeniably creative rather than reproductive. While his effort to develop an alternative to Western modernity echoes those of countless Third Worldist thinkers in the postcolonial period, and typically gets ensnared in new binaries, Elmessiri's oeuvre succeeds in challenging common misunderstandings and popular myths. Elmessiri's engagement with Judaism and Zionism started at a time when the distinction between the two was a common, even "politically correct" assumption in the Arab

world. Elmessiri developed an understanding of them that builds on this distinction, delegitimizes anti-Semitism, and offers a critical perspective on Western modernity. Zionism and the crimes of the State of Israel become symptomatic of the West's loss of values and Abrahamic morality, and its complete submergence in a secular logic of matter, profit, and individualism.

The sharper the condemnation of Zionism and the West's transgressions, the brighter the light shining on Judaism. Elmessiri identifies a flawed form of Judaism that he associates with the ills of Western modernity. But in discussing Maimonides as the icon of Jewish orthodoxy, he presents Judaism as a religious tradition that is formed in conformity with the Muslim view of God, Man, and the world. Paraphrasing Baumann and Gingrich's definition of encompassment as a grammar of identity and alterity, Elmessiri offers a hierarchized subinclusion of Judaism that, from a higher level of abstraction, is considered "part of Islam." He thus includes proper Judaism but not Zionism, and tends to minimize the Otherness of the Judaism he includes. By means of this encompassment of Judaism, Elmessiri constructs the best possible argument against the accusation of Arab-Islamic anti-Semitism. Rather than adopting the weak defense that Arab Muslims cannot be anti-Semites because they are Semites too (a counterargument that Elmessiri deems childish), Elmessiri denies that there is such a thing as Semitism. Anti-Semites follow in the footsteps of Zionists (or vice versa) in believing that Judaism constitutes a people, an ethnicity, and as such is endowed with certain laudable or detestable national characteristics. By contrast, Elmessiri argues that Judaism in its essence is only a set of respectable beliefs, nothing alien, nothing Other, and no alterity. The discursive purpose of this image of Judaism is clear. Elmessiri's encompassment of Judaism defines Judaism as an Abrahamic, universal religion, thereby disqualifying Zionism's nationalist understanding of Judaism. This rejection of difference entails a moral superiority that is common in encompassment: "you may think that you differ from me in your sense of values or identity; but deep down, or rather higher up, you are but a part of me."⁵⁵ Elmessiri suggests that it takes a deeper understanding of Judaism to see that from a higher level of abstraction, Judaism is part of the same universal message of God as Islam. This moral superiority is underscored in the anecdote on Nazis killing Jews under the subconscious impression that they were killing the West's ultimate Other: Muslims. Perfectly aware of the moral weight possessed by the victim, Elmessiri momentarily neutralizes the contemporary propagandist value of the Holocaust in an ultimate and ironic Othering of the Self.

NOTES

¹Ewan Stein, *Representing Israel in Modern Egypt: Ideas, Intellectuals and Foreign Policy from Nasser to Mubarak* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 150; Götz Nordbruch, "Rationalizing the Hidden Hand: 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Missiri's Theory of a 'Judaisation' of Society,'" in *The Global Impact of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century Old Myth*, ed. Esther Webman (New York: Routledge, 2011), 229–38; Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 54. Charles Hirschkind sees Elmessiri as a leading intellectual in more general terms; Hirschkind, "Beyond Secular and Religious: An Intellectual Genealogy of Tahrir Square," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 49–53.

²Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri, *Mawsu'at al-Mafahim wa-l-Mustalahat al-Sahyuniyya: Ru'ya Naqdiyya* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirasat al-Siyasiyya wa l-Istratijiyya bi-l-Ahram, 1975).

³Elmessiri's Facebook page, accessed 30 November 2017, www.facebook.com/ElMesseiry/; Elmessiri's website, accessed 30 November 2017, www.elmessiri.com.

⁴Nordbruch, "Rationalising the Hidden Hand"; O. Schmolke, "Eine Antwort auf Abdelwahab el-Massiri," *Die Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* 43 (1996): 422–25; Hartmut Fähndrich, "Moderne mit Transzendenz: zur Gedankenwelt des Ägypters Abdalwahhâb Messîri," *SGMOIK/SSMOCI Bulletin* 6 (1998): 15–16.

⁵Haggag Ali, *Mapping the Secular Mind: Modernity's Quest for a Godless Utopia* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013).

⁶Ibid., 159. Corresponding with Ali, Elmessiri eventually wrote: "I believe now that you know my ideas more than I."

⁷Helen E. Mesard, "Abdelwahab Elmessiri's Critique of Western Modernity and the Development of an Islamic Humanism" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2013). The dissertation can be accessed through the university's dissertation repository. A commercial edition is due to be published in 2019 by Routledge under the title *Islamic Humanism and Abdelwahab Elmessiri: Critique, Ethics, Activism*. I have benefited enormously from e-mail correspondence with Mesard, from whom I have taken the translation of the term *ḥulūliya* as "immanentism."

⁸Bernard Lewis, *Semites & Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1986); El-Sayed El-Aswad, review of *Islamic Attitudes to Israel*, ed. Efraim Karsch and P.R. Kumaraswamy, *Digest of Middle Eastern Studies* 18 (2009): 107–10; Mohamed Ajouaou, "Islamitisch antisemitisme onzuiver belicht," *ZemZem* 2 (2006): 133–35; Suha Taji-Farouki, "Thinking on the Jews," in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004): 338–39.

⁹Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust* (London: Hurst, 2009), 227–36.

¹⁰Gerd Baumann and André Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004).

¹¹Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹²Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars*, 19–21.

¹³Ibid., x.

¹⁴Ibid., x–xi.

¹⁵Ibid., 25.

¹⁶Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri, *Rihlati al-Fikriyya: Fi al-Budhur wa-l-Judhur wa-l-Thamar: Sira Ghayra Dhatiyya Ghayra Mawdu'iyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006); al-Masiri, *Mawsu'at al-Yahud wa-l-Yahudiya wa-l-Sahyuniya: al-Mawsu'a al-Mujaza fi Juz'ayn* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2003).

¹⁷Ibid., 11.

¹⁸Ibid., 24.

¹⁹Ibid., 130.

²⁰Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, "Critical Writings of Wordsworth and Whitman: A Study of the Historical and Anti-Historical Imaginations" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1969).

²¹Masiri, *Rihlati*, 24–25.

²²Ibid., 142.

²³Ibid., 212.

²⁴Ibid., 218.

²⁵Ibid., 227.

²⁶Ibid., 226.

²⁷Ibid., 281.

²⁸Ibid., 283.

²⁹Ibid., 284.

³⁰Ibid., 305.

³¹Because Elmessiri hardly published in English, Bauman was not aware of Elmessiri's work until he was alerted to it by Ali. See Ali, *Mapping*, 150.

³²These two concepts were coined by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (d. 1936) and developed into ideal types by Max Weber (d. 1920).

³³Al-Masiri, *Rihlati*, 130. Of course, this description is anachronous; it would be some time before Elmessiri would think in terms of this binarism.

³⁴Ibid., 29–32, 56–57. Incidentally, Damanhur is famous for containing the burial place of the 19th-century rabbi Abu Hasira, whose *mulid* attracts many Jewish devotees.

³⁵Ibid., 35. This accusation is repeated on p. 165.

³⁶See especially Jalal Amin, *Khurafat al-Taqqaddum wa-l-Takhalluf: al-‘Arab wa-l-Hadara al-Gharbiyya fi Mustahall al-Qarn al-Wahid wa-l-‘Ashrin* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005).

³⁷Fayza Hassan, “Abdelwahab Elmessiri: A Scholar and Three Wolves,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* 415 (1999), accessed 27 August 2016, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1999/415/people.htm>.

³⁸Al-Masiri, *Mawsu‘a*, 1:41–42.

³⁹Ibid., 43.

⁴⁰‘Abd al-Wahab M. al-Masiri, “al-Haqiqa wa-l-Wahm .. fi Qissat Brutukulat Hukama’ Sahyun,” *al-Manar al-Jadid* 21 (2003): 20–38; Baha’ al-Amir, “Brutukulat Hukama’ Sahyun . . . al-Ra’i al-Akhar,” *al-Manar al-Jadid* 22 (2004): 120–36. See also ‘Abd al-Wahab M. al-Masiri, *al-Brutukulat wa-l-Yahudiyya wa-l-Sahyuniyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2003). Already in 1977 Elmessiri engaged in a discussion over *The Protocols* and the need to reject them as a forgery, in a polemic with Bernard Lewis who had stated that no Arab writer had ever called into question the authenticity of *The Protocols*. See Bernard Lewis and Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri “Arab Views on ‘the Protocols,’” *Foreign Affairs* 55 (April 1977): 641–43.

⁴¹Al-Masiri, *Rihlati*, 627.

⁴²Stein, *Representing Israel*, 84–85, 95–96, 194.

⁴³Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab–Israeli War of Narratives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 40, 47.

⁴⁴Al-Masiri, *Mawsu‘a*, 2:21–22.

⁴⁵Ibid., 1:343–44.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 2:124.

⁴⁹Here Elmessiri seems to confuse Maimonides with Maimonides’s son, Abraham Maimonides. See Paul B. Fenton “The Jewish Pietist Movement,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Josef W. Meri (London: Routledge, 2005), 546–48.

⁵⁰Al-Masiri, *Mawsu‘a*, 2:124.

⁵¹Ibid., 2:271.

⁵²Ibid., 2:273.

⁵³Ibid., 1:211–12.

⁵⁴See Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (London: Folio Society, 2000), 103; and Yehuda Reshef and Michael Berenbaum, “Muselmann,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 14:623. Litvak and Webman also discuss this fragment, though they draw on Elmessiri’s *al-Sahyuniyya wa-l-Naziyya wa-Nihayat al-Tarikh* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1997), which offers an identical text on pp. 22–228. However, they fail to point out Elmessiri’s misunderstanding of the context. See Litvak and Webman, *Empathy to Denial*, 232.

⁵⁵Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars*, 25.