As a thriving port city, nineteenth-century Bombay attracted migrants from across India and beyond. Nile Green’s *Bombay Islam* traces the ties between industrialization, imperialism and the production of religion to show how Muslim migration from the oceanic and continental hinterlands of Bombay fuelled demand for a wide range of religious suppliers, as Christian missionaries competed with Muslim religious entrepreneurs for a stake in the new market. Enabled by a colonial policy of non-intervention in religious affairs, and powered by steam travel and vernacular printing, Bombay’s Islamic productions were exported as far as South Africa and Iran. Connecting histories of religion, labour and globalization, the book examines the role of ordinary people – mill hands and merchants – in shaping the demand that drove the religious market. By drawing on hagiographies, travelogues, doctrinal works and poems in Persian, Urdu and Arabic, *Bombay Islam* unravels a vernacular modernity that saw people from across the Indian Ocean drawn into Bombay’s industrial economy of enchantment.

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Bombay Islam

The Religious Economy of the West
Indian Ocean, 1840–1915

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For Nushin
Bombay is not a good place for ghosts. There is too much activity, too many people, and too great an amount of gas and electric light.

James Douglas, *Bombay and Western India* (1893)

*Samandar dariyâ sê bâwâ jân dànâ awliyâ.*

Baba took from the seas and oceans and gave life to the friends of God.

Murjân Sidi Nangasi, Afro-Indian prayer song (c. 1890)
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*Bombay Islam* did not begin in Bombay, but like the religious ‘firms’ whose activities it traces, it set out from Tehran and Hyderabad on the far fringes of what in the nineteenth century became Bombay’s wide religious marketplace. There, tracing histories of Muslim organizations which I originally understood in terms of the regional and national, I pursued the peregrinations of men such as Safi ‘Ali Shāh and Habīb ‘Ali Shāh, whose own trails would ultimately lead me to Bombay. And so, over the course of more than a decade, what began as a search for neglected regional side-lights on the Muslim nineteenth century became an inter-regional survey converging on a city which, were it not for the persistency of my sources in drawing me towards it, I would never have recognized as the religious centre it became from the mid-1800s. When the penny farthing dropped and the focus of the project turned to Bombay itself, I was pushed to other directions in turn, from the dockyard shrines of Bombay proper to their reproduction across the ocean in the distant port of Durban. Linked as it was to these outlying markets by vernacular print and the steamship, Bombay offers the urban historian as large a canvas as might be managed. While tracing case studies in Iran and South Africa of Bombay’s links to a larger maritime market of faith, I hope to have at least drawn an outline on enough of that canvas to give a sense of the steam-driven pulse of ‘Victorian’ Bombay and the responses to those rhythms at every node of its capillaries. That said, the book is deliberately restricted to the Muslim experience of Bombay. Partly this is justified because so little has been written about Bombay’s Muslims; partly because for all its neglect by historians of Islam, Bombay was a crucial oceanic hub for Muslims navigating the age of empire and industry. But if Islam is the major theme,
Acknowledgements

I have kept in mind the experiences of the city’s non-Muslim groups at every step, and would venture so far as to suggest that parallel cases could be made for Bombay’s variegated Hindus, Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews. Bombay’s religious market was ultimately open to all traffic.

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Acknowledgements


Given the fact that in 1997 the official Indian name of Bombay was changed to Mumbai, a final word is required on my choice of toponym. In this, my decision was determined by the sources I have used for what is in essence a historical study: for the writers of Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English on whose works I have drawn for the period surveyed in *Bombay Islam*, the name was always Bomba‘i/Bombay. The partial eclipse by Marathi of the old name and of the oceanic and imperial languages that used it marks the dilemmas of a different age.
MAP 1. Map of Bombay, India
MAP 2. West Indian Ocean Map (c. 1880)